

M. J. ...



Pastor David Tue, The Ark (nondenominational), Hauppauge: I've had to prove to Long Island schools that allowing a church to use its facilities

for worship is not a violation of the Establishment Clause [of the First Amendment]. The question is not whether these clubs are allowed to meet — they are under the Equal Access Act (EAA) — but whether they are “proper” in public schools. We wonder why there's so much drugs and violence in schools these days, whether we should hand out birth control [information] and what happened to our children's values. Interestingly, most religions teach self-control, self-discipline and proper morals. Religious student clubs can only help children be more tolerant of our religious differences, while deepening their own faith and spirituality. Since I'm sure there are those who don't believe in God, participation should be voluntary and before or after school, so these children are not adversely affected. Faith-based clubs are an opportunity for students to mature and develop. Who knows? Maybe adults will learn a thing or two about getting along from our children.



Rabbi Noah Gradofsky, Temple Israel, Long Beach:

One of the most important ways the United States protects the sanctity and autonomy of religion is by leaving it to churches and synagogues, and outside of government programs. Some



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ASKING THE CLERGY

Are religious student groups wrong for public schools?

people think this 'liberal' view is anti-religion. This is far from the truth.

At the same time, why should schools support children playing chess and not support children voluntarily studying religious scripture or performing religious ritual? Doesn't that treat religious activities as second-class? In the end, I prefer to pass on the religious clubs in public schools. It's a small price to pay to ensure our government and society won't be unduly influencing religion, or worse yet, treat one religion as better than another.



Habeeb Ahmed, president of the Islamic Center of Long Island, Westbury:

I think religious clubs could have a very positive influence on public schools. Every religion teaches good, and a child without any religion is confused and lost. Clubs also offer a venue for like-minded students to plan community activities and help people in need, while providing a healthy experience and keeping them out of trouble.



The Rev. Rick E. Edwards, Stony Brook Community Church, Stony Brook:

I would be delighted if my congregation's youth wanted to form a religious club. I'd enjoy helping them explore their faith traditions while learning respect for other faiths. We United Methodists are people of “open hearts and open minds.” Beyond that, we need to examine religious student clubs from more than one angle. First, if schools grant non-curricular clubs any

Prayer gatherings in public school buildings raise First Amendment questions.

privileges, the EAA secures the same to the religious Secondly, many are rightly concerned for fairness toward the non-religious, religious minorities or anyone who feels harassed by members of a religious club.

I'm confident that high school administrators can apply the EAA even-handedly. If not, a legal remedy is available through the courts.



Rabbi Janet Liss, North Country Reform Temple, Glen Cove:

I'm a firm believer in separation of church and state, and I don't believe religious clubs have a place in public schools. They send the wrong message to the student body. By their nature, these clubs are exclusionary and therefore run counter to the philosophy behind public schools. Religious-based clubs belong in houses of worship. I'm sure that local church and synagogue clergy would be available to start youth groups in their houses of worship for any students who feel this is a void in their lives. We would all welcome the opportunity to meet with these students.

Interviews by Michael R. Ebert

Send faith questions you'd like us to pose to: Walter Middlebrook, Newsday, 235 Pinelawn Rd., Melville, NY 11747-4250, or middle@newsday.com.