



## 4-H and Religion FAQ

### Purpose:

California 4-H Youth Development Program's core values include an appreciation, respect and valuing of diversity through a commitment to the inclusion of Californians of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender and religions. The University of California and the 4-H Youth Development Program are public nonprofit institutions that cannot promote religious or political affiliations. The 4-H Youth Development Program is governed by Federal, state and local laws.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution requires government neutrality with regard to religion. Under present law, the principle that government may accommodate the free exercise of religion does not supersede the fundamental limitations imposed by the establishment of the religions clause of the First Amendment. Issues regarding the "separation of Church and State" under the First Amendment are both complex and situation-dependent.

4-H participation in religious activities does not violate the "separation of Church and State" when: 1) The purpose of participating is secular; 2) the primary effect of participating will not be to advance religion; and 3) the participation will not excessively entangle the affairs of the government with the affairs of the church.

Frequently asked questions are:

**1. Can 4-H units meet in churches?**

Yes. 4-H units can meet in churches, as long as they function independently from any religious activity of the church. These units cannot promote religion beliefs during the 4-H unit meeting. These meetings must be open to youth of all religious denominations.

**2. Can 4-H units include specific and overt references to a specific religious tradition within their unit or program names?**

No. 4-H unit names that promote specific religious perspectives or icons promote the ideals of religious life and are not secular. Promoting such ideals in 4-H programs, units or activities not only has religious purpose, it promotes one religion over others, and it creates the impression that 4-H is not open to all regardless of their religious standing.

**3. Can 4-H unit members and adult volunteers hold prescribed religious prayers and Bible readings?**

4-H unit members and adult volunteers could use a neutral or nondenominational prayer or reflection to create an environment of solemnity, or to gather a group for a shared meal, but these should not be specific to one denomination. 4-H members can observe "moments of silence".

**4. Can 4-H presentations be religious in nature?**

If a 4-H member is speaking about a range of religious beliefs without preference of one over another and the presentation is educational in nature, then this is permissible. When speaking on behalf or

representing the 4-H Youth Development Program, your speech is considered “public” versus “private”.

**5. Can 4-H require youth to participate in activities that may compromise religious dress?**

No. If a youth’s religion requires a head scarf or hijab, members and adult volunteers cannot ask them to remove this. Adult volunteers and members should find alternative activities that are conducive for full participation.

**6. Should adult volunteers and 4-H members who prepare menus at activities consider food restrictions of certain religions?**

Yes. At 4-H events there should be an array of food choices that would not only accommodate youth whose religions have restrictions but also allow for youth with food allergies to have choices. One way to plan that menu is to ask on application forms if there are any special dietary requirements necessary for participation in an event.

**7. Can 4-H units (e.g, club, VMOs) participate in Christmas Parades or other holiday-themed events organized by outside groups, e.g., local cities, towns or Chambers of Commerce?**

They may participate if the following criteria are met:

- The purpose of participating is secular in nature. For example, the purpose is to advertise the 4-H YDP.
- The primary effect is not to advance religion. Christmas and/or Holiday parades that have no goal to advance religion would be considered.
- Participation must not entangle the affairs of the government with affairs of the church. As such, participating in Christmas or Holiday parades should not be a requirement of the 4-H Unit rather it is a social activity to promote a 4-H unit’s activities that other youth in the community can join. As participation is not a requirement and the parade is not organized by 4-H, this does not entangle the affairs of government with the church and can be considered.

**8. Can 4-H units participate in activities such as bell ringing for the Salvation Army?**

While we deeply respect the charitable efforts of organizations like the Salvation Army, 4-H units are not permitted to participate in activities such as bell ringing. This policy is in place for a few key reasons:

- a. **Focus on Non-Financial Contributions:** 4-H emphasizes activities where members contribute their time, effort, and skills rather than facilitating direct cash donations. This approach aligns with our goal of fostering hands-on learning and personal development.
- b. **Neutrality in Charitable Activities:** As 4-H is committed to inclusivity and objectivity, we avoid activities that could be perceived as endorsing religious organizations. This ensures that all members feel welcome and that our activities remain universally accessible.
- c. **Encouraging Enriching Service Learning:** We encourage our members to engage in service learning activities that offer high engagement, education, and direct community impact. While bell ringing is valuable, 4-H focuses on activities that align closely with our educational goals and allow for more active participation and learning.

4-H units are encouraged to seek service opportunities that align with these principles, offering enriching experiences that contribute positively to personal growth and community well-being.

**9. Can 4-H units organize and host their own Christmas parades or Christmas parties?**

No. 4-H Clubs/Units cannot host their own Christmas parades or Christmas parties. 4-H clubs/units that wish to organize and host a 4-H activity should offer gatherings that are inclusive, e.g., a 4-H winter celebration, a 4-H winter party, or similar. The purpose of the activity must be secular and not advance any one religion. Participation cannot be required to attend such activities.

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