

So you

Guidelines for

want to

Multi-faith gatherings

worship

for members of

together?

the Uniting Church
in Australia





In this diverse Australian society, people of many different cultures and faiths live and work together. As people wanting to develop our sense of community, we look for ways to learn more of each other, to understand more of each other's lives. This can be done in many ways; meeting as next-door-neighbours, having community picnics or cultural events. Increasingly, there are also opportunities for people of different faiths to share the spiritual aspect of their lives.

When people of the same faith worship God together, they are affirming what they believe to be true about God and their relationship to God. When people of various faiths come together, Christians seek to be faithful to God revealed to the world through Jesus Christ. People of other faiths come with different convictions about God or about the world in relation to the mystery at the heart of all things, and their convictions are also held with integrity.

Multifaith worship assumes a respect for each other's faith expression and beliefs and should never be entered into in order to proselytize. It should rather acknowledge our diverse spirituality and common humanity.

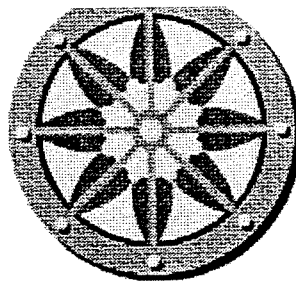
Why do people of different faiths come together to worship?

1. A Civic Service

Civic leaders may want to organise a religious gathering to bring together all members of their community - to reflect the multicultural and multireligious nature of the community and to promote the harmony and well-being of the community. Church leaders should encourage civic leaders to promote multicultural events first, so that people can learn to recognise each other's gifts and cultural values.

If there is to be a religious gathering, religious leaders should request the responsibility to organise the program, the elements of which should include components that emphasise our common humanity in relationship with God:

- stories of journeying and the significance of faith
- sharing the joy, the grief, and the pain of the journey.



Where should this event be held?

While church members may immediately consider using church buildings, this may well discomfort and even exclude those of other faiths who would like to attend. More neutral territory should be found - a public hall, an open area eg. local park or the town centre.

How should this event be organised?

Nominated representatives of faith communities should meet together to decide on the purpose, the theme and the content of the civic service.

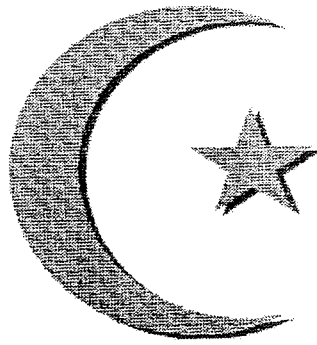
Remembering that the purpose of this event is to draw the community together, the Service should include components from different faith traditions, and these components need to be discrete sections of the event. Early in the proceedings it should be stated explicitly that statements of faith made represent the convictions of particular groups of people; they are not presented as statements having the assent of all participants. Rather, each group present shares something of its faith and religious experience with others.

The SHARED nature of these gatherings is the coming together, and the strongest components of shared worship may well be:

- when the reason for gathering is expressed, the 'drawing together' – the Greeting,
- when the individuals of the gathering are sent out to live and work together in community – the Blessing,
- in the silences that could be incorporated after each faith-sharing or story-telling by the different faith traditions.

The distinct contributions offered by the various faith traditions could include singing or a spoken prayer as well as the stories of faith. As the leaders talk through the various possibilities, each will learn what is practised by the other, what is acceptable, and what has meaning in each of the traditions. It is not recommended that people of different faiths join in common prayer. Some even say that common prayer should never be attempted as it too easily blurs the distinctions between the faiths and may cause offence. If this is accepted, then prayer may be included within each religion's section of the civic service.

Remember: a civic service provides a means to build the sense of cohesion within a community of households of people of different faiths - avoid topics that can cause division and focus on joint celebration and/ or concerns.



2. A Memorial/ Commemorative Service

Sometimes the desire to worship together comes from a very significant community experience that needs to be shared and given meaning by people of faith eg. bushfires, earthquake, multiple shootings, the breaking of a drought, the survival of the fishing fleet caught in a bad storm. It could also be a Service to mark a national or international event. The leaders of the various faith communities would be responsible jointly to organise this event.

Where should this event be held?

If the event being commemorated is local, the best location for this gathering would be as close as possible to the event being commemorated. If the occasion was traumatic, the surroundings should remain stark with some symbols from the various faith traditions that demonstrate hope, healing, the presence of a Comforter. If the event was national or international, neutral territory should be sought.

How should this event be organised?

Responsibility for organising a Memorial/ Commemorative Service should lie directly with the leaders of the various faith communities. They should ensure that the occasion focuses on the reasons for the gathering, the aspects of the experience that need to be addressed, and the process by which the people of the various faith communities deal with an event of this kind.

Again, the strengthening of the communal links may best be done in silence - maybe with 'general' music being played if this is appropriate. The service would have to be organised with great sensitivity - allowing the sense of loss, grief or thankfulness to be expressed, as well as the faith perspective that holds people together in a time of trial.

If Christians are the prime movers for such an occasion, they should be aware that their need to include others in a religious memorial may not be meeting the needs of the other faith communities. If other faith communities do not want to participate in a memorial service, then Christians may organise a Christian memorial.

3. Worshipping together - in the context of deepening relationships with people of other faiths

Events of this type may arise from shared discussions between representatives of various faith traditions. These gatherings, if conducted on behalf of the various faith traditions, should include nominated representatives from the various faiths. Even if the gathering is more informal in nature, the same general principles as used in the previously - discussed types of service apply i.e. sensitivity in deciding location, content, areas of responsibility.

Christians in this situation would have discussed pertinent faith questions with the people of other faiths and there would be a shared experience to which they may wish to give witness.

Where should this event be held?

People who have been participating in discussions with people of other faiths may wish to worship together in one of two ways:

a. By visiting each other's place of worship in order to better understand expressions of faith and worship.

If members of the Uniting Church know that they are to have visitors from other faith traditions, then the visitors should be informed throughout the service as to what is happening etc. The guests should be accorded the freedom of whether/when to participate or not - and therefore it would be better if they were not ushered to the front of the church. A further 'hospitality' gesture should be made after the service so that all may gather openly and freely together.

b. A 'shared celebration' by those participating in the dialogue.

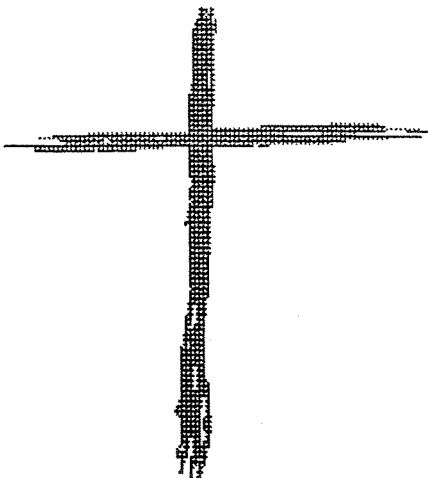
People in this situation would be able to discuss the location and content of such services among themselves. If the invitation to worship together is extended to people outside the on-going discussions, then the dialogue group would have to be sensitive to the needs of their own communities when organising such an event. **The location of Worship in this situation depends very much on the purpose of that gathering. It should never be assumed that the Worship has to take place within a building, nor that the rotational worship sequence should begin with the Christian church.**

How should this event be organised?

We acknowledge that God is at work within the lives and traditions of us all.

We are all one in our concerns for humanity, but at the same time each religion has its own distinctive set of beliefs, theological Statements and implications with respect to worship.

Worship with others of different faiths must not blur the distinctive religious traditions from which we each come.



A 'checklist'

- Why are we organising this event? Is worshipping together the best response to our felt need at this time?
- How are we dealing with those of our Church family who come from other cultures and have to overcome memories of past experience in order to relate with people of other faiths?
- Are the representatives the delegated leaders from each faith community?
- Where is the event to be held? Why?
- How are we organising this time of worship? Which group is responsible for which section? Are we doing anything that will give offence to the other?
- Should we offer further hospitality before/after the event? Is this appropriate?

These guidelines were prepared by the Assembly Reference Group on Relations with Other Faiths, and have been adopted by the Assembly Standing Committee. They are offered as a resource to those Uniting Church people and groups who are seeking to establish relationships and better understandings with people of other faiths in their communities. You are invited to respond to these initial guidelines with questions or insights from your experience of liturgies for special occasions, like inter-faith marriage, memorial services or gatherings at hospitals organised by chaplains. These should be addressed to:

Assembly Reference Committee on Relations with Other Faiths
National Assembly,
Uniting Church in Australia
PO Box A2266 Sydney South 1235