



# Multi-Faith Worship

Guidelines for Multi-Faith Worship

Australian Consultation On Liturgy - ACOL (1995)

## INTRODUCTION TO THE DOCUMENT

The Australian Consultation on Liturgy (ACOL, inaugurated in 1976) is a body nominated by its member churches to assist them in deepening their understanding of their own and other churches' worship. It monitors (on behalf of the English Language Liturgical Consultation, a similar body at the international level of which it is a constituent member) the use of the *Revised Common Lectionary* (1992) and the common worship texts in *Praying Together* (1988), and it receives reports from the National Ecumenical Church Music Committee. It enables the member churches to share current liturgical work and future projects to the mutual benefit.

*All nations form but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth, and also because all share a common destiny, namely God. His providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all against the day when the elect are gathered together in the holy city... [Nostra Aetate, 1]*

In the public life of Australia, where people of many different faiths live and work together, there are increasing numbers of civic occasions in which it is thought that peoples of different religions and ethnicities should participate for the good of community relations. In some of these, the hosts suggest that prayer be offered. This request needs to be carefully considered. The Guidelines exclude any participation which compromises the distinctive belief of

Christians (or others). They suggest that, if local churches decide to be involved in some such local event, each faith should be invited to play its part separately, "in serial form". The background information explains the importance of this.

These Guidelines are intended to promote intelligent and sensitive discussion amongst the churches. They do not represent a policy statement, either of ACOL or of its constitutive churches. The churches themselves must define their own theological position in relation to participation in "multi-faith worship", however defined. Four of our member churches, the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches, and the Churches of Christ, have commended this document for the purpose I have just outlined. The Lutheran Church has drawn our attention to a paper, "The Lutheran Church of Australia and Inter-Faith Worship" (Church Relations Committee, 1994) which sets very clear limits to Lutheran participation in certain events of this kind. The Presbyterian Church of Australia asks us to indicate its strenuous opposition to the Guidelines. No response was received from the Greek or Coptic Orthodox member Churches.

ACOL offers these guidelines for consideration as theological and practical pointers to appropriate participation in multi-faith worship and other events.

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Secretary, ACOL

## GUIDELINES FOR MULTI-FAITH WORSHIP

### A. *Form of Service*

Services of worship involving members of different faith communities may take a number of different forms:

- A Christian service, in which members of non-Christian groups participate;
- A multi-faith service with an agreed common order which blends items from a variety of Christian and non-Christian sources;
- A multi-faith service in serial form.

**Recommendation: That a Multi-faith Service in Serial Form be used where services of worship involve members of different faith communities.**

In a multi-faith service in serial form, each faith tradition, clearly identified, is allocated a segment of the program in which to offer worship. Each brief act of worship is separate and complete in itself and involves what is characteristic of the faith concerned. Each faith community selects and presents its own material. (For Christians this may include readings from scripture, trinitarian prayer, a creed of the church and hymns.)

Those present at such a service share in the worship of faiths other than their own only to the extent they feel able - praying in one another's presence but not necessarily praying together.

The cohesion of such an event will be enhanced if there is a common theme running through the material presented and a common purpose for the service.

### B. *Planning And Conducting The Service*

**Recommendation: That representatives of all the faith communities which are to participate in the service be involved in the planning and that the purpose of the occasion be made clear at the outset.**

Invitations to participate in parts of the service should be expressed so that those who feel unable to join in do not feel embarrassed or excluded. For example, sections of the printed program with congregational responses should be printed in different type styles rather than labelled, *Leader, People, All*.

It should also be stated that presence at a service does not imply total assent to all that is said or done.

Consideration should be given to providing translations for parts of the service according to the needs of those attending. Care should also be taken that the overall service does not become too long.

Planners should also organise for the event to be evaluated afterwards.

There are limits to what can be included in multi-faith worship. For example, the central Christian sacramental actions which recall the saving events of the Gospel are inappropriate. What might properly be included needs to be explored by those involved in planning.

### C. *Who Participates?*

Ordained ministers and other representatives of Christian Churches should consider what statement is being made by their presence at, or by their refusal to attend, a multi-faith worship service. They need to know beforehand what will be expected of them at the service.

The issues involved are well covered in the booklet, *Multi-faith Worship?*, a report to General Synod (1992) by the Board of Mission of the Church of England.

*Some discernment is required in the question of who will attend and participate in the service. Where the service is open to the public (as would normally be the case), people of any persuasion or none are welcome to attend. However, when it comes to participation in the leadership of the service, for example by reading, other considerations come into play. Christians would*

wish to be represented by a member of a mainstream Christian denomination. Similarly, members of other faiths would not expect to be represented by members of breakaway groups. Without detailed knowledge of other faith communities it is sometimes difficult to ascertain which leaders are genuinely representative of certain local communities. (#115)

Where members of new religious movements are to participate in their own right, the problems are more difficult. Should boundaries be drawn, and if so, where and by whom? It is possible that some groups will not attend if members of certain sects or movements are to participate. (See #116)

Another issue which arises is that of proportionality. Will each faith group involved have equal representation in the leadership of a multi-faith gathering or will representation reflect numbers of adherents to each group?

**Recommendation: That a community figure be overall presider of the gathering, with separate segments of the service led by leaders or representatives of religious communities appointed by the faith groups involved.**

#### D. Venue

A critical question is the venue. This could have a bearing on what activities are appropriate for the occasion, what kind of atmosphere is generated by it, and, to a considerable extent, the popular response from those not present at it.

Venues often suggested for multi-faith services include a church, a church hall, or the place of worship of another faith. By making its buildings available, the church is showing hospitality to people of other faiths but at the same time several problems are posed: people of other faiths may simply be unable to enter a church; Christians may take sensitivity to the feelings of people of other faiths to extremes (such as covering the crosses in a church); or

the use of church buildings may be subject to Canon Law.

**Recommendation: That a multi-faith service be held on neutral ground such as a public building or an open-air site.**

With the use of neutral ground, it is important that organisers be attentive to the issue of ownership of the event.

Where practicable, the problem of a suitable venue could be solved by arranging for each community to offer its own act of worship in its own place of worship, the congregation processing from place to place. (It is important that only one Christian site be selected.) The multi-faith service in serial form recommended above is clearly seen in this format.

#### Background Information

1. These guidelines are designed to offer those preparing for multi-faith gatherings an outline of the issues involved. They do not address the specific issues raised by marriage, funerals, etc, involving people of different faiths.

2. Throughout these guidelines the term "multi-faith" has been used in preference to "inter-faith". While both terms are in common use, "multi-faith" describes the form of worship which is recommended here. Other terms such as "inter-faith" are only used when quoting from documents which use these terms.

The term "worship" can be problematic. As different understandings of the term by different traditions could be the cause of difficulty, what is here called "multi-faith worship" may best be described as a multi-faith event, gathering or celebration.

3. In recent years there have been increased requests made by civic authorities and other organisations for Christian Churches to participate in "Interfaith Worship Services".

Because of the pluralist society in which we live, multi-faith activities are often initiated in contexts such as schools, civic occasions and trauma situations involving a particular community.

Often those who make the requests are unaware of the problems of belief involved and may have more of a concern about multicultural inclusiveness than about the religious aspect of a gathering. It is important to differentiate between occasions for multi-faith worship and multicultural gatherings.

However, there may be occasions when some form of multi-faith observance is appropriate and valuable; for example, if the participants already form a community or are genuinely united by a shared concern or common purpose. It is important that the reason for holding the service be made clear.

4. Christians have expressed varying reactions to the idea of multi-faith worship. For some, the idea of multi-faith worship is new and strange and causes genuine concern. For others, opportunities for interfaith dialogue and worship are exciting prospects which should be grasped.

Of concern are the dangers of syncretism (thoughtless confusion of different faith traditions), indifferentism ("we all believe in the one god after all"), and idolatry (giving worship to that which is not God). There are also concerns about the limitations which a situation of multi-faith worship would impose on the liturgical structure.

Care also needs to be exercised with services built around a shared concern if the concern itself is controversial, party political, or in some way problematic.

Some believe that it is not appropriate for leaders of secular organisations to call different faith groups together for worship. Where this does occur, it is hoped that heads of local faith communities would be approached by leaders of secular organisations

from the outset, so that they can be involved in planning the occasion.

5. A multi-faith service with an agreed common order which blends items from a variety of Christian and non-Christian sources is not recommended because those arranging such services may be unaware of the theological implications of such actions or may deliberately be suggesting that 'we are all one' and there is nothing distinctive or unique about Christianity. With this kind of service the problems of syncretism, indifferentism and idolatry are particularly hard to avoid.

6. Christians need to be clear about the theological, especially Christological, issues which are involved.

- Christians acknowledge and worship one God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - and for us to worship other gods is idolatry.
- It is acknowledged that God can be at work in other religions and is at work in the lives of all people.
- The word "god" is not so much a name or a title as the generic term for a particular kind of being and does not sufficiently identify the triune God.
- The special relationship of Christianity with Judaism, and with Islam, may need to be acknowledged.

#### *Recommendations*

A. *Form of service* : That a multi-faith service in serial form be used where services of worship involve members of different faith communities.

B. *Planning and conducting the service* : That representatives of all the faith communities which are to participate in the service be involved in the planning and that the purpose of the occasion be made clear at the outset.

C. *Who participates?* : That a community figure be overall presider of the gathering, with separate segments of the service led by leaders

or representatives of religious communities appointed by the faith groups involved.

D. *Venue* : That multi-faith services be held on neutral ground such as a public building or an open-air site.

*Reading List*

*Multi-faith Worship?* , Board of Mission of the Church of England, Report to General Synod, 1992.

*Multi-faith Worship? Guidance on the Situations which Arise* , Inter-faith Consultative Group of the General Synod Board of Mission.

*Basis for Participation in Inter-faith Worship* , Report by Working Group established by the Missionary & Ecumenical Commission of General Synod, MEC Newsletter March 1993.

*Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* , Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, 28 October 1965.

*The Lutheran Church of Australia and Inter-faith Worship* , Statement by the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations, 1994.