

# Interreligious Worship and Celebration

Christine J. Hong

These days, coming together with your community requires interreligious cooperation which in turn relies on both common work and common worship. Worshipping and celebrating together interreligiously can strengthen communities and build networks that sustain us through difficult and painful times. It is good practice to hold or join an interreligious service of worship or celebration at least once a year to remind one another of the power of differences and the need for solidarity.

Planning worship or celebration with interreligious partners can feel daunting and offers a different set of challenges than planning a Christian Sunday worship for people who believe approximately the same things. To assist you in laying the foundation for fruitful interreligious worship, celebration, or gathering, here are eleven points to keep in mind.

1. *Be clear about your intentions.* Why are you gathering? To worship? To build unity? Did something happen in your community that needs a public interreligious response? Are you planning a service of worship, a service of celebration, a vigil, a memorial, a service of prayer? Work with interreligious leadership to make sure everyone is on the same page about the purpose and hoped for impact of the intended gathering.

2. *Power and privilege.* There is so much we can say about this but to put it simply, it comes down to voice and risk. As you plan the gathering, ask yourself if everyone is represented on the planning team and in leadership. Do some groups have more say than others in the planning process? Why? Don't forget to think about the different level of risk for the

different religious communities who participate. For some groups, even for some ecumenical partners, joining an interreligious worship or celebration may put them at risk for being ostracized by others in their community. Make sure you talk about the risks that might be associated with participation and work on solutions together. This might mean some communities decline an invitation to participate. This is OK. Keep working to include them in other upcoming opportunities.

3. *Co-lead the planning and execution.* Interreligious worship can take a lot of time to plan but don't lose patience. It takes time because we work to intentionally share leadership around the table. No one single opinion gets the final say but all voices are thoughtfully considered. This means planning meetings and the actual worship or celebration should be held at times and places accessible for everyone and not just convenient for a few.

4. *Never assume that all traditions work from a common glossary.* Know that both sharing worship space and celebrating together mean different things to different religious communities. Every tradition has different definitions of what worship, prayer, or celebration look like and sound like as well as who can participate. Furthermore, not all religious traditions have or share the same concepts of divinity, sin, or evil. The more open you are to listening and paying attention to your assumptions, the more inclusive your event or gathering will feel.

5. *Work diligently to include folks outside the Abrahamic circle.* It can seem natural for us to work primarily at worshipping with Christians, Jews, and Muslims, then at a later time, adding on groups outside of the Abrahamic circle, but it is

Christine J. Hong is assistant professor of educational ministry at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.

possible to be inclusive of many religious traditions from the start. Consider this, if not all people are invited to the table from the beginning, how can any positive transformation that results from such a gathering be far-reaching and deeply impactful for the community at large?

6. *Plan the event during a space and time that is mutually agreed upon and convenient for all.* This can be a task of the highest order! In other words, landing on a date and time can be the most difficult part of the planning process. It can help to think outside the box. For instance, instead of asking American Muslims to join a gathering in a space with crosses everywhere, why not gather in a park or even someone's backyard? Often the most mutually agreeable spaces are not houses of worship but hospitable and neutral spaces. For instance, some of the most meaningful vigils are hosted by a community member in their home where people are able to organically gather together or apart, to mourn, reflect, sing, and pray together. As in any worship, planning think about how the space or environment works to meet the community's needs.

7. *Everyone should get to participate in the way that feels the most meaningful to them.* For some communities this might be bringing and sharing a meal, for others it might be reading their holy scriptures, and still for others it might be playing music, offering a prayer, or sharing a reflection. Give your gathering the flexibility to reflect the communities who have gathered. How do we do this? Simple. We start by asking one another what we might be willing to contribute and go from there. Make room for prayers, reflections, music, and other elements that will sound and feel different from your own. Some communities may want to show up but not participate "up front." Make room for that too.

8. *Explain, explain, explain.* As you worship or celebrate together, narrate or print directions for participants. Sometimes we wrongly assume that participants know what is happening or what to do. Make sure you are explicit about who is doing what and what is occurring. If holy texts are being

read or songs are sung, offer translations, citations, and even short blurbs on why a particular spiritual practice is significant. Interreligious worship can be a great opportunity to help people learn about one another's traditions and witness their beauty up close.

9. *Even as you work at welcoming different religious beliefs and opinions, be open to encouraging one another to rise to the challenge of interreligious life.* Part of working interreligiously is encouraging one another to stretch and grow, especially when that stretching and growing means marginal people can participate. For instance, when at all possible, be inclusive of the people not represented by the leadership around the table. I have been to many wonderful interreligious worships or celebrations where the leadership was majority male. In some traditions this is almost always the case, but find ways to work with leadership to diversify representation when at all possible. Diversity in age, gender, human sexuality, race and ethnicity are important when building a community that lasts.

10. *Be mindful of the humanists, atheists, and multi-religious believers.* Interreligious worship and celebration by principle needs to remain open and hospitable. This means making room for those that do not affiliate with a religious tradition and those who may affiliate with more than one. Chances a congregant has a family member who does not claim a particular religion. We must find a way to be inclusive of these individuals if we are truly striving to create spaces representative of our communities. Multi-religious believers are also already a part of our communities. It is possible to be Jewish or Catholic and practice Buddhism. Even if you might be uncomfortable with the different ways people practice and live religiously, find ways to practice radical hospitality in your interreligious gatherings.

11. *Follow up with action and just plain follow up.* Don't let a great gathering be the end of your interreligious efforts. Follow it up with community action or work that further establishes the relationships that are built during your interreligious worship or celebration.