

Resources

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Presbyterian Church in the United States.
A Declaration of Faith. 117th General Assembly (1977), reissued by Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1991. PDS#OGA-91-005.

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"We do not fully comprehend God's way with other faiths. We need to listen to them with openness and respect, testing their words to us by God's word. We should be loving and unafraid in our dealings with them."
119th General Assembly, Presbyterian Church U.S., A Declaration of Faith

"Where God's creation is restored ...
Where human dignity is maintained ...
Where we are urged to receive the stranger, Christ is present and revealed.
Where we are led to keep silence and meditate on the saving and healing powers of the Almighty, Christ is present.
The truth of Jesus Christ cannot be limited to any single community's confession. The Holy Spirit guides us to engage the truth of Christ whenever and wherever sisters and brothers gather to comfort each other, confront one another, and even correct each other.

"... God invites us to walk with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and followers of other religions to befriend the rejected, invite in the alienated, offer love without qualification, and set people free from fears and animosities that set us apart."
209th General Assembly, Respectful Presence



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INTERFAITH CELEBRATION, PRAYER AND WORSHIP



Today, in everyday American life people of different faiths come together. They attend the same schools and meetings. They share holidays, religious festivals, and civic occasions. They gather around particular concerns, such as ecology, peace, advocacy for justice, or disaster relief. And they may be personal friends or members of the same families.

In these settings, prayer and religious rites of various types sometimes take place. Christians in the past often assumed the symbols and forms of Christian prayer and worship would be used at these times. Within the current religious diversity of the United States, this assumption is not always appropriate or acceptable. At these moments, Christians must make the choice either to treat life events simply as secular occasions or to bring their religious expressions into situations together with those belonging to people of other faiths.

Christian corporate worship is a gathering within a community joined together by its commitment to respond to God's goodness in Jesus Christ. Interfaith prayer or celebration is quite different. In it, each religious community present is recognized as having a distinctive religious tradition whose commitments others acknowledge. The celebration thus consists of public symbolic acts in which the people of two or more faith communities gather around common concerns and values.

We Christians can share in interfaith celebration with integrity because we are aware that God is present and active in all creation. We can be authentically open to the intimations of the Spirit's presence in the midst of an interfaith gathering and, at the same time, be deeply committed to our faith in God through Jesus Christ.

Christians may engage in interfaith prayer and celebration not only to meet the demands of particular occasions, but also as an expression of faithfulness to the gospel itself.

Jesus urges us to receive hospitality from others as well as to give (Luke 10:7). This receiving of hospitality is not limited to food and drink but extends to what is precious to our neighbors. It requires of us "respectful presence." Being respectful infers giving attention, concern, and regard to others without defamation or denial of their integrity. Respectful presence goes beyond mere tolerance. It requires Christians to receive as well as give testimony to deep religious convictions and actions. Respectful presence in celebration and prayer involves authentic attentiveness to the symbolic expressions of other religious communities. It also means Christian willingness to offer witness through our liturgical expressions of the presence of God.

A study paper commended by the 209th General Assembly (1997) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Respectful Presence: An Understanding of Interfaith Prayer and Celebration from a Reformed Christian Perspective," offers guidance.

There are three broadly-defined forms of interfaith prayer and celebration considered.

- 1 People of other faiths present in Christian worship
- 2 Christians attending worship of other faith communities
- 3 People of different faiths coming together to pray or celebrate in one of several possible ways:
 - Persons from different religions participating jointly, using only whatever language and symbols are acceptable to all
 - Persons from different religious communities being with one another in prayer and celebration, using language and symbols distinctive to each tradition (Christians alternately participate fully in Christian prayer and observe with respectful attention the prayers of others.)
 - Persons who are already in relationship with one another worship together using mutually authentic language, rites, and symbols to express commonly-shared commitments

Some suggestions for Christian participation in interfaith prayer, celebration, and worship:

- 1
 - Welcome people of other faiths to Christian worship. Inform them about what they are observing. Use your usual form of service.
 - In Christian worship, use materials from other faith communities only with sensitivity to their original history, meaning, and context.
- 2
 - Visit the worship activities of other faith communities only when you can do so respectfully. Before going, learn about the community and your expected behavior.

- Before participating in the worship of another faith community in any way, be clear about the meaning of doing so. Avoid participation that invites misinterpretation and confusion or that violates the integrity of either your own or the other community.

- 3
 - Be clear about the reasons for interfaith events.
 - Expect each community to decide who will represent it in planning an interfaith celebration.
 - Respect the right of each person to determine her/his own level of participation. Acknowledge to one another what is and is not acceptable.
 - Be mindful of the importance of silence.
 - Never use jointly-planned interfaith celebrations as an opportunity to proselytize.
 - In a group whose members have developed mutual trust with each other, be sure that any act of interfaith worship is integral to the group's processes rather than an intrusion. Check to see that everyone can affirm what is happening.
 - Affirm as a Christian that commitments made in gathered interfaith communities will not violate your ultimate confession to God, the Source of our being.

Use Respectful Presence: Interfaith Prayer and Celebration for the full text of the document and a study guide with case studies, biblical reflection, and discussion helps, for individuals or groups.