

Giving Thanks with our Interfaith Neighbors

An act of peace

We live in a world that seems fraught with conflict and division. Sadly, religion has too often played a role in escalating unrest around the world and in our own communities. Religion can be used to dehumanize and divide, but it also provides a strong basis for the ability to transcend human brokenness and create community and common ground.

As Christians committed to building a just and peaceful future, we recognize that our peacemaking ministries need to emphasize respectful presence among all faith traditions. If we are to cultivate a culture of peace in our communities, it is critically important that we also learn about other faith traditions and their yearnings for a more just and peaceful world. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has a deep and rich commitment to interfaith relationships and has emphasized its commitment to nurturing these relationships so that “interests and concerns may be shared and common action undertaken where compatible means and aims exist.” *The Book of Order* (G-15.0104-.0105)

As we consider ways to develop relations with interfaith neighbors in our community the season of Thanksgiving provides a wonderful opportunity to come together to deepen our common bonds, offering our collective gratitude for the abundance of God’s blessings. In recent years, many Presbyterian churches have been developing partnerships with congregations of other faith traditions in their communities, planning and facilitating interfaith celebrations of thanksgiving and praise. Presbyterians participate in interfaith celebrations with integrity because of our awareness 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.

These opportunities to gather have often provided a springboard for building deeper understanding and dialogue that then can lead to working together to address common peace and justice concerns facing the community.

If your congregation would like to enrich its ministry by exploring and possibly initiating an interfaith Thanksgiving celebration but are not sure how to begin, consider the following ways a worship or prayer service might be approached:

- Persons from different religions plan and participate in partnership, using only whatever language and symbols are acceptable to all
- Each religious community in turn leads a part of an event, fully using its distinctive forms while others observe

- Persons who are already in relationship with one another worship together using mutually authentic language, rites, and symbols to express commonly-shared commitments ¹

Once an agreement has been determined regarding the scope and content of the gathering, there are additional guidelines that will be helpful as the planning begins:

- Be clear about the purpose of your celebration and gain common agreement from the leaders of other faith communities.
- Always plan your event in equal partnership with leaders from the other faith communities. Each group should decide who will represent them in planning and participating in the 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.
- Affirm as a Christian that commitments made in gathered interfaith communities will not violate your ultimate confession to God, the Source of our being.²

Building relationships with our neighbors from other faiths is a primary task for our peacemaking ministry in this increasingly divided world. As we engage in this ministry, we do so with the confidence that "... 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 part." ³

The season of Thanksgiving presents a perfect occasion to begin or strengthen our common bonds. As we gather, united as a diverse to give thanks we also gift our communities with a larger vision of peace.

¹ Interfaith Celebration, Prayer, and Worship, Office of Interfaith Ministries, Worldwide Ministries Division, Presbyterian Church (USA)

² Ibid

³ *Respectful Presence: Interfaith Prayer and Celebration*. 209th General Assembly (1997). Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)