

Showing Southern Hospitality: Guidelines for Respecting Religious Diversity in Our Community

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Huntsville and Madison County, Alabama
By Interfaith Mission Service
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This publication is not designed as an overview of the beliefs of the faiths included herein, but as a description of the ways in which adherents of these faiths may experience conflict with the “general culture” in Huntsville and Madison County, Alabama.... Within any faith community, different groups and different individuals will place different amounts of emphasis on the observance of religious laws and traditions.... It is impossible to be all inclusive. So, if you live next door to or work beside someone of a faith different from yours, we hope that you will use this publication to open a discussion about what you each believe. Both of your lives will be richer for the experience!

Susan Smith ... primary compiler of the information contained herein, thanks the thirty-plus participants in the Fall 1998 Interfaith Dialogue series and the thirty-nine religious leaders of various faiths and denominations who reviewed preliminary drafts of these Guidelines....

[These Guidelines are reproduced with the permission of the Interfaith Mission Service. You may copy and use them with attribution. No correction of original content has been made. The information compiled here is not only useful in itself, but a good illustration of one thing you might create together in your community. As of the fall of 2008, a new edition was being prepared by the same organization, now with new leadership. God willing, we will post it in place of this one when it is available.]

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Holidays/Holy Days

The following is not an attempt to explain the religious significance of holidays/holy days in each faith, but the ways in which religious observance may conflict with everyday life in our community.

There are three holiday-related issues which surface frequently:

1. Christian holidays are incorporated into school and corporate activities so completely that non-Christian children and adults can't avoid them.
2. While schools and much of public life close on Christian holidays, adherents of faiths other than Christian often have difficulty abstaining from their usual routines (e.g., school, work) on their holy days. Some schools recognize religious holidays as excused absences; others do not. Some employers permit the use of "flex time" for religious holidays, while others require the use of personal leave on such days.
3. Schools and employers occasionally schedule important events (e.g. the yearbook photographer, the company picnic) on a day which is a religious holiday for some of their students or employees.

Note: The calendar in standard use in this country (January 1-December 31) is known as the Gregorian calendar, named for the pope during whose reign it was developed. With the length of the year based on the sun's orbit, the Gregorian calendar is a solar calendar.

Baha'i Faith

The Baha'i calendar consists of nineteen months of nineteen days each, with four or five intercalary days to round out the Baha'i year as a solar one. Baha'i holy days begin at sundown the day before the date listed below.

There are nine days on which Baha'is are expected to suspend work or school attendance:

March 21	Naw Ruz (New Year)
April 21	First day of the festival of Ridvan
April 29	Ninth day of Ridvan
May 2	Twelfth and final day of Ridvan
May 29	Ascension of Baha'u'llah
July 9	Martyrdom of the Bab
October 20	Birth of the Bab
November 12	Birth of Baha'u'llah

Buddhism

There are several different schools of Buddhism, with the observance of celebrations varying among the different schools. The same celebration may be observed at different times in different temples. Most Buddhist holidays (e.g., the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death) are celebrated on the weekend and, therefore, do not usually interfere with the work and school routines of Buddhists.

Christianity

Some Christian holidays (e.g., Christmas) occur on the same date every year, while Easter (and the holidays preceding and following Easter) are determined by the moon's cycles. Most Christian denominations in the United States observe Christmas on December 25 and Easter on the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after March 21. Members of the Eastern Orthodox churches observe both these holidays at other times.

Most Christian denominations observe Sunday as the Sabbath, though some celebrate the Sabbath on other days. Every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, with Easter (Resurrection Day) being the principal festival shared by most Christian denominations. Good Friday (the Friday before Easter), Pentecost (fifty days after Easter), and Christmas are observed by most denominations. Some Christians (particularly Roman Catholics) are expected to attend church on several other days, known as "holy days of obligation." Churches in these denominations usually have services scattered throughout the day so people may attend without seriously disrupting the usual work or school routine.

Some denominations observe a somber, reflective time during the weeks preceding Christmas and Easter. While church services are less festive, that mood runs counter to the Christmas parties (and sometimes Spring Break activities) which occur during these times.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Sabbath extends from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. Adventists are expected to finish their work on Friday early enough to make preparation for the Vespers service, which takes place at home or at church about one-half hour before sunset.... Usual activities, both work and leisure, are suspended on the Sabbath. The SDA observance of the Christmas and Easter holidays focuses solely on the religious aspects (no Santa Claus or Easter egg hunt). Adventist children are discouraged from participating in Halloween activities.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate or take part in activities that are associated with religious or semi-religious holidays (e.g., Christmas, Halloween). Gifts may be given at various times, but not related to a holiday.

Hinduism

The timing of Hindu festivals is based on a lunar calendar, so their dates vary. Since holidays are usually celebrated in the home in early morning or evening, no absence from school or work is necessary.

Islam

The Islamic calendar is composed of twelve lunar months of twenty-nine or thirty days each. Since no days are inserted to maintain consistency with the Gregorian calendar, Islamic holidays shift forward eleven days each year, making a full cycle through the Gregorian calendar each thirty-three years. Islamic holy days begin at sunset. The weekly holy day is from Thursday sunset to Friday sunset, but the only time during this day in which Muslims are expected to refrain from work/school is during the Jummah (Friday) prayer, which is said at the mosque and lasts for about thirty minutes between noon and 1:00 pm.

During the Islamic month of Ramadan, healthy Muslims who have reached the age of puberty are expected to refrain from consuming both food and drink between dawn (the first appearance of light—approximately 1 ½ hours before sunrise) and sunset. At sunset, Muslims usually break the fast with dates or something similar before eating their evening meal.

Muslims are encouraged to refrain from work or school and to attend religious services and social festivities on Eid-ul-Fitr (the first day of the month following Ramadan) and Eid-ul-Adha.

Judaism

The Jewish calendar follows a lunar year, so holidays don't occur on exactly the same date each year. The Sabbath and all holy days begin at sundown.

Sabbath, the most important holiday, begins at sundown every Friday night and lasts until sundown on Saturday. The conflicts with school sports and other end-of-work-week events are obvious.

Observance of holy days varies among Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist traditions, but there are several holy days on which Jews of all traditions are expected to abstain from work/school/normal activities.

Passover/Pesach begins with the first new moon in the Spring. During Passover Jews don't eat food products with yeast and many will only eat foods classified as "kosher." Reform Jews observe Passover for seven days, Conservative and Orthodox Jews for eight days. Passover is primarily observed in the home.

Rosh Hashanah (New Year) is the day of the first new moon in the Fall. The beginning of a ten-day period of reflection, Rosh Hashanah is observed for two days by Orthodox and Conservative Jews and for one day by Reform Jews. Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) comes ten days after Rosh Hashanah and is observed with a twenty-four hour fast from food and drink. Hanukkah, which lasts for eight days and occurs in November or December, is usually celebrated each evening at home. According to Jewish religious tradition, Hanukkah is a minor holiday. Except for Yom Kippur, abstaining from routine activities is not expected during these times.

Sikhism

Currently the Sikh community in Huntsville holds services in a rented space on the first Sunday of each month. Consequently, they observe all Sikh holy days on the first Sunday of the month closest to the actual date of the holy day. No variation is needed from normal work or school schedules.

Food/Dietary Issues

Fasting (abstaining from food and sometimes from liquid) is a part of many religious faiths. When an individual is observing a religious fast, it is most gracious not to invite him/her to a luncheon or party where much of the social focus is on food. Children who are fasting should be allowed to spend their school lunchtime somewhere other than the school cafeteria. They also may not be able to participate in physical activities at “full speed”.

Baha’i

During ‘Ala’(the last month of the Baha’i year), healthy Baha’is ages fifteen to seventy observe a fast, abstaining from both food and drink between sunrise and sunset. These days occur between March 2 and March 20 on the Gregorian calendar.

The drinking of alcohol and the consumption of food prepared with alcohol is forbidden.

Buddhism

There are several different schools of Buddhism with variations in dietary requirements among them. Generally speaking, Buddhists are encouraged to eat foods that are grown in their particular region of the world. In some schools, vegetarianism is expected, unless individual health needs make a vegetarian diet inadvisable. Some ordained monks do not eat meals after 12 Noon. Some do not consume alcoholic beverages.

Christianity

Some Christian denominations abstain from eating meat on Fridays during Lent (the six weeks before Easter). Some Christians fast or only eat one meal on Ash Wednesday (forty-six days before Easter) and on Good Friday (the Friday before Easter).

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (frequently called Mormons) take their health standards from the publication Words of Wisdom. In addition to encouraging the eating of grains, fruits, and vegetables in season, it states that Mormons are expected to refrain from tobacco, alcohol, coffee, and tea. Some church members apply this prohibition to caffeinated soft drinks as well. The consumption of teas without caffeine is permissible, however. Many members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints also fast from both food and liquid for twenty-four hours on the first Sunday of each month, contributing the equivalent cost of these meals to feed the poor.

As a way of following Biblical dietary principles, most Seventh-Day Adventists are vegetarians, but it is not mandatory. Those who do eat meat consume only “clean meat” – that which comes from cud-chewing animals with divided, cloven hoofs (e.g., cows, sheep). Chicken is permissible, but the eating of pork, rabbit, and fish without scales or fins is prohibited. Seventh Day

Adventists abstain from partaking of any food or substance that will bring harm to the body, including alcohol and nicotine products.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not smoke tobacco products.

Hinduism

Orthodox Hindus are strict vegetarians, refraining from eating all meat, fish, eggs, and products thereof. Most other Hindus do eat meat, but abstain from beef. A non-vegetarian Hindu may maintain a vegetarian diet during specific times. Orthodox Hindus also abstain from alcohol in any form. In order to promote self-control, Hindus are encouraged to fast one day a week, consuming only fruit and milk or juice.

Islam

Muslims are expected to abstain from all food containing pork (or pork products) and alcohol/liquor. While Muslims may remain at a meal where pork is served to others, they much prefer not to be in a place where socializing includes the consumption of alcohol/liquor.

Pork products such as lard and gelatin/rennet are found in many unexpected places, including some cake mixes, cheeses, margarines, and ice creams. Much southern cooking involves the use of pork as flavoring for vegetables, a habit so ingrained in our culture that we may forget to list it as an ingredient. Whenever pork is an entrée or merely used as a flavoring, it should be identified on the menu and another option offered to those who refrain from pork. If Muslims are being served, care should be taken that vegetable oil is used in food preparation and that the same utensils are not used to serve pork and non-pork foods.

The way in which animals are slaughtered also determines whether its meat is permissible (halaal) for Muslims. Because their rules for slaughter are so similar, meat that is kosher (acceptable to Orthodox Jews and labeled as such on the grocery shelves) is also halaal.

During ... Ramadan, healthy Muslims ... are expected to refrain from consuming both food and drink between dawn (...approximately 1 ½ hours before sunrise) and sunset. At sunset, Muslims usually break the fast with dates or something similar before eating their evening meal.

Judaism

Jews are expected to refrain from eating pork (including barbeque and bacon) and pork products. Pork products such as lard and gelatin/rennet are found in many unexpected places, including some cake mixes, cheeses, margarines, and ice creams. Much southern cooking involves the use of port as flavoring fro vegetables, a habit so ingrained in our culture that we may forget to list it as an ingredient. Whenever pork is an entrée or merely used as a flavoring, it should be identified on the menu and another option offered to those who refrain from pork.

Jews are permitted to eat the meat of any animal whose hooves are cloven and which chews its cud (e.g., cows, lambs/sheep). Pigs do not meet this requirement, hence the prohibition against their consumption.

Birds of prey and ostriches are forbidden as food, as are fish which do not have fins and scales (including catfish and all varieties of shellfish). Chicken and poultry are acceptable.

Permissible animals must be slaughtered according to specific regulations in order to be classified “kosher”. Orthodox Jews will eat only kosher foods, which are labeled as such on the packaging. Many Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist Jews eat only kosher foods during Passover and year-round will only consume wines and cheeses certified as kosher.

Many Orthodox Jews maintain a total separation of all dairy products from all meat products. Such families have two complete sets of dishes and cookware (“deli” and “dairy”).

During Passover ... Jews don't eat food products with yeast. Reform Jews observe Passover for seven days, Conservative and Orthodox Jews for eight days. Jews also observe a twenty-four hour fast from food and liquid during Yom Kippur.

Sikhism

Alcohol and tobacco are prohibited by the Sikh scriptures. Sikhs are encouraged to eat a simple diet and to avoid stimulants such as caffeine. Some Sikhs are vegetarians.

Clothing

While there may not be specific clothing restrictions in many of the faiths in our community, most expect their adherents to dress modestly.

Christianity

In addition to dressing modestly, Seventh-Day Adventists are encouraged to limit jewelry to that which is functional (e.g. watches, cuff links). The wearing of heavy make-up is discouraged.

Male members of the Free Holiness and United Pentecostal Churches and Church of God of Prophecy are expected to keep their hair short, while women wear theirs long. Women are expected to wear dresses or skirts, while men wear long pants, not shorts. Jewelry should be modest.

Hinduism

Hindu women's clothing is conservative, usually covering most of the body except the face.

Hindu women (and occasionally men) may wear a red dot of saffron on their forehead. This dot, which is both a religious symbol and a part of the culture in which Hinduism developed, is applied daily after the individual has said his/her morning prayers.

Islam

Beginning at puberty, Muslim women are expected to cover their entire bodies, except their faces and hands, when in the company of males other than family members. This clothing of the body (called hijab) is done in an attempt to be judged by criteria other than sexuality, rather than an effort at repression. This requirement can only be met in American high school gym classes and sports teams if the teacher/coach will allow flexibility in uniform/dress codes.

A Muslim man is expected to dress modestly, being covered from navel to knee, in all company except his wife's. Men's clothing is not to imitate women's.

Muslim men and women do not wear bathing suits in mixed company.

Sikhism

Sikhs do not cut their hair. Males wrap their hair beneath a turban. A young boy covers his head with a small piece of cloth (patka), while adult males and some females wear turbans (called dastars).

Child-Raising Issues

Schools have a unique opportunity to teach children respect for other religions and cultures. Some schools include a part of the daily announcements, "Today is _____ in the _____ faith."

Religious holidays are a particularly sensitive issue in schools. Especially in preschools and elementary schools, there is often a weeks-long build up to Christmas and Easter, with art activities, stories, etc., related to the holidays. This may be less the case in middle schools and high schools, though choral and band concerts in December usually have a Christmas theme. Several other faiths have holy days in December, but they rarely receive more than a moment's attention in the schools. Changing the focus of school holidays from Halloween, Christmas and Easter, to harvest, winter break and spring break would give equal "ownership" of these events to all children and break the ties (historical and present-day) with the Christian faith [alone].

In high schools in the Huntsville City Schools, there is great emphasis on near-perfect attendance so students can claim exemption from one or two exams at the end of the semester. The policy seems to vary from school to school, based on the goodwill of the principal, but children whose holy days are not school holidays sometimes lose eligibility for exam exemption because they were absent on their faith's holy days.

Convocations, graduation ceremonies, etc. have received a great deal of legal and media attention in recent years. Less the object of focus, but still important, are school events such as athletic banquets. Whether a prayer is led by an adult or a student, asking Jesus Christ to bless the event or the food means that the event does not “belong” equally to non-Christian participants.

The holding of baccalaureate services for graduating seniors is also a sensitive issue. While holding the event in a church, sponsored by the PTA rather than the school administration, does avoid legal conflicts, it is still a setting which prevents the participation by some of the students in whose honor it is planned.

Nationwide, the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT) for college bound high school students are scheduled on Saturdays several times during the year. By following the instructions inside their registration packets, students for whom Saturday is the Sabbath may make arrangements to take the test on another day.

Christianity

Children in Free Holiness Church families traditionally do not participate in extra-curricular activities which require apparel that is not considered modest.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church emphasizes a Christian education and runs one of the largest private school systems in the United States, from elementary school through universities. Adventist children are encouraged not to participate in activities related to Halloween, the Easter bunny, or Santa Claus.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not participate in birthday celebrations, patriotic, or religious holidays, though they respect other's beliefs and their right to do so.

Hinduism

Most Hindu women stay at home to raise their children.

Because traditional Hindu marriages are arranged by parents, dating is discouraged.

Islam

Observing Islamic dietary restrictions while eating in school cafeterias can be a challenge.... A more complete description of Islamic dietary restrictions is found on page 6.

When a Muslim girl reaches puberty, she is expected to cover all of her body except her face and hands (hijab) whenever she is outside her own home. Non-Muslim children need to be taught not to tease or pull at the clothing of girls dressed in hijab. Girls also need to be allowed 1) to wear modest, loose-fitting gym/PE clothes, and 2) to take private showers following gym activities.

All Muslims are expected to say ritual prayers on their knees with heads touching the floor at five specific times during the day. One of these times falls during the regular school day, so Muslim children need a quiet place to pray and permission to go there for five to ten minutes at these times. On Fridays (the Islamic Sabbath) boys of high school age are expected to join adult men for prayer at the mosque for about thirty minutes between Noon and 1 pm.

While the Jewish festival of Hanukkah usually receives some mention in local classrooms, Ramadan is rarely mentioned. Islamic parents are usually quite willing to come to school to tell their children's classmates about this holy month in the Islamic calendar.

Muslims are forbidden to participate in any celebration of any non-Muslim religious holiday. In order to avoid Christmas songs, parties and other activities, some Muslim children spend much of the month of December sitting in the school office or leaving school early in the day.

Judaism

Observing Jewish dietary restriction while eating in school cafeterias can be a challenge.... A more complete description of Jewish dietary restrictions is on page 7.

If school clothing is an issue for Jews, it is primarily for those of the Orthodox community, though males (and some females) of all groups may choose to wear a yarmulke (skullcap) as a symbol of their faith. The fact that athletic uniforms cover so little of the body may also make their wearing unacceptable to traditionally observant Jews.

Sikhism

Sikhs are encouraged to marry within their faith. Dating is not permitted, but individuals are permitted to choose their own spouse.

Public Prayer

In the Southern culture, many public events begin and/or end with a public prayer. Unless event organizers are sensitive to the religious diversity among attendees, many such prayers include references that are strongly Christian and end in some variation of "in Jesus name. Amen." Musical entertainment at such events frequently includes similar references as well.

Prayers can be powerful statements of shared respect without compromising the integrity of any faith represented. To make public prayers inclusive of the diverse people in whose name they are offered [and allowing them to publicly affirm the prayer offered], and to emphasize the fact that God transcends our human-made divisions, the following opening phrases might be used:

<i>God</i>	<i>Creator God</i>	<i>Mighty God</i>
<i>Source of all being</i>	<i>God, by whatever name we know thee/you</i>	

The body of the prayer should acknowledge the shared values and concerns of those in attendance. Thanksgivings in prayer are common to all faiths – for the blessings of the world, for the concerns that all share, for the work that has been given us to do. Supplications should also reflect the shared values and concerns – for vision, hope, strength, courage, etc.

Closings that represent all faiths [i.e. to which all can assent] include:

*Keep us faithful
In thy /your name*

*Hear our prayer
In thy/your holy name we pray*

Amen is almost universally used as a statement of affirmation. To emphasize the fact that the prayer has been offered on behalf of all those present, participants may be invited to join in the *Amen* with words like, “And the people say....”

If the person offering the prayer feels called to make a public prayer to her/her faith, he/she needs to introduce it with words like, “Respecting the fact that we come from many faiths, I offer my prayer in my tradition, the Christian faith.” Such a prayer can then be followed by a moment of silence in which people are invited to pray silently in their own tradition. More than one spoken prayer, each in a different tradition, could also be used.

People offering blessings over food that is to be consumed at the event need to be aware that individuals of other faiths may not be able to eat food that has been blessed in Jesus’ name.

While the [forms of prayer] above speak for most faiths which acknowledge a single God with power and might beyond that of humans, the Buddhist faith does not include such a God, so prayers that contain such a reference will not include any Buddhists who are present. A Buddhist prayer would be more likely to address the goodness and wisdom inherent in all human life and focus on opening one’s heart to those values. For example: Let us offer a prayer of appreciation for the opportunity to share this meal, to share our friendship, and to work together for the betterment of our community. Thank you.”

Other Issues in Public Life

In addition to the prayers offered at public events and the Southern tradition of serving barbecue, ham or bacon at many such dinners, other issues arise in which different faiths may experience conflicts with the “general culture”.

Baha’i

Baha’is are expected to recite an obligatory prayer each day. Many of today’s workspaces are not conducive to prayerful quiet.

Adult Baha'is fast from sunrise to sunset from March 2 to March 20, so it is difficult for them to participate in events such as going-away lunches or luncheon meetings during this time. An evening meeting, which prevents breaking the fast right at sundown, can also present problems.

Speaking of one another's shortcomings is "the most great sin" in the Baha'i faith. Because of this admonition, Baha'is will often excuse themselves from a conversation which includes gossip or backbiting.

Baha'is are expected to abstain from work and school on nine specific holy days, but they are not expected to risk their jobs for such an observance.

Christianity

Jehovah's Witnesses do not salute the flag of any nation and do not participate when national anthems are sung or played. They do respect the flag of the country in which they live, shown by respecting the laws of that nation. For religious reasons, Jehovah's Witnesses prefer non-blood management for all health matters.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (frequently called Mormons) are strongly encouraged to observe "Family Home Evenings" on Mondays, which prevents participation in Monday evening meetings, school events, etc.

Islam

Muslims are expected to recite prayers at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and evening each day. Since some of these fall during traditional work/school hours, a quiet place needs to be available where a Muslim may kneel with his/her head touching the floor.

As a sign of modesty, Muslims do not shake hands with persons of the opposite gender. If one male and one female are in an office or other room alone, the door should be left open.

Judaism

The Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday, which brings Sabbath service into direct conflict with events ranging from high school football games to symphony concerts.

Several slang phrases (e.g., "I think you can *jew* the price down") in common parlance are offensive to Jews.