

GUIDELINES FOR MULTIFAITH GATHERINGS

**A document prepared for Christian communities
and for all people of goodwill who
want to organise a multifaith gathering.**

Prepared by the *Commission on Living Faiths - Dialogue and Community*
of the Victorian Council of Churches, in consultation with
representatives of other faiths.

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Preface

The richness of our many faiths is expressed in the homes, shops, clothing and symbols of Victoria's (and Australia's) many multicultural, multilingual, multifaith neighbourhoods. That variety demonstrates how closely daily life is regulated for us as individuals and our communities, by the cycles of our religious calendars and festivals. Our lives are infused with the atmosphere of the holy, mingled with that of the everyday. Bishop David Silk, on the occasion of the multifaith celebration to mark the centenary of Australia's Federation, 2001.

There are times when we wish to come together to celebrate or commemorate a special event. We need to express our common humanity and the shared values which underpin our society. On occasion, we wish to share the spiritual dimension of our lives which gives a strong foundation to our society. Though our country is predominantly Christian, we welcome, acknowledge and respect people of all faiths or spiritual traditions, or, indeed, of no faith. So, then, it is only fitting that our gatherings reflect the multifaith reality.

Some members of our communities may perceive gathering with people of other faith traditions as a compromise or even a threat to their own position. Others may hasten into meetings, unaware of the sensitivities which should be observed. Sound leadership and understanding in planning an event should ensure an acceptable outcome. Some reference to our faith convictions is offered in the appendix, as is a suggested list for further reading.

These guidelines to assist in the planning of multifaith gatherings have been prepared by the Victorian Council of Churches *Commission on Living Faiths – Dialogue and Community*. This document is offered as a resource to Christians and to all people of goodwill who are seeking to come together to understand each others' traditions and to celebrate the multifaith dimension of our multicultural community.

This document is offered, too, to encourage people of all faiths to stand together with confidence, knowing that the meeting and gathering itself demonstrates tolerance, acceptance and respect for the integrity of each faith tradition. We acknowledge the prior document prepared for the Uniting Church in Australia by their Assembly's Reference Group on Relations with Other Faiths.

The authors of this document are grateful for the positive response and input received from representatives of the major faith traditions within our community.

We acknowledge the assistance and support of Mr George Lekakis, Chairperson, Victorian Multicultural Commission, in making these guidelines readily available to those interested.

Introduction

Multifaith vs Interfaith

Both terms are used when describing gatherings of people of different faith traditions.

Multifaith describes a gathering of people of different faiths, each being responsible for expressing something of its faith tradition or experience. *Multifaith* has been used in these guidelines as it better describes the events that are being organised in our communities – either the Civic Ceremony or the Memorial Gathering (the 1st and 2nd type of gatherings described). These gatherings are for a specific purpose, and each faith contribution is presented **in turn**.

Interfaith supposes an on-going relationship of dialogue between faiths. The Gatherings which celebrate the existing relationship and provide an experience which assists in the development and continuity of that relationship are properly called interfaith gatherings. This is the 3rd type of gathering described.

Building Community

In this diverse Australian society, people of many different cultures and faiths live and work together. As people wanting to develop our sense of community, we look for ways to learn more of each other, to understand more of each other's lives. This can be done in many ways; e.g., meeting as next-door-neighbours, having community picnics or cultural events. Increasingly, there are also opportunities for people of different faiths to share the spiritual aspect of their lives. There is the dialogue of

- life
- cooperation
- religious studies
- religious experience

Experience of faith

When people of the same faith gather together, they are affirming what they believe to be true about their own faith and tradition. When people of different faiths come together, they each express something of their own tradition thus showing what it means to be people of faith. People of diverse faiths come with different convictions about God or about the world in relation to the mystery at the heart of all things, and their convictions are also held with integrity.

Multifaith gatherings assume a respect for the faith expression and beliefs of each tradition and should never be entered into in order to proselytise, argue, debate or confront. They should rather be opportunities to acknowledge our common humanity and diverse spirituality. Interfaith meetings provide the opportunity for discussion and exploration of each others' faith traditions.

Acknowledgment of Indigenous People

Our ancient land, Australia, is home to **indigenous communities** whose dreaming and relationship with the land express a profound spirituality, which predates any other faith tradition in this land. Wherever possible, the local indigenous community should be invited to be involved in the gathering, both in planning and participation. In the absence of a local indigenous representative, their relationship to and continuing custodianship of the land should be acknowledged at the beginning of all public celebrations of faith and life.

1. A Civic Ceremony

Civic leaders may wish to organise a religious gathering to bring together all members of their community - to reflect its multicultural and multifaith nature and to promote the harmony and wellbeing of that community. Faith leaders should also encourage civic leaders to promote multicultural events as separate non-religious events, so that people can learn to recognise each other's gifts and cultures. When we wish to hold a civic religious ceremony, it should be open to and inclusive of all faiths or spiritual traditions.

Civic occasions, then, should acknowledge the specific contribution and place of values shared by all, by people of all faiths and spiritual traditions. The inclusive nature of a civic multifaith event provides an occasion to plan and learn together. It also demonstrates our understanding of the place faith plays in the lives of many as the motivation of their commitment to the local community, to respect, to understanding and to tolerance.

If there is to be a religious gathering, religious leaders should ask to be responsible for organising the program, together with the civic leaders. The elements of this gathering should emphasise the local situation and needs of the community, our common humanity, our tolerance and respect for our neighbour who may be of a different faith tradition, and could include

- stories of journeying and the significance of faith
- sharing the joy, the grief and the pain of the journey
- a commitment to work together to promote community harmony
- an overview of the specific occasion and the significance of gathering together.

Organising the event

Where should this event be held?

While church members may immediately consider using church buildings, this may well discomfort and even exclude those of other faiths who would like to attend. Neutral territory could be found – the civic centre itself, a public hall, an open area such as a local park or the town centre.

If a relationship of mutual trust has been established, it may be acceptable to all to meet in a venue of a particular faith tradition that is hosting or convening an event planned by all.

The venue is only one of the aspects of the event that needs to be considered by the nominated representatives of faith communities. Together, they also need to decide on the purpose, the theme and the content of the civic ceremony.

Planning

Remembering that the purpose of this event is to draw the community together, the gathering should include components from different faith traditions, and these components should be discrete sections of the event. Early in the proceedings it should be stated explicitly that statements of faith represented are the convictions of particular groups of people; they are not presented as statements having the assent of all participants. Rather, each participating group presents expressions of its faith and religious tradition in turn.

The **planning meeting and the process itself** contribute to the **shared** nature of these gatherings. And because the process to organise the gathering has been talked through collectively, the shared experience should carry through into the various components of the event itself:

- the Greeting, the Welcome - when the reason for gathering is expressed, the 'drawing together';
- the Blessing - when the individuals of the gathering are sent out to live and work together in community;
- in the silences that could be incorporated after each faith-sharing or story-telling by the different faith traditions;
- the sentiments expressed by different faith traditions when they resonate with one's own faith or spiritual experience.

The distinct contributions offered by the various faith traditions could include singing or a spoken prayer as

well as the stories of faith. As the leaders talk through the various possibilities, each will learn what is practised by the other, what is acceptable, and what has meaning in each of the traditions. **It is not recommended that people of different faiths join in common prayer.** The concept of *prayer* itself can be misunderstood, with different meanings and understandings in different traditions. Some even say that common prayer should never be attempted, as it too easily blurs the distinctions between the faiths and may cause offence. If this is accepted, then prayer may be included within each religion's section of the civic service. It may be possible, however, to express a common petition or commitment in which all are happy to participate, either in words, music or in ritual action.

Remember: a civic gathering provides a means to build the sense of cohesion within a community of households of people of different faiths. Avoid topics that can cause division. Focus on common values, celebration or concerns.

2. A Memorial or Commemorative Ceremony or Gathering

Sometimes the desire to come together arises from a very significant event which the community needs to respond to in faith. Examples of events which may bring people together include bushfires, earthquakes, multiple shootings and other tragedies, the breaking of a drought, the survival of the fishing fleet caught in a bad storm. It could also be a ceremony to mark a national or international event. The leaders of the various faith communities could jointly be responsible for organising this event.

Organising the event

Where should this event be held?

If the event being commemorated is local, the best location for this gathering should be as close as possible to the place of the event being commemorated. If the occasion was traumatic, the gathering would have to be organised with great sensitivity - allowing the sense of loss, grief or thankfulness to be expressed, as well as the faith perspective that holds people together in a time of trial. The surroundings should remain stark with some symbols from the various faith traditions that demonstrate hope, healing, and life. If the event was national or international, the location for the event should be as in the Civic Ceremony – a location not necessarily associated with any one of the faith groups, but meaningful to the event being commemorated.

Planning

Responsibility for organising a Memorial or Commemorative Gathering should lie directly with the leaders of the various faith communities. They should ensure that the occasion focuses on the reasons for the gathering, the aspects of the experience that need to be addressed, and the manner in which the people of the various faith communities deal with an event of this kind. Expressions of faith and ritual action are often a significant dimension of healing and reconciliation.

Again, the strengthening of the community links may best be done in silence - maybe with 'universal' music being played if this is appropriate. When we wish to hold a civic religious ceremony, it should be open to, and inclusive of, all faiths and spiritual traditions.

If Christians or civic leaders are the prime movers for such an occasion, they should be aware that they may not be meeting the needs of the other faith communities. If other faith communities do not want to participate in the memorial, then Christians may organise a Christian or civic memorial.

3. Interfaith Gatherings - meeting together in the context of ongoing relationships with people of other faiths

Events of this type may arise from shared discussions between representatives of various faith traditions. These gatherings, if conducted on behalf of the various faith traditions, should include nominated representatives from the various faiths. Even if the gathering is more informal in nature, the same general principles as used in the previously discussed types of gatherings apply i.e. sensitivity in deciding location, content, and areas of responsibility.

In the process of interfaith dialogue and discussion, the participants would have already explored pertinent questions of faith and belief, and should have gone some way in deepening their understanding of relevant faith issues. This deepening of understanding, together with a deepening of relationships, will affect the organisation of the planned event.

Organising the event

We acknowledge that we come together as people of faith or spiritual traditions. We are all one in our concern for humanity, but at the same time each religion has its own distinctive set of beliefs. The expressions of these beliefs will determine how we choose to participate and what we will contribute to the gathering. No one faith tradition should dominate the gatherings.

Coming together with others of different faiths must not blur the distinctive religious traditions from which we each come.

Where should this event be held?

People who have been participating in discussions with people of other faiths may wish to meet together in one of two ways:

a. **By visiting each other's place of worship in order to better understand expressions of faith and ritual.**

If members of a local faith community are expecting visitors from other faith traditions, then the visitors should be welcomed and accompanied by members of the host community. Some simple explanation or comment could be given during the ritual. The guests should be accorded the freedom of whether to participate or not, and it would be better therefore that they were not ushered to the front of the gathering. A further 'hospitality' gesture should be made after the service so that all may gather openly and freely together, possibly to share food. As dietary requirements should be observed, the hosts need to ensure that the appropriate foods are available.

b. **A 'shared celebration' by those participating in the dialogue.**

People in this situation would be able to discuss the location and content of such a meeting among themselves. If the invitation to come together is extended to people outside the organising group, then the dialogue group would need to be sensitive to the needs of their own communities and to the visitors when organising such an event. **The location of the gathering in this situation depends very much on its purpose. It need not be assumed that it has to take place within a building, nor that a rotational sequence should begin with the Christian church.**

Planning

Planning for an event within the context of ongoing interfaith dialogue will be the responsibility of those involved in the dialogue itself. Leaders of the participating faith traditions, if not involved in the dialogue, should be kept informed as events are being planned.

Postscript

A checklist

- Why are we organising this event? Is coming together the best response to our felt need at this time?
- How are relating to those of different faiths who come from other lands and cultures (where they may have been a persecuted minority) and have to overcome memories of past experience in order to associate here in Australia with people of other faiths?
- Are the representatives the delegated leaders from each faith community?
- Where is the event to be held? Why?
- How are we organising this gathering/event? Which group is responsible for which section? Are we doing anything that will give offence to another? Is any one faith dominant?
- Should we offer further hospitality before/after the event? Is this appropriate? (Note dietary requirements).
- Are there any local or City Council requirements to be respected in conducting this gathering?

The importance of inclusive language

When working with multifaith or interfaith events or relations, it is important to use inclusive language, i.e. words and expressions which are appropriate to all, and not specific to any individual faith tradition.

When Christians relate to people of other faiths, they aim to relate simply as Christians, rather than, as members of a particular Christian denomination. For example, Christianity is a faith tradition; the Anglican church is a denomination or branch of Christianity.

The words *service, worship, prayer, theology, clergy, minister, priest* are better expressed in more inclusive terms as will be evident in this document.

Such well-intentioned statements as ‘ We are all children/ sons and daughters of the one God’ or ‘God is at work within the lives of all of us’ should be avoided, as they presume some common understanding of who or what is meant by *God*. This may cause unnecessary complexity.

Nor should we imply or presume that all people present believe in a God. Hence we are sensitive to those whose ‘faith’ is more a philosophy or way of life rather than a ‘religion’.



Comments or responses invited

You are invited to respond to these Guidelines with questions or insights from your experience of memorials or gatherings e.g. at hospitals organised by chaplains, or ceremonies and gatherings for special occasions e.g. interfaith marriage.

Send your responses to the Commission for Living Faiths – Community and Dialogue
Phone: 9650 4511 Email: vcc@vcc.org.au

Appendix 1

OUR FAITH CONVICTIONS

The following positions represent ways of understanding the range of faith convictions which are encountered within faith communities. These may help to explain the resistance of some to come together with people of other faiths, or to enter into dialogue with them. With the assurance that individual faith is not compromised in respectful dialogue, however, the anticipated difficulties should not eventuate.

The **exclusivist** position

- regarding only themselves as ‘saved’, and no other religion as having the means of ‘salvation’ for their followers
- looking upon other religions as man-made, faulty and not to be tolerated, denying that any truth can be found in them
- dialogue only out of political necessity (where group is seeking recognition as a minority)
- dialogue in the hope of converting the other, out of a position of superiority, and, at worst, demonstrating a militant, aggressive attitude of proselytising

The **inclusivist** position

- regarding other religions as possessing only partial truth, yet able to predispose their followers towards accepting (one’s own) more complete truth and goodness
- either in this life or in the next, others will shed their ignorance and come to accept the truth revealed as it really is
- dialogue provides an opportunity to offer the truth, out of a position of superiority or claim to fullness of the truth

The **pluralist** position

- respecting the integrity of all world religions as complete systems, capable of helping their followers find salvation and ultimate enlightenment
- people of faith can be enriched by sharing the different perspectives and ways of understanding ultimate things; together searching for the truth
- each religion is worthy of respect, as one among many, while for the individual, his/her own faith provides the way of reaching perfection/God

Appendix 2

A Suggested Format for Gatherings

Some or all of the following components could form part of gatherings, depending on the purpose and formality of the event.

In planning the gathering, it is well to ensure that the contributions are diverse: chant or song, dance or ritual action as well as scripture and the spoken word could be incorporated, while preserving the religious nature of the celebration.

The gathering may thus include:

- Acknowledgment of the Indigenous People;

- Gathering, greeting and welcome, together with an expression of purpose;
- Presentations from participating faith communities - in whatever form is appropriate to them but remembering that while each presentation is an authentic expression of the faith of that tradition, it should be respectful of other faith traditions;
- A statement of intention e.g. for peace and harmony, understanding and goodwill;
- Common ritual action and/or statement from participants;
- Some form of formal conclusion.

Appendix 3

Background Reading:

Keith Rowe, *Living with the Neighbour who is Different* Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 2000

Interreligious Dialogue: the End of Ecumenism? John D'Arcy May, Melbourne, 2001. Occasional paper, available on the Victorian Council of Churches website: www.vcc.org.au

S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Not without my neighbour who is different: issues in interfaith relations*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1999

Civic Religious Partnership – refer to website www.greaterdandenong.com key word interfaith

Australian Consultation on Liturgy, *Guidelines for Multifaith Worship*, www.melbourne.catholic.org.au

Further Reading:

Klaus K Klostermaier *Hinduism: A short history*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2000

Cybelle Shattuck, *Hinduism*, London, Toutledge, 1999

John R Hinnells, ed., *New handbook of living religions*, Cambridge UK, Blackwell Publishers, 1997

Ian Markham, ed., *A world Religions Reader*, Cambridge UK, Blackwell Publishers, 1996

C. Scott Littleton, Gen Ed., *The Sacred East : Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Shinto*, London, Macmillan in association with Duncan Baird Publishers, 1996

Philip Novak, *The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions*, San Francisco USA, Harper, 1994

Marcus J Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* , San Francisco USA, Harper, 2003

C S Lewis *Mere Christianity*, San Francisco USA, Harper, (Reprinted) 2001

Karen Armstrong *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, London, Ballantine Books, 1994

Donna Rosenthal *The Israelis: Ordinary People in an Extraordinary Land*, Free Press, 2003