

Guidelines for Interfaith Celebration of Thanksgiving

The concept of respectful presence is helpful when Presbyterians consider the implications of the Reformed tradition for Christian relationships with persons of other religious faiths. . . . Respectful presence is a way to follow Jesus of Nazareth, who met with people of many cultures and religions even as he fulfilled the nature and purpose of his God-given mission. Our expectation is that the practice of respectful presence can enable Christians to have fruitful experiences of interfaith dialogue, celebration, or worship. At the same time, our expectation is that respectful presence with people of other faiths can lead Christians into a fuller understanding and experience of their own faith. — Respectful Presence: An Understanding of Interfaith Prayer and Celebration from Reformed Christian Perspective, 209th General Assembly, 1997

In a pluralistic society, opportunities for interaction with persons of other faith traditions are increasingly common. A national holiday, such as Thanksgiving Day in the United States of America, offers an occasion which may be celebrated with those from a variety of faiths. In such a setting, an attitude of respectful presence offers Christians a way to participate, expressing respect for persons from other faiths while maintaining loyalty to the Christian gospel.

Interfaith celebrations should be planned by representatives from each participating faith. For that reason, guidelines for liturgical planning are offered here with suggested liturgical resources Presbyterians may use to represent the Reformed Christian tradition.

Guidelines

Christians have significant doctrinal disagreements with other religions. We should not compromise our faith in God's revelation in Jesus Christ in order to achieve an artificial agreement with persons of other faiths. Rather, expressing our own faith with integrity, while maintaining respect for the faith of others, is a necessary condition of genuine interreligious dialogue.

At the same time, these differences should not deter us from seeking common ground for both service and prayer. In a world where divisions are often bitter, Christians should be eager to join other people of faith in seeking mutual cooperation and understanding. Christians may engage in interfaith celebration, both for a specific common purpose and as an expression of faithfulness to the gospel itself.

While Christians may give appropriate witness to their faith in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, respectful presence implies a mutual agreement not to exploit occasions of interfaith celebration as opportunities for conversion.

Persons of different faith traditions call God by different names, follow different patterns for the worship of God, and pray to God in distinct ways. Even among the monotheistic traditions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, different ways of prayer to the one God require acknowledgment, understanding, and mutual sensitivity.

Given differences in both doctrine and prayer, maintaining a respectful presence suggests two basic forms an interfaith celebration may take:

1. Persons from different faith traditions may agree to gather for specific purposes, using language and symbols acceptable to all present. In such a setting, it is important to seek ways in which all may pray together authentically. These will necessarily be different from the ways each might pray within a specific faith tradition, but they should not be offensive, compromising, or beyond the genuine expression of any one faith group.
2. Different faith traditions gather for specific purposes, using language and symbols distinctive to each of their particular traditions. In such a setting, we seek to stand with one another in prayer. In alternating moments, we participate fully in Christian prayer in the presence of others, and we observe with respectful attention the prayer of persons from other faiths. Appropriate readings, prayers, and music may be offered by each religious tradition. Care should be taken to ensure that no one faith tradition dominates or overshadows another.

Sample Prayer

The following is a prayer which might be used in a gathering of persons of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faiths:

Eternal Source,
Creator of all,
the One and Holy God:
you alone are worthy of our praise.
Even as we call you by different names,
we acknowledge together our common faith
that only you are God.
Give us grace to celebrate the heritage we share
as the children of your covenant with Abraham.
Give us wisdom to hear your truth
in the teachings of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad,
and to live by love according to your commandments.
Lead us, gracious and merciful God,
to love you above all others,
and in our daily lives,
to love our neighbors as our own kin.
All praise be yours now and forever.
Amen.

Resources

Scripture Readings

Book of Common Worship (1993)

Daily Lectionary for Special Days, p. 1095

The Worshipbook (1970)

Lectionary for Thanksgiving Day, p. 175

Psalm verses for Thanksgiving Day, p. 162

Appropriate or Adaptable Prayers

Book of Common Worship (1993)

Litany of Thanksgiving, pp. 792–93

Chippewa prayer for hope, p. 796

Canticle of the Sun, p. 800

Prayer for the harvest, p. 801

Prayer for nature, p. 802

Prayers for our nation and for our country, p. 816

The Worshipbook (1970)

Litany for the Nation, pp. 127–29

The practice of prayer for persons of other faiths in the context of Christian worship is appropriate on any Lord's Day and may lead to greater interfaith understanding and cooperation. Resources for such prayers may be found in the *BCW*, Prayers for Various Occasions, p. 798 (for world religions), p. 815 (for Jews, for Muslims), and in the Intercession for Lent, pp. 236–37.

Excerpted from the *Book of Occasional Services* (Geneva Press, 1999) 285–288.