



# ***Respectful Presence:***

**AN UNDERSTANDING OF INTERFAITH  
PRAYER AND CELEBRATION  
FROM A REFORMED CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

**A DOCUMENT COMMENDED TO CONGREGATIONS  
AND GOVERNING BODIES  
OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)  
BY THE  
209th GENERAL ASSEMBLY (1997)**

**AND  
A STUDY GUIDE**

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**The *Respectful Presence* document (without the study guide), is available on the Worldwide Web at the Interfaith Relations site.**



# **Respectful Presence: An Understanding of Interfaith Prayer and Celebration from a Reformed Christian Perspective**

## **Preliminary summary**

102<sup>1</sup> Many persons in the United States have traditionally assumed that Christian religious institutions constituted the dominant religious force in U.S. society and that, therefore, their symbols and religious forms should be commonly accepted in the public arena. Today, however, Christians in the United States find themselves in a society that has become so diverse religiously and culturally that it is often inappropriate or unacceptable to assume that acts of Christian worship will be used in public circumstances. At the same time, Christians may find themselves in situations where they are unsure if they are unfaithful and unwise to participate in other types of public religious acts which some might interpret as unauthentic worship.

Will we avoid the language of religious participation and the symbols of religious expression entirely and thereby treat public encounters with people of other faiths as purely secular? Or, shall we join in situations where religious expressions and symbols are used in a context where diverse faith communities are present and active?

We are convinced that Christians may engage in interreligious prayer and celebration, not only to meet the demands of particular occasions, but also as an expression of our faithfulness to the gospel itself.

Respectful presence is a way for Christians to be present with persons of other religious traditions in a variety of settings, expressing deep respect for those persons and their faith while maintaining loyalty to the Christian gospel.

## **I. Introduction**

103 The religious profile of the United States has shifted. This is due to new patterns of immigration and to greater fluidity of religious membership and commitments among Americans. Christians have long been aware of Jewish places of worship in their midst, but many are experiencing new interactions with Jewish colleagues, friends, and even family members. Demographic changes have brought new neighbors to Americans cities and towns. In the quarter century from 1965 to 1990, the number of Asian-Americans, for example, has grown from one million to over seven million. There are now mosques in previously unexpected places throughout the United States. Perhaps more surprising to

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: Numbering in this booklet is keyed to the numbers in the official *Minutes of the 209th General Assembly*, excepting that those read 33.0102-33.0177.

many Christian Americans is the expanding number of centers for the community life of Hindus, Buddhists, and others who were less frequently encountered in the past.

104

Research suggests that approximately ten percent of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations have some type of ongoing relationship with people of other faiths. Christians in the U.S. live increasingly today in situations in which there is fellowship with people of other faiths. Opportunities for interreligious celebration and worship are more frequent, and occasions of potential conflict are nearly unavoidable.

### ***The situations in which we live***

105

In a world of many bitter divisions to which, sadly, religious differences often contribute, there is an urgent call to all people of faith to seek understanding and cooperation. In response to this vocation, Christians should be eager to seek fellowship with people of other religions, work together with them, and celebrate our common concerns and values, all the while being alert to the great sensitivity this practice requires.

106

Questions about participation in interreligious celebration and worship are no longer optional or restricted to an elite group. It is a matter of concern for all Christians. In the pluralistic world in which we live, everyday life provides numerous encounters with people of different faiths: interfaith marriages, personal friendships, public prayer, religious festivals, baccalaureates, meetings at interreligious study centers and meetings of civic organizations, fraternities and sororities. In the past, Christian institutions and symbols have dominated. Diversity will make this inappropriate in the future. Christians must make decisions about what they will do: they can be secular in public or they can bring their religious expressions into situations together with those of others.

107

Such occasions may make acts of Christian worship inappropriate, but perhaps for reasons other than what many people assume. When Christians gather to worship, they assume many things, particularly that a continuing bond of common commitment exists among them that is a base for their corporate acts of worship together. This commitment is characterized by several common features:

- 108 - They believe they are gathered in response to God's call.
- 109 - They make their confession of faith with one another.
- 110 - They participate in a liturgy which is commonly understood and affirmed.
- 111 - They pledge themselves to support one another in times of need and to support the church's mission with outreach.
- 112 - They observe their common passages in life.
- 113 - They witness that their life together is a foretaste of God's kingdom.
- 114 - They celebrate the sacraments as signs of their common confession and commitment.

115

In our pluralistic world, however, situations of everyday life frequently provide dynamics that are in contrast to those found in worshipping Christian congregations:

- 116 - People who meet together may represent varying religious communities rooted in different traditions.
- 117 - They come together for a specific purpose, not a common faith commitment.
- 118 - They meet together to accomplish some intended agenda, and they either tacitly agree or carefully decide what may be appropriate or inappropriate to do.
- 119 - They are conscious of time constraints, since they must inevitably return to their respective commitments and other responsibilities.
- 120 - At the conclusion of their task they disperse with no necessarily continuing commitment.

121

In such situations it would be inappropriate or unacceptable to assume that acts Christians define as corporate worship will occur, even when some desire for common sharing exists.

122

If people of different faith communities meet often enough and find common bonds among themselves, they may begin to develop a continuing commitment to each other and to their mutual quest for ultimate Reality. Such commonality cannot be taken for granted. When it does develop people may indeed find ways to engage in acts that Christians can define as full corporate worship. In most cases, however, people assemble for particular agendas in which the conditions do not call forth what we describe as worship. In these cases, people may indeed celebrate together or even find themselves sharing experiences of personal prayer.

123

Given these circumstances, we Christians have many decisions to make in the varying situations we will encounter. We can choose to be primarily observers who minimally participate in what is happening around us, or we can be participants who maintain a careful observing stance. There can be a tension between our intention to be with others and our intention to remain standing within our own faith commitments. An interfaith, interreligious orientation frequently raises significant fears for Christians. It also brings challenges that Christians are often poorly prepared to meet.

124

In each interfaith encounter—for example, marriages and funerals, civic occasions, baccalaureates, meetings of fraternities and sororities, legislative sessions, peace events, and joint efforts on justice issues—it is important that Christians not malign other traditions, and that they be sensitive to the hospitality Jesus urges us to allow and receive from others. It is important to search for understanding which will assist Christians in a multi-religious society to maintain public faith through prayer, celebration and, perhaps, even corporate worship. The suggestions we make here may be helpful to those willing to be respectfully present with others. It will be important to see those responses in the light of some convictions shared by Presbyterians and other Reformed Christians.

## ***Reformed Christian convictions***

### **The living Christ**

125

As Presbyterians we confess Jesus Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14: 6). By God's grace and mercy the Spirit of the living Christ is at work in the world. Where God's creation is restored, Christ is present and revealed. Where human dignity is maintained, Christ is present and revealed. 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. The truth of Christ bids us seek reconciliation, "unmask idolatries in church and culture, hear the voices of people long silenced and to work with others for justice, freedom and peace" (*The Book of Confessions, A Brief Statement of Faith*, 10.4, lines 69-71). The truth of Christ exposes the arrogance and pride of any community's claim that it alone receives revelation.

126

We seek to "build loving relationships with people of other faiths and religious traditions. Where possible we will work in solidarity with them in struggles for justice, freedom, peace and human dignity" (*General Assembly Minutes*, 1991, Part I, p. 676, paragraph 34.074).<sup>2</sup> As we continue to interact with, and learn from, diverse cultures across the globe, we rejoice in the way that the Spirit goes before us, preparing hearts with the implicit message of God's love through creation, made explicit through Jesus Christ (Romans 1:20, 3:21-30).

127

As we enter the new millennium 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.

128

We walk the way in humility and trust in God to guide us. In so doing, we shall not only confess Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life; we shall also follow Paul's admonition to "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18).

### **Limits to Interfaith Celebration and Worship**

129

There are limits to interfaith prayer, celebration, and worship for Presbyterians. These have been expressed in very general form in the paper, "The Nature of Revelation in the Christian Tradition from a

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<sup>2</sup> Editor's note: Document references in parentheses refer to Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) documents.



Reformed Perspective” (*General Assembly Minutes*, 1987, Part I, pp. 437-453). While the original context refers to various forms of interfaith dialogue, the principles are particularly appropriate for interfaith celebration, prayer, and worship:

(a) We must not bend or trim our faith in God's revelation in Jesus Christ in order to achieve an artificial agreement with the doctrines of other religions. We must therefore be prepared to acknowledge clearly that as Christians we do have doctrinal disagreements with other religions, though this should not deter us from seeking common ground for service to humanity.

(b) We may learn from [other religions] insofar as what we learn can be incorporated into, and enrich, our personal and corporate relationships with the God of Israel who is revealed in Jesus Christ....The criterion to be applied here is Jesus Christ as the center of revelation.

(c) Entering into interfaith dialogue in no way diminishes our calling to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all people, with all due respect for every good thing that God has given them in their religion. Indeed, expressing one's own faith is a necessary condition of interreligious dialogue. (*General Assembly Minutes*, 1987, Part I, pp. 452-453, paragraph 28.276)

### **Possibilities for interfaith prayer, celebration, and worship**

130

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.

### **Respectful presence**

131

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 authentic attentiveness to the symbolic expressions of other religious communities. Respectful presence also means Christian willingness to offer witness in our liturgical expressions of the presence of God. Respectful presence goes beyond mere tolerance. It engages Christians in receiving as well as giving testimony to deep religious convictions and actions.

132

In exploring the possibilities of respectful presence, Presbyterians possess wise resources from the church's confessions and statements. The church's confessions are consistent in their affirmation of the universal providence of God.

133

In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, we recognize: “The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds...heaven and earth together with all creatures...” (*The Book of Confessions*, The Heidelberg Catechism, 4.027).

134

A Declaration of Faith, adopted by the 117th General Assembly (1977) of the Presbyterian Church U.S. as a reliable aid for Christian study, liturgy, and inspiration, acknowledges that:

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. (*The Book of Confessions*, A Declaration of Faith, Chapter Seven: The Christian Church, (4) The Church Lives Alongside Other Faiths, lines **52, 54-56**)

135

Thus, as The Confession of 1967 affirms:

The church...encounters the religions of [people] and in that encounter becomes conscious of its own human character as a religion....

The Christian finds parallels between other religions and his [/her] own and must approach all religions with openness and respect. Repeatedly God has used the insight of non-Christians to challenge the church to renewal. But the reconciling word of the gospel is God's judgment upon all forms of religion, including the Christian... (*The Book of Confessions*, The Confession of 1967, 9.41)

136

"The Nature of Revelation in the Christian Tradition," commended to the church by the 199th General Assembly (1989), notes that:

If trees are to be known by their fruits (Matthew 7:16-20) it is hard to say that all religions besides Christianity are bad trees, or even to deny that God is at work in them...

We must attend to each religious tradition in its historical particularity and not just under the rubric of "non-Christian religions." (*General Assembly Minutes*, 1987, Part I, pp. 451 and 452, paragraphs 28.258 and 28.269)

137

Such attentiveness leads us to affirm, in the words a statement adopted by the 195th General Assembly (1983), "Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation":

...The Spirit of God is constantly at work in ways that pass human understanding and in places that to us are least expected...

...Witness cannot be a one-way process, but of necessity is two-way; in it Christians become aware of some of the deepest convictions of their neighbors. It is also the time in which, within a spirit of openness and trust, Christians are able to bear authentic witness, giving an account of their commitment to the Christ, who calls all persons to himself. (*General Assembly Minutes*, 1983, Part I, pp. 551 and 552, Ecumenical Convictions, Sections 7.43 and 7.45)

## **II. A framework for interreligious prayer and celebration**

### ***Respectful presence and interfaith prayer, celebration, and worship***

138

Christian worship is a gathering within a community committed in response to God's goodness in Jesus Christ. In interfaith celebration, however, something quite different yet also quite significant is happening.

139

Each religious community represented in interfaith prayer and celebration should be recognized as having a distinctive religious tradition. Respectful presence implies that, in spite of the differences this produces, Christians can acknowledge the participants' commitments. Interfaith celebration can therefore potentially transform those who participate in it. Christians can be authentically open to the intimations of the Spirit's presence in the midst of an interfaith gathering and, at the same time, deeply committed to their faith in God through Jesus Christ. They can share with others with integrity, aware that God is present and active in all creation.

### ***Three kinds of interfaith prayer, celebration, and worship***

140 In broadest possible terms, there are three forms of interfaith prayer and celebration:

1. when people of other faiths are present in Christian worship;
2. when Christians are present in worship activities of other faith communities;
3. when people of different faiths are together in interfaith prayer, celebration, or worship.

141 In actual practice, the distinctions between the three types, or their subsets, may be blurred. Nevertheless, for purposes of providing help, the categories are defined separately and guidelines for each type follow, as understood within the practices of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

### **People of other faiths in Christian worship**

142

People of other faiths may attend a Christian service for different reasons. They may come out of curiosity or they may be invited to attend on the basis of some relationship with Christians who are involved in a particular church. Sometimes people of other faiths attend Christian services as part of the planning process for an interfaith celebration or other interfaith activity, such as working on justice issues for the common good. At other times they attend because of personal relationships across faith lines, especially at times when rites of passage are celebrated by friends.

143

1. People of other faiths should be welcomed at services of Christian worship. They should feel free to participate (e.g., by standing, kneeling, singing), and explicit reference should be made to the acceptability of this, both before and during the service.

- 144 2. There should be opportunity to inform our guests about what they are observing.
- 145 3. The particular church's usual form of service should be used in accordance with the normative framework found in the Directory for Worship in the *Book of Order*.
- 146 4. When the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is celebrated, it should be appropriately explained and the invitation to the table clearly defined in accordance with the Directory for Worship (*Book of Order*, W-2.4011).
- 147 5. Liturgical materials originating in other faith communities should be used in the Christian service only with sensitivity to their history, meaning, and context. They should be appropriate to the occasion of worship and should not be used primarily as ways to include or welcome guests.
- 148 6. Hospitality essential to respectful presence should include provision for the guests' comfort and careful observance of what they can and cannot eat or drink.

### **Christians attending worship activities of other faith communities**

149

Christians may attend the worship activities of other religious communities for different reasons: out of curiosity, to seek understanding, as an educational opportunity, as an expression of relationship with the other community or persons in it.

- 150 1. It is advisable that Christians only visit the worship activities of other faith communities when they can do so with respectful presence.
- 151 2. Prior to visiting, Christians should learn something about the other faith community. A knowledgeable person of that community can be asked to teach something about it. Christians that serve other faith communities professionally may also be resource persons.
- 152 3. Visitors should learn about and observe any restrictions that may be practiced in the place of worship they visit. As guests, they should discover appropriate behavior related to clothing, food and drink, gestures, gender roles, and postures.
- 153 4. Christians should know why they are attending the worship activity. Christian pastors and leaders should interpret the implications of respectful presence, including the concerns of conscience and appropriate limits to participation.
- 154 5. When invited to participate in any way, Christians should be clear about the meaning of such participation. They should exercise caution so that participation does not invite misinterpretation and confusion nor violate the integrity of either their own or the other community. Christians need to maintain accountability to their own confessing community. (See Appendix B of this report.)

## **Christians and others together in interfaith prayer and celebrations**

155

An increasing number of Christian churches, including congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), are engaged in interfaith prayer and celebration. Planners should be clear about the reasons for the events. Occasions might include: civic or national festivals such as Thanksgiving Day or Martin Luther King, Jr. Day celebrations; services for particular organizations whose membership shares ideas and concerns; conferences; services organized by local interfaith groups; and services for particular concerns such as peace, justice, world unity, AIDS, disasters, or ecology.

156

Interfaith prayer and celebration fit into one of three categories: a focused observance, alternate worship and observation, or worship with mutual commitment.

### ***\* A focused observance for prayer and celebration***

157

In focused observances persons from different religious communities agree to gather together for specific purposes in which they will use language and symbols acceptable to all persons present.

- 158 1. The communities that gather should themselves determine who shall represent them in the planning process.
- 159 2. There should be openness accompanied by acknowledged responsibility to express what is and is not acceptable. Planners have a responsibility to be clear about the purpose as well as the nature of the occasion.
- 160 3. Planners should give attention to such details as: forms and vocabulary which allow persons of different faiths to give assent to what is said, generally inclusive terms for transcendent Reality and human communities.
- 161 4. Planners should insure that the celebration is not used as an opportunity to proselytize.
- 162 5. Planners should be mindful of the importance of silence and meditation. Their use should be interpreted so that no persons are made to feel awkward.

### ***\* Alternating participation and observation for prayer and celebration***

163

In alternating participation and observation, persons from different religious communities agree to gather for specific purposes in which they will use language and symbols distinctive to their particular traditions. Such occasions provide alternating opportunities for participants to pray and celebrate in the presence of others and to be in the respectful presence of others when they provide the leadership.

- 164 1. People should respect the integrity of all who participate.
- 165 2. The leaders should respect the rights of each person to determine her or his own level of participation without manipulation, coercion, or intimidation.
- 166 3. Each community that joins in such a gathering should itself determine who shall represent it in planning the prayer and celebration.
- 167 4. The planners should respect the right of persons of each faith community to make their particular contribution to the language, rites, and symbols of the celebration.
- 168 5. Planners should be clear about such particular details as equitable distribution of time and leadership, seating, acoustics, and amenities.

**\* *Worship with mutual commitment***

169

In worship with mutual commitment, persons from different faith traditions use mutually authentic language, rites, and symbols to express their common commitments to transcendent Reality and one another. The development of such a covenant relationship in community grows out of deep commitment to one another, and involves the profound difficulties such a commitment entails. Consequently this form of interfaith coming together is often rare and profoundly meaningful. As Christians we can only say that this occurs by the grace of God.

- 170 1. People need to meet often enough to trust one another, to allow such a committed community to develop.
- 171 2. If worship is to become an activity of such a community, it should enhance and be an integral part of the process rather than on the periphery, an intrusion, or extraneous.
- 172 3. People should choose a committee that represents the diversity of the group. It will need to meet often enough to allow its members to commit themselves to one another, learn to trust each another, and themselves increasingly become a community.
- 173 4. At each stage as mutual acceptance develops, everyone in the community needs to affirm the result.
- 174 5. Commitments made in gathered interfaith communities should not violate an ultimate confession to God, the Source of our being.

### **III. Conclusion**

175

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.

## Appendix A: Definitions

176

The following definitions are used in this document:

*Religion*: the sum of human responses to transcendent Reality. A particular religion is defined in terms of its cluster of powerful and illuminating symbols or images (e.g., at the core of the Christian religion is the image of Jesus as Christ; other religions have their own distinctive symbol systems which contrast with those of Christianity).

*Respectful*: characterized by particular attention, concern, consideration, deference, or regard for others without defamation or denial of their integrity

*Presence*: to be within the awareness of another person (or being)

*Interfaith or interreligious*: the relationship between Christians and persons of one or more other religious traditions. This is significantly different from the Christian ecumenical relationships between persons from within various Christian churches. The terms interfaith and interreligious are used interchangeably throughout these guidelines.

*Multifaith or multireligious*: the social context in which people gather within a society made up of people of many religions. The terms multifaith and multireligious are used interchangeably throughout these guidelines.

*Celebration*: public symbolic acts that occur when persons from two or more faith communities gather around common concerns and values.

*Worship*: "Christian worship joyfully ascribes all praise and honor, glory and power to the triune God. In worship the people of God acknowledge God present in the world and in their lives. As they respond to God's claim and redemptive action in Jesus Christ, believers are transformed and renewed. In worship the faithful offer themselves to God and are equipped for God's service in the world" (*Book of Order*, W1.1001). In any religious tradition, worship is an encounter with transcendence. It implies giving honor to and acknowledging transcendent Reality as it is encountered in the world and in human lives. Worshipers respond to and are changed or renewed by what they experience in worship; they offer themselves up through worship.



## **Appendix B: Preparing for the practice of respectful presence<sup>3</sup>**

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Respectful presence requires acknowledgment of the integrity of others. As Christians consider the issues involved, they must address the following questions:

1. Are there both similarities and differences in beliefs and practices of the Christian faith and other faiths?
2. Can we affirm that adherents of other faiths experience their religious life as grounded in ultimate Reality?
3. Can we commit ourselves, from a Christian perspective, to the premise that the relationship between God and people is what matters most in religion and that all people must be presumed to stand in relationship to God?
4. Can gratitude for human goodness and wisdom be found among believers of all religions, Christian and other?
5. Can we foster mutual self-critique when religions and cultures mingle through history and in our contemporary situation?
6. Can we affirm that some insights from other religions assist Christians toward a better understanding of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and in Scripture?
7. Can we acknowledge the possibility there is revelation of God in other religions?

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<sup>3</sup> Editor's Note: See "The Nature of Revelation in the Christian Tradition from a Reformed Perspective," commended to the church for study by the 199th General Assembly (1987) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), IX. Revelation and the Mission of the Church in a Pluralistic World, to which the formulation of these questions is indebted.

## **Action of the 209th General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

1. That the document, “Respectful Presence: An Understanding of Interfaith Prayer and Celebration from a Reformed Christian Perspective,” be made available and commended to congregations and governing bodies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for assistance to those persons and groups who are involved with interfaith celebration, prayer, and worship.
2. That a study guide be prepared and made available to accompany the document, “Respectful Presence: An Understanding of Interfaith Prayer and Celebration from a Reformed Christian Perspective.”

### **Background**

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The document, *Respectful Presence: An Understanding of Interfaith Prayer and Celebration from a Reformed Christian Perspective*, was developed by a task group on Multifaith Worship and Celebration composed of James G. Kirk, S.T.D., chair; Vin A. Harwell, Melva Wilson Costen, Ph.D., Charles R. White, D.Min., and John A. Hutchison, Ph.D. Staff assistance was provided by Margaret O. Thomas (Worldwide Ministries Division), Joseph D. Small (Congregational Ministries Division), and Carla Libby Gentry (Worldwide Ministries Division).

In 1994, the Congregational Ministries Division gathered together materials for Presbyterians on “Our Living Tradition,” in response to a request from the General Assembly Council, among them being material on interfaith worship. For purposes of the “Our Living Tradition” series, it was deemed advisable to reach beyond our own tradition to seek permission from the Church of England to publish a U.S. edition of its resource, *“Multi-faith Worship”? Questions And Suggestions*.<sup>4</sup> The British resource proved helpful, but the Ecumenical Staff Team agreed that the time had come to look at the issue of interfaith worship from within our own Reformed tradition. A group was convened to offer advice. This group sent a report to the Advisory Committee on Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations (ACEIR) in 1996. The ACEIR recommended that more work was needed and asked the group to continue its efforts. Shortly thereafter, James Kirk attended the meeting of the Worldwide Ministries Division (WMD) Committee to present the first paper. Following the recommendations of ACEIR and of WMD committee members, the task group conducted a hearing at the 208th General Assembly (1996). It also used available research on interfaith relations in the PC(USA) together with responses to a questionnaire on interfaith prayer. Its chair was invited by the World Council of Churches to participate in a 1996 conference on interfaith prayer held in Bangalore, India, under the joint auspices of the World Council of Churches Inter-Religious Office and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

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<sup>4</sup> *“Multi-Faith Worship”? Questions and Suggestions* prepared by the Inter-Faith Consultative Group, The General Synod Board of Mission, Church of England, Special edition for use in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) may be ordered from 1-800-524-2612, DMS #74-292-94-902.

# A Study Guide for *Respectful Presence*

## Introduction

### Section One: The Purpose of Interfaith Celebrations

Our fears

Reasons for establishing relationships with people of other faiths

### Section Two: Respectful Presence, Understanding, and Engagement

Attending worship activities of another religious community

The meaning and practice of respectful presence

### Section Three: Different Practices and Settings

Receiving persons of another religious community at Christian worship services

The dynamics of Christian corporate worship

Respecting the different religious practices and settings of others

### Section Four: Respecting Our Own Tradition

Mutually-planned interfaith prayer or celebration

Limits to interfaith celebration and prayer

Opening new doors for interfaith discussion and cooperation

### Section Five: The Work of the Spirit in Multireligious Communities

Mutually-planned interfaith prayer and celebration

Results of interfaith prayer and celebration

Different ways and settings in which God relates to people

### Section Six: Authentic Being, Spirituality, and Justice

Interfaith worship

Longstanding relationships and commitments

### Sample Service

A celebration alternating participation and observation

### Sample Guidance

Prayer and celebration using only commonly acceptable symbols and language

## Adjunct resources

*Brochure on Interfaith Celebration, Prayer and Worship*

Use to introduce interfaith celebration to a study group, congregation or governing body.

Directly related to *Respectful Presence*. Free. PDS #74-292-97-010

*“Multifaith Worship”? Questions and Suggestions*

Special edition for use by Presbyterians.



## Introduction

### Using this study guide:

Use this study guide for either personal reflection or group discussion.

### General goals:

- ' To facilitate study and use of the *Respectful Presence* paper
- ' To help Christians and their congregations develop respectful presence in interfaith celebration, prayer, and worship
- ' To use Christian scriptures and the Reformed Christian theological tradition for reflection and guidance on interfaith activities

### Getting ready:

Determine your purpose(s) for study:

- ' Has your congregation's session assigned you to examine this issue and report back? Has the Christian Education committee asked for a study series?
- ' Are you involved in a community organization with people of different faith traditions that requires you to think through issues of interfaith celebration?
- ' Do personal circumstances, such as an interfaith marriage, afford natural opportunities for common prayer and celebration?
- ' Are you interested in knowing what the church is saying about the spiritual dimensions of relating to people of other faiths?
- ' Are you concerned about evangelistic witness and asking whether you can be involved with interfaith celebration and prayer?

What are *your* reasons for study? State these in one to three sentences.

Consider your present motivation(s) for exploring interfaith celebration and prayer:

- ' Are you attempting to understand and appreciate others in new and profound ways?
- ' Do you want to seek greater unity with creation and humanity?
- ' Do you want to engage in a shared commitment to social justice with others?
- ' Are you seeking greater understanding of God's work in the world through experiencing spirituality with others?

What meaning do interfaith prayer and worship have for *you* as you begin your study? Write your ideas in one to three sentences.

## **Pre-reading *Respectful Presence*:**

Read the entire document from beginning to end. As you begin to read, note the document's approach:

- ' It provides guidance for Christians in their relationships with various religious communities and traditions that have an identity other than Christian.
- ' It deals with *corporate* prayer, celebration, and worship—not simply with whether an individual feels a sense of worship in the midst of an experience.
- ' It uses a careful vocabulary. See Appendix A, 176 for key definitions.
- ' It assumes that most public religious acts between people of different faiths would not be defined by all the participants as worship. They can better describe most such public acts as celebration or prayer.
- ' It does not expect that interfaith celebrations, prayer, and worship will replace Christian worship. Interfaith opportunities grow out of different dynamics and serve different purposes than the regular corporate worship of a Christian congregation.

## **Planning for a group**

If you will be leading group study, plan carefully in advance:

- ' Order sufficient copies of this booklet or plan to photocopy single pages for your group's use.
- ' Review the entire study guide. Discussion questions and optional activities are based on narratives that encourage practical reflection<sup>5</sup> and biblical perspectives that explore faith dimensions. Each section deals with particular parts of *Respectful Presence*.
- ' Determine your group's objectives. Consider whether you will offer a Christian education series or a single event, such as a retreat. Finally, decide to use all or only some sections of the study guide.
- ' If you are moving toward new engagement in interfaith celebration, consider how to go from the study phase to program planning.
- ' Develop a time schedule for each group session. Allow time for sufficient discussion and activity. Select which questions you will use, to fit your available time. If your group is large, consider using subgroups that give people a chance to talk.
- ' Make assignments. Expect each member to read the full *Respectful Presence* document before your first group session. Before each subsequent session, prepare assignments based upon your group's plans. Be sure each person rereads the designated portions of *Respectful Presence*. You may also want group members to read the narrative and selected biblical texts before each session, so that group time can be spent in discussion or activity.

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<sup>5</sup> With the exception of the second narrative in Section Six, the narratives do not represent real events (though they are based on actual experiences) and the names of their characters are fictitious.



## Section One: The Purpose of Interfaith Celebrations

*“All the earth worships you;  
they sing praises to you,  
sing praises to your name.”*

Psalm 66:4

### Objectives:

- ‘ To examine our fears of interfaith celebration, prayer, and worship and their consequences
- ‘ To consider reasons for establishing relationships with people of other faiths

### Respectful Presence Assignment:

Read again paragraphs 102-106 and 125-128. The Thanksgiving service described below follows the celebration form described in 155-163.

### Group Process Option:

- ‘ Start with self-introductions that briefly note any past or present interfaith experiences, especially with celebration and prayer.
- ‘ Ask each individual to jot a written response to question 2, “In what ways are you challenged by the practice or possibility of interfaith celebration or prayer in your community?” Suggest that each person save the paper until you do the activities in Section Five.

### A Narrative for Discussion:

Members of a few local congregations and religious community centers had planned a cooperative Thanksgiving event for several years. Clara, a faithful church member, was excited that her church was host to this annual interfaith Thanksgiving celebration for the first time. She invited several family members, friends, and colleagues from work. In the past Clara had lived outside the United States, where she worked closely with people of religious backgrounds other than her own. She was currently active in a civic organization in her own city, to which women of several religions belonged. Therefore, the responses she received from some people she invited to the special Thanksgiving celebration surprised her.

#### Celebration

Public symbolic acts with religious meaning that occur when persons from two or more faith communities gather around common concerns and values.

Although many of her Christian friends appreciated the invitation, Clara found that others simply had no notion of what she was talking about or were uninterested. Teresa, a lifelong friend, did not like the idea of an interfaith celebration. She asked Clara, “Why should I attend anything like this? I always go to my church’s regular services. That’s all I need. Jesus said he is ‘the way, the truth, and the life.’ What else is there? I just don’t see the point of having a potluck of faiths where everybody brings their own variety of religion for all to share!” Clara did not know what to say or think.



## Questions

1. Why was Clara excited about the plans for the interfaith Thanksgiving celebration? What do you suggest Clara might have said to Teresa? (Give special attention to 125-128 as you consider this.)
2. We live in an age of increased communication and interaction between people of different religions. One easy way to escape serious engagement with others is to avoid seeing them as persons with meaningful religious commitments different from our own. By contrast, interfaith celebrations may challenge us at the depth of our being, as we recognize others in fundamental religious activities. What do you know about people of other faiths in your community? In what ways does the practice or possibility of interfaith celebration or prayer in your community challenge you?

## Selected biblical texts:

I Kings 17: 8, 17-23

Then the word of the Lord came to [Elijah], saying, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you."...[T]he son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" But he said to her, "Give me your son." He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again." The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive."

During a drought brought on by Israel's unfaithfulness to God, Elijah was called to move outside Israel and go to Zarephath, a territory on the Phoenician coast. There, outside the limits of Israel, we see a miraculous encounter between a great prophet and a poor foreign widow whom God commanded to feed him. This "interfaith" episode brought peace to Elijah and life to the poor woman and her household. God used the woman, who did not belong to the tradition of Israel but had a relationship with God, to offer hospitality to a man of God. (See Luke 4:25-26.) Both the widow and Elijah followed God's Spirit as it led them to cross old boundaries and tread new territories. When the woman told the prophet about the death of her son, Elijah did not argue with her about Israel's religious codes of purity that would have required him to keep a physical distance. Instead, he carried the boy and prayed to God on the boy's behalf.

Mark 7:24-30

[Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

In his encounter with a Syrophenician woman, Jesus crossed boundaries of race, gender, and religion. He related with compassion to someone who belonged to a neighboring people considered outsiders and sometimes even enemies of the God of Israel. As they talked to each other, the woman moved beyond superficial norms to deeper human sharing and, in so doing, challenged Jesus. Her plea reminds us of Abraham's supplication to God to spare the righteous people in Sodom (Genesis 18:22-33). Both Abraham and the Syrophenician woman expected the justice and mercy of God. They were sure of God's goodness and demonstrated their trust by calling on God to act according to God's faithfulness and justice.

The Syrophenician woman's wisdom opened new channels for the flowing of God's Spirit. In the process, it became clear that God makes covenant not only with Israel but with all humanity. The woman's faith and interaction with Jesus became an example of how true believers and covenant partners should relate to God. Through his interaction with this outsider, Jesus not only opened new possibilities for the woman and her daughter but also for his own ministry and community.

### **Questions**

3. The religious tradition of Protestant Christians in the United States (especially of Euro-American heritage) has been historically related to the dominant culture of the powerful nation in which we reside. We are often seen as people who expect to set the standards, but we are less often recognized as people who can receive hospitality extended by others (cf. 130). In what ways do American Christian attitudes inhibit our appropriate receptivity to others? In your own community, in what ways, if any, have Christians shown limited ability to receive hospitality from people of other religions? What suggestions do you have for change? How will this affect possibilities for interfaith celebration and prayer?

4. What do we mean when we say that God's covenant offers a relationship with God to all peoples? When we act on this understanding, what difference does this make in our relationships with people of other faiths? What difference does this understanding make in our relationship with God?

5. Both Elijah and Jesus were called to reach out to others in fulfillment of God's will. What fears or restrictions did they need to overcome? What opportunities were before them? In what ways do we face both fears and opportunities today as we contemplate relationships with people of other faiths through celebration, prayer, and worship?

6. The Syrophenician woman challenged Jesus, and he responded by ministering to her though she was an outsider to Israel. In what ways is it appropriate to allow people of other faiths to influence our faith questions and assertions today? How might this affect our willingness to be present among others?

## Section Two: Respectful Presence, Understanding, and

*From new moon to new moon,  
and from Sabbath to Sabbath,  
all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord.*  
Isaiah 66:23

### Objectives:

- ' To reflect on the practice of Christians attending worship activities of another religious community
- ' To consider the meaning and practice of respectful presence

### Respectful Presence Assignment:

Read again paragraphs 131-139, and 149-154. Also reread Appendix A, 176.

### Group Process Option:

- ' Role play the response to question 3. Select one person to be Nancy and ask several others (or all members of your group) to be members of the congregation. After several minutes, cut the role play and engage in group discussion about it.
- ' Give group members a card or post-it on which to write a personal statement of what it means for a Christian to practice respectful presence, in response to question 7. Display the responses on a wall or bulletin board. Give group members time to look at all the statements.

### A Narrative for Discussion:

Nancy and Neva describe themselves as good friends. They are members of different religious communities, but they get along well. Nevertheless, though they often talk about their views of life, they have shared little with each other about the formal aspects of their religious traditions. Now Nancy is faced with a dilemma. Neva, a Baha'i, has asked her to participate in the funeral rites for her father who has just died. Since Nancy, a Christian, does not know about Baha'i prayers or rituals, she is afraid she may inadvertently do something to offend her friend's family. She is also concerned about what is appropriate for her to do as a Christian. Nancy has half a day to decide what she will do.

### Respectful presence

Being within the awareness of another person with particular concern, attention, consideration, deference or regard for the other, without defamation or denial of that person's integrity.

## **Questions:**

1. Why are religious rites important to people at significant moments in their lives? How might your view of religious rites affect your decision about whether to participate in celebration of life events (e.g., birth, naming, marriage, death) of persons from another religious tradition?
2. What steps should Nancy take to decide how to respond to Neva's request? If Nancy decides to accept Neva's invitation, how can she show respectful presence during and after the funeral events?<sup>6</sup> If Nancy decides to decline Neva's invitation, what should she say to Neva? What difference will Nancy's actions make in the relationship between Neva and Nancy? (Review the guidelines in 149-154.)
3. If Nancy accepts Neva's invitation, how should she explain her decision to members of her congregation who ask why she attended a Baha'i funeral? How might she talk about the idea of respectful presence with them?
4. What steps would you take if you were preparing to take a group from your congregation to visit the worship of another religious community at their place of worship?<sup>7</sup>

## **Selected biblical texts:**

Jonah 4:6-11

The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

God's concern extends to all creation. Jonah, a Galilean, was a faithful prophet who believed that God's love was exclusive to Israel as God's covenant partner. He was not able to respect the dignity of a people of a different race and a different faith tradition. He lacked the very thing God intended for

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<sup>6</sup> A set of books with very helpful information is *How to Be a Perfect Stranger: Etiquette in Other People's Religious Ceremonies*, Vols. 1 and 2, Stuart M. Matlins and Arthur J. Magida, editors. Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996 and 1997. Multifaith Resources, P.O. Box 128, Wofford Heights CA 93285, phone (619) 376-4691 is a distributor. Suggest the set to your church library or public library for general availability.

<sup>7</sup> Appropriate dress often raises questions. Most hosts will be helpful. *If* you have no information, follow some very general guidelines, though they do not fit every situation: Both men and women should dress modestly and wear footwear that can be removed. If seating will be on the floor, dresses should be loose enough for comfortable modesty. (In a mosque, women should cover arms and legs.) Women should have a scarf available to cover the head fully, if expected. In Asian-related settings, remember not to expose the soles of the feet or point them toward other people and sacred objects. Wear only religious symbols you use as part of your ordinary dress.

God's covenant people, i.e., compassion for God's created world. God made a covenant with Israel to show the other nations how God cares for them.

Jeremiah 29:4-7

[Jeremiah wrote]: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'"

The prophet Jeremiah instructed the people of Israel, as they were going into exile, to work for the peace of the city of their new neighbors. He told a nation that defined itself in separatistic terms to go and build long-term relationships with a people of a different race, tradition, and faith. Jeremiah also asked the exiles to pray for the peace of the city where they found themselves. Before Israel would rebuild itself as a people and as a community, the exiles were asked to live full lives in the presence of others, with regard and respect for them.

### **Questions**

5. Although Jonah was physically located in Ninevah, he lacked the ability to respect and be truly present among the city's people, both when they were judged to be evil and when they had repented of their evil. (Read quickly through the entire short book of Jonah to see this unfold.) Should our ability to show compassionate respect be connected to our judgments about whether another faith community is good or evil, right or wrong? Why? How do the quotations from the book of Jonah and the documents of our Reformed tradition (in 133-137) support your answer?

6. What does the model of relationships commended by Jeremiah to the exiles teach us as Christians today about being respectfully present among people of other faiths? What kind of responsibility do we have for relating to them on behalf of peace and healing in our communities?

7. In one to three sentences, write your own statement of what it means for a Christian to practice respectful presence among people of other faiths. Be as concrete and practical as possible. (See Appendix B, 177, for additional reflection.) Do you believe you personally can always practice respectful presence, or are there times when you should not enter a situation because you cannot be sufficiently respectful? Explain your answer. (See 129-130; cf. 150.) Can a Christian have respectful presence among others who do not reciprocate by offering respect? Why?

## Section Three: Different Practices and Settings

*All the nations you have made  
shall bow down before you, O Lord,  
and shall glorify your name.*

**Psalm 86:9**

### **Objectives:**

- ' To reflect on the practice of Christians receiving persons of another religious community at Christian worship services
- ' To compare Christian corporate worship and everyday gatherings of other types
- ' To consider how to respect the different religious practices and settings of others

### **Respectful Presence Assignment:**

Read again paragraphs 107-124 and 142-148.

### **Group Process Option:**

- ' Role play a Session meeting discussing hospitality in worship, in response to question 3.
- ' Use newsprint or a board to display a chart comparing Christian worship and everyday meetings, in response to question 1. Develop your own group chart, through discussion during the session, or copy the sample at the end of this section before the session begins.

### **A Narrative for Discussion:**

After attending Sunday worship, Mark went home with a deep sense of frustration. Today he had taken his Buddhist friend, Lin, to church for the first time. He had informed his pastor, the Rev. Peter Smith, that he would be bringing a visitor from a different faith tradition. Mr. Smith had taken no specific steps to make the service welcoming for Lin, and Mark had expected him to do so. Mark himself had done nothing in advance to explain to Lin what would happen at the church.

All afternoon Mark found himself wishing he knew more about Christian worship. He kept thinking about what he and Mr. Smith might have done differently to respect Lin's presence. Though Mark had wanted to talk to his friend during the service, he realized he had been afraid this would attract undue attention from those sitting near them. He knew, too, that after the service he hadn't dared to ask Lin what he had understood from the prayers, hymns, or sermon. Obviously Lin had felt like a total outsider during the whole service. He hadn't known where to find the hymns nor when to stand or sit. Mark had been particularly embarrassed when Lin read the leader's part in a responsive reading.

Finally Mark decided he must call Mr. Smith to voice his confusion. In response, the pastor suggested, "You can't rely on me as the pastor to deal with this problem alone, Mark. I hear a lot of talk these days about 'welcoming the stranger.' This isn't a one-person job. I'd like you to describe your experience to the Session. Our church needs to be connected to our city neighborhood, where a quarter of the residents are people with religious backgrounds other than Christianity."

## **Questions**

1. Review the comparison between the dynamics of Christian public worship and everyday public gatherings. (See 108-124, 138-139.) How might insights into the special function and dynamics of Christian worship help Mark be a more appropriate host to Lin?
2. Is attendance at a Sunday service a helpful way to introduce someone from outside the Christian community to the Christian faith? Why? From the perspective of the Christian congregation, what should be the purpose(s) of receiving guests from another faith into its worship?
3. What should the Session decide is the minimal acceptable hospitality that the church should extend to persons of other faiths? What additional steps, if any, should Mark, Peter Smith, and/or the congregation have taken to meet this standard when Lin was present? What steps, if any, should they take to be ready for another occasion? Is it important to involve the whole congregation in welcoming the stranger? Why? (See the guidelines, 142-148.)

## **Selected biblical texts:**

1 Kings 8: 41-43

[Solomon prayed to God:] "Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built."

King Solomon told his people the story of their faith. He described the importance and the meaning of the temple they now had for the first time in their history. In offering the dedication prayer, he spoke clearly about welcoming "foreigners" or people of different faith traditions. Welcoming the stranger was to be at the very heart of Israel's social and religious life as part of Israel's efforts to keep God's commandments. In fact, welcoming the stranger to pray was to be a witness to God's glory and work to bless all the nations through the people Israel.

2 Kings 5:18-19a

[Naaman said to Elisha,] "But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count." He said to him, "Go in peace."

Naaman, a Syrian army captain, came to Elisha the prophet and was cured of leprosy. Elisha could have used his healing power to manipulate this strong military leader and make him follow the norms of Israel. At the least, he could have taken the expensive gifts Naaman brought. Instead, Elisha chose to witness to God's love and to God's healing Spirit without personal gain or even national or religious triumph. When Naaman asked for permission to go back and participate in the practices of his traditional religion, Elisha respected Naaman's different background and said to him, "Go in peace."

**Questions**

4a. What attitude toward people of other faiths did the words of King Solomon’s prayer evoke? What insight does Solomon’s stance offer as you consider the guidelines about people of other faiths visiting Christian worship (142-148)?

4b. How do Solomon’s words place hospitality and respect toward others in the context of Israel’s worship?

5. What are the characteristics of the respect that Elisha showed to Naaman? What made Elisha able to show this kind of respect? (Look at the full story in 2 Kings 5.)

**Comparisons in paragraphs 108-124, 138-139**

<b>Dynamics</b>	<b>Christian worship</b>	<b>Everyday life</b>
<b>Why gathered?</b>	<b>response to God’s call</b>	<b>response to specific purpose or need</b>
<b>Shared religious character?</b>	<b>common faith commitment</b>	<b>no common faith commitment</b>
<b>Content of meeting?</b>	<b>commonly understood liturgy; sacraments as signs of common confession and commitment</b>	<b>commonly accepted agenda</b>
<b>Support for who or what?</b>	<b>one another, church mission</b>	<b>specific project/goals</b>
<b>Nature of time together?</b>	<b>foretaste of God’s kingdom</b>	<b>constrained by other commitments</b>



## Section Four: Respecting Our Own Tradition

*Praise the Lord, all you nations!  
Extol him, all you peoples!  
For great is his steadfast love toward us,  
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.  
Praise the Lord!  
Psalm 117*

### Objectives:

- ' To reflect on practical steps necessary for mutually-planned interfaith prayer or celebration
- ' To reflect on appropriate limits to interfaith celebration and prayer
- ' To increase appreciation and understanding of our Christian faith and tradition in ways that open new doors for interfaith discussion and cooperation

8

### Respectful Presence Assignment:

Read again paragraphs 129-130, 155-168.

### Group Process Option:

- ' Ask two persons to role play a conversation between Laura and David, in response to question 2. Follow the short role play with group discussion about the issues.
- ' Write a sample prayer that a Christian could use in a meeting attended by people of different faiths.

### A Narrative for Discussion:

In a relaxed conversation between David Jensen and his pastor, Laura Whittier, the subject of prayer came up. "Laura," David said, "I had a new experience last week. As you know, I've been involved with a local peacemaking group made up of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. I've always enjoyed the opportunities we have to learn about issues. Last week for the first time, we started the meeting by three people reading prayers, each representing one of our religious traditions. I know Jewish and Muslim religious understandings are different from mine, as a Christian, but I really related to the content and spirit of those prayers. How should I respond to the prayer of a Muslim or a Jew?"

That's an interesting question," Laura replied. "It's often hard for us to know how to react to the religious expressions of others, I know. We frequently get hung up on our reactions, so that we don't even listen well. Yet I believe that the essence of Jesus' ministry was in his relationships— with people and with God, with whom he was one. He demonstrated God's love for the whole world. So I am learning to look for God's Spirit at work today in the world God loves. I see the church as a living

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<sup>8</sup>See excerpts for "Guidelines for Civic Occasions," from which this is quoted, on page 47. See also the prayers in the Sample Service on pages 44-46.

body that the Spirit is transforming every day. What would be the sign of the Spirit working in places like your group, too? That's a question I keep pondering."

"Well, we do have good relationships," David responded, as he thought about his group. "We've been aware of each other's religious labels, but bringing our spirituality and our practices into the mix will be a new challenge. I'm a bit apprehensive but I think one or two of the Muslims are definitely more so. I really don't think just anything is all right. I want to be faithful to God's will. Since many know me as an active church member, I may be one of those asked for advice about these prayers in our meetings. What can I offer? I'd like to do this well."

"I'd like to share a resource that talks about interfaith celebration and prayer. It may be helpful to you," Laura offered. "Let's talk later."

### **Questions**

1. What is your reaction to Laura's comments to David? What would you have said to him in the same situation?

2. Imagine Laura and David reading *Respectful Presence* and discussing it. What would be the important points of the discussion? What practical advice for David would grow out of the discussion? In particular, how would Laura and David apply the guidelines in 155-168 to David's situation? How would they talk about the limits to interfaith prayer and celebration for the Christian? (See 129-130.)

General public prayer uses forms and vocabulary that allow persons of different faiths to give assent to what is said.<sup>8</sup>

### **Selected biblical text:**

Acts 15: 19-21

"Therefore I [James] have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues."

The early church struggled to define the limits of acceptable religious variants. It met, prayed, and sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit in a very specific and direct way. Also, the "whole assembly kept silence, and listened" as Paul and Barnabas described what had happened through their ministry among Gentiles (Acts 15:12). The church ultimately did not accept the views of some early leaders (that the Gentiles be circumcised) while they approved others views (that accepting the Holy Spirit was enough for the Gentiles to become members of the body of Christ). They all worked together to discern the will of God. They kept a healthy balance between being open to new initiatives of the Holy Spirit and being faithful to the tradition they had received.

## **Questions**

3. What guidance does the story of the early church give us today when we experience conflict or confusion about the appropriateness of particular forms of interfaith celebration, prayer, and worship?
4. Is it important for our interfaith relations that Christians think and work together? Why?
5. One option for Mark's organization would be to start each meeting with silence during which each individual would be free to pray or meditate. How did silence help the early church in its struggle with the issue of accepting Gentiles? In our noisy world, what constructive role can silence play when we encounter differences?
6. The early Christians disagreed on appropriate behavior related to others' religious practices, such as whether to eat food offered to idols. (See 1 Corinthians 8:4-13.) Christians today find themselves considering such diverse questions as whether to eat *prasad* (food presented to the deities in a Hindu temple) or whether to join Muslims in their posture of prayer. On what basis should we decide? What are some questions you anticipate as you think about interfaith celebration and prayer? What guides or tools will you use to help you respond to these?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>If you wish additional help on this subject, see "*Multi-Faith Worship*"? *Questions and Suggestions*, especially sections III-IV.

## **Section Five: The Work of the Spirit in Multireligious Communities**

*Let everything that breathes  
praise the Lord!*  
Psalm 150: 6

### **Objectives:**

10

- ' To reflect on practical steps necessary for mutually-planned interfaith prayer and celebration
- ' To recognize enriching and empowering results of interfaith prayer and celebration
- ' To reflect on the different ways and settings in which God relates to people

### **Respectful Presence Assignment:**

Read again paragraphs 138-139, 155-168, and 175.

### **Group Process Option:**

- ' Write your response to question 2 on newsprint or a chalk board. If there are particularly good ideas, you may want to save the newsprint until you are ready to do your own local planning.
- ' At the end of your session, plan together a 10-minute act of thanksgiving that you imagine will be used in an interfaith service with Jews and Muslims (or people of whatever other religious community you imagine). Think about how you can be faithful to our Christian tradition and communicate thanksgiving to others. Include whatever you choose—music, prayer, scripture, quotations from literature, drama, or even something visual.
- ' Ask ahead that participants bring back the papers they saved from the first session. Following discussion of question 4, refer to the papers to see what changes in thinking have occurred because of your study.

Frequently, interfaith participants alternate between actively offering their prayer and worship, according to their own faith tradition, and being respectfully present as they observe others praying and worshipping through another

### **A Narrative for Discussion:**

This was Dr. Sharon Lee's first year as dean of students at Clarion College, a liberal arts institution that graduates some 400 seniors yearly. She worked on several community events during the school year and paid a good deal of attention to nurturing the community life of the students. Now part of Dr. Lee's duties was to oversee the annual baccalaureate service. She had always been an active Presbyterian church member but had never thought that religious affiliation would become an issue for her in a work situation. Yet after the first meeting of the baccalaureate planning committee, Dr. Lee began to pay more attention to the different religious traditions among the students. Some planners had advocated

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<sup>10</sup> See the sample service and sample guidelines on pages 44-47.

that the baccalaureate include acts of thanksgiving representing the religious diversity of the student body. Protestant and Catholic Christians, Mormons, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Native American Traditionalists, Baha'is, Sikhs, Jews, and New Agers were all represented on campus. The largest of these communities had chaplains or organized religious programs.

Soon the planning committee restructured itself into a new committee that represented more adequately the diversity on campus. In its planning sessions, the new committee adopted the principle of praying only in ways that would be acceptable to all those present. Because this was a new experience, committee members had to struggle with what this meant. Eventually Christians agreed that they would not say "in Jesus' name" at the end of their prayers, and others were similarly willing to drop their particularities. Later the committee reflected on what emerged and finally decided that the baccalaureate itself should follow another pattern. Brief acts of thanksgiving would be presented by several students—Protestant and Catholic Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu—in the particular forms of each tradition, not in general language. It would be held in an auditorium that did not have religious symbols from any faith tradition.

The effort required almost more time than Dr. Lee thought she could give but, when the baccalaureate was over, she received positive feedback from many. She also received complaints, especially from alumni who regretted "Clarion's departure from its Christian heritage." Her emotional first reaction was to tell herself that a religious baccalaureate no longer made sense. The student body had become too mixed for comfort. Something totally secular to mark the end of the school year was all that was needed! Yet her Christian faith seemed to send Dr. Lee back to affirming the importance of recognizing God's presence at such an important time. Prayerfully and carefully, she would have to go on. Dr. Lee decided she wanted to start working immediately with a group to plan the following year's event, to make it even more relevant to the changing needs of the school.

### **Questions**

1. Why did her Christian faith impel Dr. Lee to plan another year's baccalaureate that could not be exclusively Christian?
2. What steps should Dr. Lee use to organize the planning for next year's baccalaureate? What vision should she have as she works with the planning committee? What role will the planning committee have in creating attitudes that will enable a college-wide interfaith celebration? (Review 157-168 for guidance.)
3. Why did this year's committee decide to pray at its meetings using only language and religious symbolism acceptable to all? Why did it adopt a different approach for the baccalaureate? Why did the baccalaureate take so much time to plan, since each act of thanksgiving could be prepared by one particular faith community?
4. As a result of Dr. Lee's becoming concerned about religious issues in the work place, what do you hope might happen to her future work and her faith as a Christian?

## **Selected biblical text:**

Acts 10:30-48

Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say."

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

God's work is often surprising because it takes us to new dimensions of faith. This was the case for early circumcised believers as they witnessed the Holy Spirit being poured out even on the uncircumcised. Those who followed the law of Moses were astounded when the Holy Spirit was given to those outside their group. As a result, the early church faced an issue: Ignoring the problem was not an option, yet solving it would not be easy. The results of a serious process of mutual discernment were beneficial to all, giving an expanded vision of God and God's mission in the world.

### ***Questions:***

5. Sometimes we can neither ignore the religious dimensions of our neighbor's lives nor participate easily with them in celebration and prayer. On what issues may Christians disagree today because of this tension? How can we engage in mutual discernment to address these issues?

6. Christians receive into the church's membership those whom the Spirit calls to become part of the community. What is the appropriate form of Christian witness during interfaith celebration? Why do the *Respectful Presence* guidelines say that an interfaith celebration is not an occasion for proselytism?

## Section Six: Authentic Being, Spirituality and Justice

***What does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?***

**Micah 6:8**

### **Objectives:**

11 12

- ' To consider possibilities for corporate interfaith worship
- ' To explore the importance of longstanding relationships and commitments for deep interfaith encounters

### **Respectful Presence Assignment:**

Read again paragraphs 125-128 and 169-174.

### **Group Process Option:**

- ' Discuss your own plans related to interfaith celebration, prayer, and worship. If this activity will be new for you, ask: Should we begin by getting to know a group or congregation from another religious tradition? Should we visit their place of worship and invite them to ours before we talk about any mutually-planned celebration event?
- ' Select ahead a few people to prepare a brief worship to close your group's study series. Ask them how they worked together to plan the worship. How would preparing worship with an interfaith committee be the same? Different?
- ' Use only one of the following two narratives for discussion in your group, even if you decide to ask your members to read both ahead of the meeting. The first story concentrates on how a group developed to the point of worshipping together, while the second concentrates on the process of planning worship.

### **Worship**

An encounter with transcendence<sup>11</sup> in which humans offer themselves up and are changed or renewed by what they

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<sup>11</sup> In a morning sermon during the 209th General Assembly (1997), James Costen described worship as the awareness that "what we know and experience at any given time is not all there is."

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix A, 176, for the specific definition of worship from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Order*. The *Respectful Presence* document uses a general definition not intended to describe Christian worship alone. Terms such as "ultimate Reality" do not represent Christian vocabulary about the transcendent God who lives among us. They can be employed as general language to include others who do not find the Christian vocabulary an acceptable way to express their understandings.

## **Narratives for Discussion:**

### **Oscar's Group**

Oscar, a member of an ongoing interfaith community, brought his out-of-town guest, Christopher, to one of the group's gatherings. There, Christopher saw a group of Jews and Christians joined in music, scripture reading, reflection, prayer—all within an experience of shared worship that seemed to connect authentically to both the Jewish and Christian traditions.

At the end of the evening, Christopher asked Oscar, "What did you do to achieve this?" Amused, yet with seriousness, Oscar responded, "This worship doesn't seem strange to me, but it isn't much like the once-a-year interfaith services I used to attend. We have a worship committee of six people from our two traditions. But what you experienced this evening isn't really just a result of efficient planning." "Then what does enable it?" Christopher probed.

Oscar began to tell Christopher the story of a small circle of Christians and Jews who originally gathered around shared concerns for issues of race and of civil liberty. Common interests made them polite though not close to each other. Rather unusually, they found themselves invited to participate in a cross-cultural encounter with a Native-American group. They were to go on the experience with several Christians, Anglos and Hispanics, who had longstanding relationships of trust and mutuality with each other and with their hosts. The equally-shared leadership impressed Oscar's circle. The open acceptance they received from the very same Native Americans who told them stories of violence, abuse, and exploitation experienced by Native American peoples also deeply moved them. "I call this forgiveness," Oscar said.

"After being together through such an encounter," Oscar went on, "our group began talking about the painful history between Jews and Christians. There was healing power in facing and acknowledging the past together. We began to read scripture together and to learn about our histories—and not just twentieth century events, either. We continued an interest in community service activities, but we also nurtured our religious roots. You can say we have real ties with each other and clear intentions to make a difference in society. Yet we join, too, to thank God for being with us, to confess our limited achievements when we focus on ourselves alone, and to ask again for God's blessing. This has become very authentic worship."

Before he finished, Oscar added a footnote. "We began as a small group," he reflected, "and built a measure of mutual trust. It was hard work and takes continuing effort. Finally we urged the congregations from which we come to reach out to each other—two religious communities, not just a group of individuals. It's harder to get people to trust each other when many are involved. In fact, it has taken three years for the congregations to have any real commitment to each other. Part of our group didn't really want to bother with the synagogue and the church. A few of them aren't regular participants in any traditional religious activities. They think of themselves as reformers."

Christopher was curious. "Before we stop talking, I want to ask you personally," he said, "can a Christian really worship with others who don't share the Christian faith?" "Well, my minister talks about



what happens in Christian worship—listening together to God’s word, then offering ourselves in commitment to do God’s will,” Oscar responded, “and I think his definition fits what we do. In a way it’s risky, I guess. But, though I deeply appreciate some practices of my Jewish friends, my faith has stood the test. I’m a follower of Jesus Christ.”

### **Hartford**<sup>13</sup>

*Saima Waheed, a Muslim, and David Wright, an Episcopalian, prepared an interfaith worship service at the invitation of David Kerr, then director of the Hartford Seminary’s Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. Members of the Hartford community frequently engage in theological discussion. Worship, however, proved a more difficult task. Wright and Waheed struggled with how people of differing faiths can worship together in mutual respect while remaining true to their own beliefs. In an interview with Praxis editor Christine Palm, they talk about the planning process.*

*Saima Waheed:* I’d like to make a distinction between worship and prayer. Worship is a very sacred concept. I would define what we did [in our interfaith worship] as a communal remembrance of God. So many issues came up that we didn’t anticipate. I objected to some Bible verses because I thought they didn’t fit into the interfaith aspect of the remembrance. They were directly contradictory to Islamic teaching. Muslims don’t define Jesus as the son of God or as God, although we revere him as a great prophet. And while I certainly understand that is what Christians believe, it didn’t seem like the time or place to bring it up.

*David Wright:* That issue really does get to the heart of one of the problems with interfaith worship. You ask yourself, What am I doing involved in this for whatever reason, even reasons of politeness, if I cannot name my God. It’s a dilemma, because, like Saima, I sense a difference in the meaning of worship and coming together in prayer. I felt the real purpose of this service was to drive home that we both do serve the one and only God. And I believed it was important to take part in the service. And I realize that the process of simply naming [the Triune] God brings up the issue of polytheism that is absolute blasphemy for adherents of Islam. So it’s an either/or situation. I decided I could give up that form of my traditional liturgy for the sake of the larger purpose, which was coming together in worship.

*Waheed:* I’m not used to calling God “God,” I call God “Allah.” For me, it’s more a question of the translation of the Arabic, so it’s not as deep an issue. I believe this was the first time [at Hartford Seminary that] Jews, Christians and Muslims sat together and remembered God together by reciting the same verses at the same time, as opposed to a Jew’s reading from the Torah, a Christian’s reading from the Bible and a Muslim’s reading from the Qur’an. [We did not have a hard time finding verses from the Qur’an and from the Bible that dealt with the same ideas.] There are so many textual similarities—references to nature, and God’s bounty, for example.

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<sup>13</sup> The service described included not only local Hartford-area participants but also a group from the National Council of Churches. The interview is excerpted from *Praxis: News from Hartford Seminary*, Summer 1996 (Hartford Seminary, 77 Sherman Street, Hartford CT 06105-2260), “Remembering God Together: The joys and trials of an interfaith service.” Used by permission.

*Wright:* It's not easy to be sensitive to everyone's feelings, but we did try. For example, we wanted to use a reference to Abraham from the Hebrew Scriptures and yet we had to be careful not to choose passages that talk about the theology of the land, because of the possibility of political associations with the Middle East conflict. Both the Lord's Prayer and Fatiha<sup>14</sup> are very particular, so they weren't recited. And they're both very beautiful prayers. We took prayers from saints, like Augustine, which are not really used in the traditional weekly Christian liturgy. By necessity, you strip away that which is most particular to each tradition. It's really the same thing as happens in a Christian ecumenical service. For me, the central part of the service is Communion and the very particular prayers that attend that sacrament. So some of the heartfelt Christian spirituality, the kind you can really hang your hat on, was lost.

The worship was structured so that we do these things together, as one body. As one body, we called upon God together and then we both praised God together. Then we both meditated upon the faith of our father and leader Abraham together. Then we asked for God's forgiveness together and then we prayed for peace together. In that sense it was five things each religion does independently, but at this service, we did it in unison. At this service there were imams, priests and several Jews all worshipping together. And I believe that two factors helped us pull it off. First, the service was held as part of a larger context, a seminar studying how communities can work together. The service felt like more than spiritual nourishment, it was part of a move toward real social justice. The second reason is that David Kerr believed that for it to have integrity, it had to be planned from the ground up by members of the respective faiths.

*Waheed:* This service was a way of connecting—of building friendships among Jews, Christians and Muslims and a way to focus on the common themes we do have. We have to go back into our daily lives and remember all we shared, respecting one another. I don't think for one moment any of us wanted to convert anybody. And we didn't try to brush aside the differences or pretend they didn't exist because we wouldn't have gotten anywhere. We've learned that "interfaith dialogue" is not only about when Christians and Muslims hold conferences to discuss theological points. Interfaith dialogue is when ordinary Christians, Muslims and Jews sit down with one another and remember God.

*Wright:* Interfaith worship has to be done with forethought, and planning, and input from representatives of those who live out these faiths. Curiously, worship is probably the one thing religions do least well together. Our respective liturgies contain the essence of what is most holy to each tradition, and it is precisely these liturgies that are compromised by interfaith worship. That's why such services are best held within the larger context of social praxis.

*Waheed:* Don't expect [planning] to be easy! Go into it prepared for a long session and be open-minded. And be prepared that at times your feelings might be misunderstood. But try to keep sight of the ultimate goal—that remembering God together might lead to changes in society and to real friendships. Also, it's helpful to have a go-between who has knowledge of both sides. Don't allow

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<sup>14</sup> The first sura of the Qur'an

yourself to give up when it gets hard. There's no way we can just separate from one another and live in our own separate worlds.

### **Questions**

1. What were the key factors that made the interfaith worship possible? Why were these factors significant? Why is interfaith worship, in the full meaning of the words, so seldom achieved? Do you think that worship with people of other faiths—as compared with celebrating or praying with them—is a goal Christians should seek? Why? (You may wish to refer to the chart in Section Three before answering.)
2. What steps should the interfaith worship planning committee take to nurture opportunities for authentic worship that grows out of the ongoing life of a group? (Review 169-174 for guidance.) What happens when a group invites persons who have not participated in its ongoing group life to join them in worship?
3. If you have experienced deep spiritual sharing with any person(s) of another religion, what circumstances led to the sharing? (For example, did you study scripture together? Work on social justice projects or peacemaking together? Face a crisis together? Live or work near one another? Are you members of the same family?) How has your experience of deep spiritual sharing affected your ongoing encounters with the person(s) involved?

### **Selected Biblical Text:**

Ruth 1:15-17

So [Naomi] said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you or turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there I will be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"

A great bond existed between Ruth and Naomi—a bond that developed despite their desperate situation, their different religious traditions, and the long history of enmity between their two peoples, the Moabites and the Israelites. After the death of the family's male bread winners, there were no practical motives for Ruth to stay with Naomi. Naomi had nothing to offer Ruth except uncertainty and shame. Instead of going back to her people, however, Ruth insisted on accompanying Naomi on her difficult journey of return. Although Naomi refused to talk to Ruth on the way to Bethlehem, Ruth continued to walk with her and be with her even in silence.

Upon their arrival, Naomi and Ruth, two women, were forced to act cooperatively on their own behalf. Ancient Israel expected that free males cared for widows and orphans who could not provide for themselves. These figures, known as "redeemers," protected the well-being of the community. Yet, although Naomi had relatives, when she returned home she was initially left with no redeemer to protect her. It was Ruth's loyal and loving presence that brought healing and redemption to Naomi's life. Because of her longstanding relationship with Naomi, Ruth had become deeply committed to Naomi's

well-being. The depth of that relationship enabled Ruth to cross geographical, social, and religious boundaries. The courageous commitment of Ruth the Moabite became a model for all Israel.

### **Questions**

4. Ruth—a woman, a widow, and a foreigner—did not have acceptable social standing when she went among the people of Israel, yet she became an ancestor of David the king. (See Ruth 4:22, Matthew 1:5.) How did Ruth’s spiritual commitment to Naomi bring forth redemption and justice, in spite of obstacles? Do you know of contemporary examples of similar dynamics? Tell the story.

5. What role did expected norms of behavior have in the decisions of each woman in Ruth’s story, i.e., Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah? What role did unusual circumstances, such as shared suffering, play in the decisions of each? How was God at work in Ruth’s story? (You may wish to read Ruth, chapters 1-4 to review the story.) What leads to shared faith commitments in our day? Could you make such a shared faith commitment in a group that included persons of another religion? Why?

## **Sample Service**

### **A celebration alternating participation and observation**

A Service of Prayer for Peace in the Middle East<sup>15</sup>

*Hymn:* “The God of Abraham Praise”

*Welcome and Greetings*

From the Jewish Tradition

*Reading:* Micah 4:1-4

In the days to come, the mount of the Lord’s house  
Shall be established higher than the mountains:  
It shall rise high above the hills,  
And people shall stream to it.  
Many nations shall come, and say,  
“Come, let us climb the mount of the Lord,  
to the house of the God of Jacob,  
that we may walk in his paths.”  
For from Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.  
He shall judge between many peoples  
and impose terms on strong and distant nations;  
They shall beat their swords into plowshares;  
and their spears into pruning hooks.  
One nation shall not raise the sword against another,  
nor shall they train for war again.  
Every one shall sit under his own fig tree, undisturbed;  
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

*Reflection*

*Prayer*

Sustain together in undiminished hope, O God of hope,  
those who continue to labor with undiminished determination  
to build peace in the land from which, of old,  
out of brokenness, violence and destruction,  
nevertheless hope emerged for so many of faith.  
Bless all the spiritual seed of Abraham together  
with the light of your Presence.  
From the light of your Presence  
we have found a way of justice and mercy  
and a vision of Peace.  
We praise you O God, Giver of Peace,  
who commands us to Peace. Amen.

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<sup>15</sup> Reproduced by permission of the U.S. Interreligious Committee for Peace in the Middle East, 922 131st Street, Marysville WA 98271. The outline of the service was used in December 1992 at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. The prayers come from *Groundwork for Peace*, Fall 1997, and were written by Rabbi Herbert Bronstein, Rev. John T. Pawlikowski OSM, and Mian Ashraf.

## From the Christian Tradition

### *Reading: Matthew 5:1-12*

And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain:  
and when he was set, his disciples came unto him:  
And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,  
Blessed are the poor in spirit:  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are the meek:  
for they shall inherit the earth.  
Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness:  
for they shall be filled.  
Blessed are the merciful:  
for they shall obtain mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart:  
for they shall see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers:  
for they shall be called the children of God.  
Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake:  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you,  
and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.  
Rejoice, and be exceeding glad:  
for great is your reward in heaven:  
for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

### *Reflection*

### *Prayer*

God our Creator, who made the earth a peaceful garden,  
help us restore that peace wherever it has been broken  
by terrorism and injustice, especially in the Middle East.  
We repent for the times when religious language  
has fostered hatred and division.  
Bring healing to those whose lives  
have been shattered by violence.  
Instill a renewed spirit of reconciliation in those  
who lead our people politically and religiously. Amen.

## From the Islamic Tradition

### *Reading: verses from the Holy Qur'an*

Say ye: "We believe in God, and the revelation given to us  
and to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob and the Tribes,  
and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to all Prophets from their Lord: we make no  
differences between one and another of them:  
and we bow to God in Islam." (Sura III, v.136)  
If the enemy incline towards peace,  
do thou (also) incline towards peace, and trust in God:  
for He is the One that heareth and knoweth (all things). (Sura VIII, v.61)  
And the servants of (God) Most Gracious are those who walk on the earth in humility, and when the  
ignorant address them, they say, "Peace!" (Sura XXV, v.63)  
O Mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female,  
and made you into nations and tribes,

that ye know each other (not that ye may despise each other).  
Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God  
is (he who is) the most righteous of you.  
And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (Sura XLIX, v.11)

### *Reflection*

### *Prayer*

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful,  
Accept our prayer to sustain us  
and our brothers and sisters of different beliefs  
in our desire for peace.  
Help us to find this peace in our living together,  
and receive mutual sustenance from our neighbor. Amen.

### *Shared Greeting of Shalom/Salaam*

### *Hymn*

### *Blessings: Jewish / Christian / Islamic*

## **Sample Guidance**

### **Prayer and celebration using only commonly acceptable symbols and language**

*Excerpts from “Guidelines for Civic Occasions”  
prepared by The National Conference [of Christians and Jews]<sup>16</sup>*

Prayer on behalf of the *general community* should be *general prayer*. General public prayer on civic occasions is authentic prayer that also enables people to recognize the pluralism of American society.

General public prayer—

- seeks the highest common denominator without compromise of conscience.
- calls upon God on behalf of the particular public gathered; avoids individual petitions.
- uses forms and vocabulary that allow persons of different faiths to give assent to what is said.
- uses universal, inclusive terms for deity rather than particular proper names for divine manifestations. Some opening ascriptions are “Mighty God,” “Our Maker,” “Source of all Being” or “Creator and Sustainer.” Possible closing words are “Hear Our Prayer,” “In Thy Name,” “May Goodness Flourish,” or, simply, “Amen.”
- uses the language most widely understood in the audience, unless one purpose of the event is to express ethnic/cultural diversity, in which case multiple languages can be effective.
- remains faithful to the purposes of acknowledging divine presence and seeking blessing, not as opportunity to preach, argue or testify.<sup>17</sup>

*Excerpts from “Guidelines for Interfaith Prayer Services”  
prepared by the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington*

A concern for inclusive language will serve the planners well. It is important to draw on the universal and unifying aspects of our various traditions and to use prayers, readings, litanies, hymns, and other elements of a service that lift up the commitment to peace and justice in the world, and to any event or person which may be commemorated in the service.

The reading of sacred Scripture from each tradition involved in the service is most appropriate. As with hymns and each other part of the service, they should be selected with their inclusive nature in mind. Prayer is helpful when all feel included and can say, "Amen."

Interfaith events set in a church, synagogue, mosque, or other sanctuary acknowledge the physical integrity of the house of worship. Consideration should be given to the temporary removal of symbols or objects that might cause others distress and which can be easily removed. Similarly, the addition of banners, symbols or expressions of welcome that may make guests feel more at home should be explored.

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<sup>16</sup> Used with permission.

<sup>17</sup> Although these guidelines are intended to enable people to recognize the pluralism of American society, they will only be appropriate as acceptably inclusive in certain situations, depending upon the particular religions found in the general public in a given community.





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