

Guidelines on

WORSHIP INVOLVING CHRISTIANS AND PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITH TRADITIONS

Prepared by a Task Force of the
Faith, Worship, and Ministry Committee of the Anglican Church of Canada
approved by the Council of General Synod

1 Historical

Anglicans are increasingly invited to participate in worship with people of other faith traditions, in the context of a multi-cultural society and also against the background of growing dialogue with representatives of some other faith traditions. Guidelines for inter-faith dialogue were commended to the Church by the General Synod in 1986.¹ Inter-faith dialogue is a long process and it is not always easy for a number of reasons: it lacks the definable goal of corporate union which characterizes Christian ecumenism; it is not an appropriate forum for Christian evangelism (with which it is sometimes confused); the histories of the various faith communities have sometimes included distortion, mutual condemnation and persecution; sometimes it is hard to find a common language to speak of the divine; cultural presuppositions may be confused with religious practice and thought by both Christians and others; some Christians question the need for dialogue when the real agenda is, for them, conversion. These and other difficulties should be acknowledged. Our dialogue partners face the same problems. Dialogue must be open, honest, and realistic, and we should not avoid difficult issues simply to avoid disagreement. Mere sentimentalism can, in the long run, be destructive of good relationships.

At the same time, dialogue has proven to be rewarding for both partners in many situations. We come to understand our own tradition better when we have to articulate it to others, and our partners may frequently reflect back to us elements of our tradition which we have neglected. Dialogue may be a forum in which prejudice may be overcome and the past may be healed. In a world in which inter-religious tension often leads to violence, the presence of dialogue among these traditions is a sign of hope.

2 Contexts

In the course of dialogue partners are frequently drawn to worship together, which may raise new difficulties and opportunities. But increasingly, inter-faith worship takes place in a variety of contexts:

- civic events on commemorative occasions;
- special events celebrating community needs identified by the religious communities or rising from their response to the expressed concerns of the larger community;
- special liturgies at the time of crises and disasters;
- worship at multi-faith events organized by religious communities;
- the installation of professional care-givers in clinical, academic, and correctional institutions;
- in the programs of other organizations which wish to have a religious expression in their events.

As a multi-cultural society grows, other contexts will present themselves. These guidelines are offered to help Anglicans reflect on the issues raised by these opportunities and their practical implications for worship events.

¹ *Guidelines for Inter-Faith Dialogue*, Ecumenical Office of the Anglican Church of Canada, 600 Jarvis Street, Toronto ON M4Y 2J6, 1988.

3 **Theological**

When people of faith gather to worship together we do so understanding ourselves to be in relationship to the ultimate mystery of the source and end of being, which Christians name as the Triune God, although others name that reality in other terms. Christians who participate in worship with members of other traditions do so in acknowledgement of the possibility that the presence of God may be mediated through traditions other than their own.

Worship includes symbolic actions, words, and objects, which may mediate the presence of God even to those to whom they are unfamiliar. This may be true for Christians of the symbols of other faiths. At the same time, symbols may also be startling and may block this mediation, which has happened with Christian symbols even within Christianity and may happen with Christian symbols in other faith communities as well as with their symbols for Christians. It is important to remember that symbols are never the objects of worship but are expressions of worship, in which the aspirations and experiences of the worshippers may be focused and enlarged. Worship may take both outer and inner forms: in some traditions symbolic and ritual actions are central, while in other traditions meditation and contemplation are the primary form of worship activity.

The primary purpose of inter-faith worship is not to educate one another in our various forms of worship (important as that may be) but to stand together in relationship to the ultimate mystery and to one another in a given context. This combination of dimensions means that we are bound together not only before the ultimate mystery but also in a community of ethical responsibility.

We are at a cross-roads in history and we cannot predetermine the effects of dialogue. We cannot establish a fixed theological tradition in which we make judgements about other traditions. As we enter a process of dialogue and approach relationships of worship, it may be helpful to ask ourselves questions like these.

- What is our theology of ritual?
- What is our theology of symbols? What is the significance of symbolic objects in our own tradition and how does that relate to the symbolic objects of other traditions?
- Can we see ourselves united in prayer beyond the words and symbols we are using?
- Can we, in worship, affirm the particularity of Christ and be involved at the same time in events which express God's purpose in all people? Can we live with this ambiguity? Can our partners?
- Some Christians assume that all worship is to God through Christ, which presents problems in traditions which have no developed theology of the identity of God and do not accept the mediation of Jesus Christ.

Religion and culture are always intimately related, whether they reflect or confront one another. When religion reflects the culture of its context, the cultural elements are very difficult to discern. People seldom recognize that their religious practice may reinforce their cultural assumptions. Those involved in inter-faith worship should be sensitive to the cultural dimensions of their own religious practice, as well as those of others.

4 **Models**

There are three models of inter-faith worship: exclusive, inclusive, and pluralistic. The exclusive model, in which worship is the expression of only one faith tradition is not true multi-faith worship. The inclusive or integrated model seeks to find a common expression with which representatives of the various traditions are comfortable. In the pluralist model the different traditions and practices of the respective groups are brought together side by side in a single act of worship. In either of these latter two models it should be the responsibility of members of a faith tradition to identify those aspects of their own practice which should be used in inter-faith worship; those outside a tradition should not impose its elements on the community event.

5 **Guidelines for Planning**

- Care needs to be taken that planners and leaders of inter-faith events represent their traditions authentically. Anglicans who find themselves as Christian representatives on an inter-faith planning committee should attempt to represent the sensitivities of the broader Christian community.
- Inter-faith worship events should be planned by representatives of all of the traditions which will be involved.
- Sufficient time should be taken to allow mutual understanding and respect to grow.
- Some events (e.g., commemorative civic events) may take six months to a year to plan.
- Community building should be encouraged.
- Those involved should be encouraged to develop a brief, clear statement of their faith as preparation for planning.
- Planners should formulate clearly the purpose of the event.
- Planners should be sensitive to the appropriateness of the location and its symbolic decoration, especially if it is necessary to use a religious building for a civic event.
- When symbols proper to one faith tradition are used in an inter-faith worship event, care should be taken to explain them to members of other traditions.
- Symbols, including language, which are likely to cause great discomfort should not be used.

6 **Participation in worship of another tradition**

Participation in the worship of another tradition does not indicate consent or agreement but respect. Leaders of particular traditions should indicate appropriate levels of participation in their rites; participants should make their own decisions on the level of participation appropriate to them as an act of their own informed consciences. Christians may not wish to participate in certain prayers, to consume sacred foods, or perform certain gestures.

Participants should be sensitive to matters of dress (e.g., removal of shoes and covering of the head), deportment, and the possibility of gender separation. They should seek education in the practice of a faith tradition before attending, by consulting members of the faith tradition, their public library, or other informed sources.

November 1996