

Guidelines for Designing a Multifaith Prayer Service

Introduction

Multifaith prayer is a growing international phenomenon. In fact, the current proliferation of multifaith prayer activity is unprecedented in human history. And as more and more regions of the world become environments of multifaith and multicultural, the occasions for multifaith prayer are increasing.

In multifaith prayer, the wider community comes together in a spirit that can range from celebration to mourning. Occasions for multifaith prayer include:

- 1) Prayer services on important civic, national and international days such as Earth Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Armistice Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Racism.
- 2) Prayer services related to particular social concerns such as peace, justice, global unity, AIDS, child poverty and ecology.
- 3) Prayer services related to tragedies such as natural disasters, multiple-victim shootings and airplane crashes (and on the anniversaries of such tragedies).
- 4) Prayer services at interfaith conferences, meetings and gatherings.
- 5) Prayer services in hospitals and in care and correctional institutions.

This growth in multifaith prayer activity is also being stimulated by new situations and new relationships that traditional religious services are no longer able to address, for example, interfaith marriages or memorial services following disasters in which there are victims of more than one faith.

The proliferation of multifaith prayer activity also reflects a desire for an interfaith encounter at a deeper level. Religious experience at the level of prayer and meditation involves a journey into the profoundest depths of the individual and the community. More and more people of various faiths are wanting to encounter one another at levels that go beyond verbal dialogue and common action.

Purposes & Benefits of Multifaith Prayer

Multifaith prayer is an effort to symbolize and actualize the aspiration toward interreligious unity. More specifically, multifaith prayer

- Acknowledges the rich diversity of humankind's spiritual traditions.
- Affirms the unity and solidarity of the human family while respecting religious differences. "Unity amidst diversity" is the keyword here.
- Provides an occasion to build and nurture relationships among faith traditions and among individuals in these traditions.
- Appreciates common ethical values and a common search for truth.
- Exposes individuals to the prayer, meditation, musical and ritual expressions of other religions.
- Can inspire common action in the realms of charity, community service, social justice, scholarship, global issues and spiritual and religious care.
- Provides an occasion to practice religious hospitality.

But how does the experience of multifaith prayer impact on the individual participant? Here, the hope is that through one's exposure to and even participation in the spirituality and religious culture of other traditions, one will not only grow in appreciation for other faiths but also be renewed in terms of one's own faith experience.

A Note on the Term "Multifaith Prayer Service"

Whenever one is dealing with multifaith and interfaith issues, language can be a sensitive issue. In this document, the author has chosen to use the term "multifaith prayer service" to describe a gathering of many faiths for purposes of spiritual co-operation.

But the word "prayer" means different things to different people. And this word can certainly mean different things to people of various faith groups. For example, for faith groups who believe in a deity, "prayer" can refer to the relationship to that deity by way of petition, praise or thanksgiving. For faith groups who do not believe in a deity, "prayer" can refer to a practice that leads to interior spiritual growth and inner transformation involving ego-transcendence or self-transcendence. These are only two of many ways in which "prayer" is understood and practised.

In this document, the author chose to use the word “prayer” because he has found that this word best expresses the concept of a multifaith spiritual gathering. In this document, then, the word “prayer” is an umbrella term that refers to and includes the broad range of spiritual practices found in the multifaith commonwealth of spirituality.

Some multifaith prayer service organizers do not use the words "prayer service," opting instead for words such as "celebration," "observance," "ceremony," "vigil," "liturgy," "gathering," "spiritual service," or "service." Please note that the word "celebration" would not be appropriate to describe all multifaith services - for example, a multifaith memorial service for the victims of an airplane crash.

Some organizers use the term “multifaith worship service.” But the word “worship” clearly applies only to traditions who believe in a deity and is, therefore, exclusive.

Guidelines

A multifaith prayer service can be organized and conducted by one person. But the most holistic way to organize a multifaith prayer service is to involve a number of faith groups in the planning and delivery of the service. The experience of multifaith prayer thus becomes a gift of dialogue and an opportunity to build and nurture interreligious relationships.

Multifaith prayer is a gift. But the creation and delivery of a multifaith service is no easy task. Multifaith prayer is difficult because it presents its creators with numerous dilemmas and challenges – dilemmas and challenges that are theological, cultural and practical. For example, not all spiritual practices are universal. Dance is a prayer form in many faith traditions but in some traditions, dance is prohibited.

In this section, we offer suggestions for doing multifaith prayer. Quite a number of guidelines are outlined below; it is not the suggestion of this author that all of these be implemented in a given service (with the exception, of course, of such important values as “respectful presence” and “inclusivity”); in fact, a simple, uncomplicated order of service can be very effective. Numerous suggestions and tips are included here in order to give organizers an abundance of ideas and choices.

Respectful Presence

Respectful Presence refers to the overall attitude of anyone involved in multifaith prayer. Respectful presence does not imply acceptance or full acceptance of the prayers, teachings or beliefs of another faith group. It does imply a willingness to be respectfully present – at least for the period of the service – when those prayers, teaching or beliefs are being articulated or symbolized. This sense of respect should also characterize the planning phase of the prayer service.

Inclusivity

A spirit of inclusivity is absolutely key to the planning and delivery of a multifaith service. Inclusivity refers to a comprehensive attitude that is responsive to the multiple sensibilities of the participating faith groups and the multifaith congregation. The use of inclusive language is part of this sensitivity. Inclusivity is also enhanced by creating opportunities in the service for the entire congregation to participate, for example, through congregational singing or the use of prayer refrains.

Balance and Diversity

It's helpful to strive for balance and diversity in terms of the various prayer forms used in the service. Here are some options: song, instrumental music, chant, art, prayers, sacred writings, silence, story, dance (physical movement), ritual, readings, the use of light/darkness, use of nature or elements of nature (e.g. flowers, stones, water). Please note that it is not necessary to utilize all or even most of these prayer forms; in fact, a simple, uncomplicated order of service can be very effective.

Symbolic Actions and Gestures

Symbolic actions and gestures such as greetings of peace among the members of the congregation and the lighting of candles by the various faith group representatives serve to both symbolize and express unity.

Welcome

Banners, symbols and expressions of welcome serve to make guests feel welcome. Greeters from various faiths can be positioned at the entrance to the multifaith prayer space.

Banners

A procession of banners, each with a symbol of the participating faith group, can be an aesthetically and spiritually moving experience at the beginning of the prayer service. The banners can be carried by the various faith group representatives into the multifaith prayer space. When the procession reaches the stage, the banners can be placed beside one another in stands on the stage and thus remain on display throughout the service.

Printed Bulletin/Program

As a guide for the members of the congregation, it is helpful to provide everyone with a bulletin, program or published order of service.

Leader/Moderator

Experience has demonstrated that the planning group should choose the leader/moderator of the service with care, sensitivity, and by consensus.

Opening Words

The opening words of the service should be general, welcoming and inclusive.

A Sample Order of Service

The following outline is merely one example of an order of service for a multifaith prayer gathering:

Prelude (music)
Procession (of all participating faith groups)
Welcome and Opening Words
Offering (e.g. by a children's choir of one faith group)
Reading of prayers (from 3 or 4 traditions)
Presentation of symbols or gifts from participating faith traditions
Hymn/Song
Offering (e.g. dance from one faith tradition)
Prayer of reconciliation and peace
Gestures of greeting or peace among members of congregation
Chants (or readings from sacred texts) of 3 or 4 traditions
Silence
Offering of the 4 elements (air, earth, fire, water)
Prayers and responses
Message (a brief reflection by one individual)
Lighting of candles by participating faith group representatives
Closing words and song

Theme

The adoption of a theme for the service is extremely helpful because

- It gives a focus to the planners.
- It provides a focus for the congregation.
- It promotes a sense of unity.

The range of possible themes is unlimited. Here are a few suggestions:

Peace	Pilgrimage	Living in Harmony with Each Other
Love	Compassion	Other
Light	Gratitude	Sacred Writings
Harmony	Unity in Diversity	Economic justice
Hope	The Spaces Within	Leaving Home
Air	The Spaces Without	Coming Full Circle
Earth	The Golden Rule	Ecology/Mother Earth
Water	Sacred Spaces	Universal Love of All Humankind
Fire	Weaving Together Our Lives and Learning	Non-violence
Silence	Learning	One Global Family
Justice	Conflict Resolution / Reconciliation	Sacred Harmony

Faith Group Representatives

As mentioned above, the most holistic way to organize a multifaith prayer service is to involve a number of faith groups in the planning and delivery of the service. In the planning phase, each faith group delegates a representative to participate in planning the form, order and content of the service. During the service, each participating representative is free to pray from within his or her own tradition, to read from the sacred texts of his or her own tradition or to perform ritual or chant from his or her tradition. Faith representatives may speak positively about their own tradition, but not negatively about other faith traditions. This would violate a basic principle of interfaith relations. In the context of multifaith prayer, it is inappropriate for faith group representatives to offer prayers, read sacred texts or make statements which suggest the incompleteness or inferiority of another faith tradition. This emphasis on respect and inclusivity must apply to the content of all hymns, songs, prayers and refrains that are sung or recited by the entire congregation.

Gestures of Peace and Greeting

Some multifaith services encourage the members of the congregation to greet one another with a word or gesture of peace at some point during the service. Such gestures both express and symbolize unity. However, it is important to be aware that certain physical gestures such as a handshake or an embrace are foreign to people of some cultural and religious backgrounds. One way to address this issue is to have the moderator invite members of the congregation to greet those around them with a nod and/or a word of peace.

Community Needs

Some multifaith prayer services include an opportunity for the moderator or others to acknowledge community needs (from local to global levels) and to express spiritual and social solidarity with respect to such needs.

Music

Singing is a good way to involve everyone in the congregation. Experience has shown that the music which is sung or chanted by the entire congregation should be carefully chosen by the planning group. Music without words can also be a valuable aid in meditation.

Dance

Dance is sometimes performed in multifaith prayer gatherings. But the practice of dance is prohibited in some faith traditions. The decision as to whether or not to include dance in a service should be left in the hands of the planning group.

Children

The inclusion of children is important. *Mosaic*, a multifaith organization in Toronto, Canada, invites children's choirs of various faith traditions to participate in its interfaith gatherings.

Circle

Because the circle is a universal religious symbol as well as a symbol of equality and unity, it is sometimes used in multifaith prayer. One option is to have the congregation seated in a circle.

Art and Beauty

One should strive to make the multifaith prayer experience and environment "a garden of beauty."

Candles

The candle is a virtually universal religious symbol and the lighting of candles is a universal prayer form and a symbol of unity.

Fountains

Fountains provide a wonderful interplay of light and water. Their universal appeal is complemented by their contemplative and calming effect.

Nature

Plants, flowers, water, natural light — these and other elements of nature can be enriching ingredients in any multifaith service. Also, an outdoor venue can be a nice touch.

Sign Language

The use of sign language adds to the inclusivity, beauty, symbolism and rhythm of the prayer gathering.

Silence

The practice of silence is common to most religious traditions. A period of silence during the service is a good method for symbolizing and manifesting unity in the multifaith gathering. Silence, a universal spiritual practice, also serves to deepen the prayer experience.

Refrains/Responses/Affirmations

The use of refrains, responses or affirmations is a useful method for promoting unity and congregational participation. If the service contains a section in which a series of faith group representatives recite prayers or read from their sacred texts, the refrain, response or affirmation can be recited by the entire congregation after each prayer or reading. Here are three inclusive examples of such responses that have been used in prayer services by the Edmonton Interfaith Center for Education and Action (Edmonton, Canada):

- 1) *"We affirm this prayer and celebrate our love, acceptance and compassion."*
- 2) *"We affirm this prayer and pray for peace and racial harmony in the world."*
(used in a prayer service for International Day for the Elimination of Racial discrimination)
- 3) *"We celebrate our being together as people of many faiths in the world."*

Issues with the word "God"

In planning a multi-faith prayer service, it is important to remember that the broad range of words or names used to describe Ultimate Reality or Ultimate Truth contain religious assumptions that are not shared by all faith groups. For example, many faith groups use the term "God" to describe Ultimate Reality. But this does not mean that all such faith groups share a common understanding of the word "God." Also, "God" is not a term that is relevant to non-theistic traditions. For example, Buddhism and Jainism do not subscribe to a concept of God (i.e. a Creator-God). The suggestion here is not that faith group representatives should refrain from using the words or names from their particular traditions which refer to Ultimate Reality; the suggestion, rather, is that they be aware that such terms may not necessarily be universal and all-inclusive in meaning.

Religious and Cultural Dress

Participants in a multifaith prayer service often wear dress that is culturally and religiously specific. Such traditional dress is encouraged for those who wish. This invitation applies to the faith group representatives in the wearing, for example, of robes, vestments or prayer shawls; the invitation also extends to members of the multifaith congregation, for example, in the wearing of saris or clerical collars. This dress feature adds to the colour and vibrancy of the prayer environment and makes the gathering a truly visual celebration of "unity amidst diversity."

Traditional Languages

In some multifaith services, the faith group representatives are invited to read or chant their prayers, readings, sacred texts or mantras in the traditional scriptural or oral language of their faith group (e.g. Hebrew, Arabic, Sanskrit, Lakota). In some cases, they are also invited to read or chant these prayers, readings, sacred texts or mantras in the local or vernacular language (e.g. Spanish, Mandarin, English, German).

Venue

Essentially, there are three types of venues for a multifaith prayer service: first, an outdoor environment; second, a “neutral” environment such as a community center, rented hall or multipurpose room; third, a house of worship/meditation center of a given faith tradition (e.g. mosque, synagogue, mandir, meditation center, church, temple, gurdwara). If the chosen locale is a house of worship/meditation center, some sensitivity issues particular to the host faith group may arise. For example, if the locale is a Sikh temple, it would be inappropriate for the service to include a Native smudge (purification ritual) using tobacco because tobacco use is prohibited in the Sikh faith; if the locale is a Hindu temple followed by a potluck supper, it would be inappropriate for a visitor to bring meat for the supper because meat is forbidden in Hindu temples; if the locale is a house of worship/meditation center of a faith group that prohibits dance, it would, of course, be inappropriate to include dance in the service. These sensitivity issues are best worked out in a dialogue between the interfaith planning group and the host house of worship/meditation center.

Day and Time

It is advisable to hold the multifaith service at a time other than when the participating faith communities would normally be holding their own principal devotions/services/meditations.

Food and Drink

The sharing of food and drink after the prayer service can be a continuation of the interfaith friendship stimulated by the service. Here there should be a concern for the dietary regulations of the participating faith communities. It is helpful to label foods so that everyone knows their contents or ingredients. Meat and alcohol should be avoided.

Multifaith Music Resource

In 2002, the Interfaith Center at the Presidio in San Francisco, California, USA published *One World, Many Voices - An Interfaith Songbook*. This useful document contains the words and music of fifty-seven songs collected from various cultures, faith groups and regions of the world. The inclusive content and theme of this songbook make it an excellent resource for planning congregational singing in a multifaith prayer service. To find out more about this document or to order it click here:

<http://www.interfaith-presidio.org/store/songbook.html>

A paper entitled, *Dialogue through Observation and Participation*, by **Rev. Dr. Clark Lobenstine**, has proven to be a very useful resource in the compilation of this document. Clark, a seasoned interfaith veteran, is Executive Director of The Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, D.C., USA.

Compiled by Paul McKenna

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