

A close-up photograph of an olive branch with several green olives and long, narrow leaves. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and green. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Promoting Interfaith Relations¹

Guidelines² for the parishes and agencies of the Archdiocese of Melbourne to assist in the promotion of interfaith relations in general and especially in the preparation of interfaith gatherings.

Introduction

In recent times, it has become common for moments of celebration or tragedy to be marked by multifaith gatherings, often initiated by civic or government bodies, in order to mirror the diverse nature of our society and to promote its harmony and wellbeing. Indeed, particular religious groups and local interfaith networks often arrange such events in their neighbourhood.

It is, therefore, increasingly likely that the parishes and agencies of the Archdiocese will be invited to take part in interfaith gatherings. If such occasions are to be truly spiritual, they cannot be simply a 'colourful' event or an empty ritual. They must be so structured and conducted that participants draw nearer to the Divine Mystery.

In addition, individual members of the Church will find opportunities and situations in which they are called into dialogue and interaction with their neighbours of other faiths and cultures.

These short guidelines are intended to help provide a balanced and fruitful approach for responding appropriately to this call and, more generally, for promoting interfaith relations within the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

PART I

Basic Approaches

The Second Vatican Council, in a watershed statement, proclaims:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. The Church, therefore, urges her [children] to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.

Nostra Aetate §2

Dialogue, therefore, involves both having something substantial to say and being willing to listen in depth. The participants want to hear the authentic tradition which has been really experienced and is truly lived.

The essential Christian proclamation is found in this passage from the New Testament

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

St Paul's Letter to the Colossians: 1:15-20 (NRSV)

Dialogue and proclamation are both authentic elements of the Church's evangelising mission. Both are legitimate and necessary. True interreligious dialogue on the part of the Christian supposes the desire to make Jesus better known, recognised and loved³.

Interfaith dialogue, therefore, does not entail Christians watering down their faith but involves its fuller commitment. It can be challenging as the essence of the Gospel is distinguished from its cultural expression. It can involve a profound change in the participants. If approached with the right attitude, the dialogue is always rewarding and leads to a deeper experience of the Word made flesh. In this way Christians may find that they themselves are in fact being evangelised⁴.

Interreligious dialogue is not a debate. It does not seek to produce a sort of super-religion. It does not imply relativism or syncretism, a smorgasbord of bits and pieces. Neither is interfaith dialogue a clever means of proselytising; while always a witness to Christ, it does not aim at conversion.

And yet true dialogue is not mere civility. Interfaith dialogue involves humility and openness to the spiritual depths of other faiths. It takes place in confidence, without fear or arrogance, without dominating or glossing over differences, never excluding or patronising, neither assimilating nor ignoring.

It requires participants to dialogue with respect, not necessarily in agreement; it invites them to acknowledge that what is heard may indeed proceed from the depths of the Divine Mystery. It does not preclude robust debate if this is done with courtesy and without antagonism, but is based on a spirituality of communion and a commitment to a practical concern for every human being.

“A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly but also as a ‘gift for me’.”

Pope John Paul II⁵

Interreligious dialogue is a powerful witness in the face of an increasingly secularised world. By emphasising common values such as love of God and love of neighbour, it seeks to promote cooperation and solidarity among people of faith in acting for social justice, moral values, peace and liberty in our society.

“The world in which we live is often marked by conflicts, violence and war, but it earnestly longs for peace, peace which is above all a gift from God, peace for which we must pray without ceasing. Yet peace is also a duty to which all peoples must be committed, especially those who profess to belong to religious traditions. Our efforts to come together and foster dialogue are a valuable contribution to building peace on solid foundations.”

Pope Benedict XVI⁶

PART II

Interreligious dialogue

The following four types of dialogue⁷ are not mutually exclusive and in practice overlap. All forms of dialogue can be carried out in parishes and agencies to a greater or lesser extent.

1. Dialogue of everyday life where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations, developing individual friendships based on mutual trust which can lead to sharing their religious beliefs and experiences.

Examples from the Melbourne scene:

- The Archdiocese and the Australian Intercultural Society (a Muslim based Turkish group) have co-hosted dinners at the end of fasting on one of the days of Ramadan with the Australian Catholic University.
- The Catholic Jewish Friendship dinner is held every year
- Each year Archbishop Hart sends letters of greeting to the leaders of the various faith traditions on the occasion of their major feasts.
- The examples set out more fully in Appendix III give witness to this form of dialogue in neighbourhood, community, school and workplace.

Suggestions:

- Invite into your home neighbours who may be of other faiths.
- Organise community and parish activities, e.g. picnics.
- Arrange school visits.
- Promote involvement in interfaith women's groups.
- Send greetings on the occasion of the major feast of another religious group in your suburb.

2. Dialogue of action in which Christians and others collaborate for the good of the earth and for the integral development and liberation of people.

Examples from the Melbourne scene:

- Interfaith networks have been formed in many municipalities with the aim of fostering harmonious relations and community service.
- A "Walk for Harmony" which involved more than 10,000 people from all religious communities in Victoria
- The Archdiocese sought to make an Intervention in support of the Islamic Council of Victoria in their complaint against vilification lodged with the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT). The Uniting Church also sought to make an Intervention. In this way the ecumenical and interfaith endeavours came together very neatly.

Suggestions:

- Take part in interfaith activities co-ordinated by local interfaith networks.
- Arrange neighbourhood gatherings to address issues such as drug addiction, youth unemployment.
- Defend each other in cases of vilification or harassment.
- Set up a parish-based interfaith committee to work with other faith communities and represent the parish on the local interfaith network.

3. Dialogue of theological exchange where dialogue partners seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages and to appreciate each other's spiritual beliefs and values.

Examples from the Melbourne scene:

- The Catholic Interfaith Committee organises symposiums and conversations which draw together speakers from the various faith traditions.
- The Archdiocese cooperates in organising major events for Jews, Christians and Muslims each year, such as:
 - The JCMA Conference where Jews, Christians and Muslims live together for four days of fellowship and discussion
 - The JCMA Women's Group which holds an annual conference and regular meetings during the year
- A Symposium on the legal, medical and religious aspects of Death and Dying organized by the Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission

Suggestions:

- Set up local interfaith study-circles, book discussions.
- Attend and promote the increasing number of interfaith conferences, discussions, public lectures, workshops, etc. on interfaith topics.
- Convene interfaith discussion groups on topics of mutual interest.

4. Dialogue of religious experience where persons, grounded in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, ceremonies and places of worship.

Examples from the Melbourne scene:

- Members of Muslim communities attend Catholic ceremonies such as Christmas, Passion Sunday, and Good Friday.
- The City of Greater Dandenong conducts 'Temple Tours' by which people visit places of worship from the various traditions.
- Interfaith gatherings involving Christians, Buddhists Hindus, Muslims, have taken place at various venues. Some of these have been organised by the East-West Meditation Foundation, a Catholic based organisation that has made valuable contacts over the recent years.

Suggestions:

- Visit each other's places of worship.
- Accept invitations to Iftar meals with Muslims during the month of Ramadan .
- Attend ceremonies in synagogues, mosques, or temples, if invited
- Take part in the Ecumenical Shoah Memorial Service

PART III

Preparing an authentically religious multifaith event

Since multifaith gatherings are becoming increasingly common, greater attention needs to be paid to this form of dialogue.

1. Initiative

While civic leaders may initiate a multifaith event, the appropriate religious leaders are responsible for its structure and content. Given this basic premise, the religious leaders will maintain due regard for the intentions of the initiators and their legitimate role.

A balance needs to be maintained. Although one denomination or religious tradition should not dominate, neither may there be time in the celebration for every tradition to have a public role. The selection must be done in a spirit of wisdom and service lest the event be in fact counterproductive.

These events may involve Christians from a number of denominations: indeed multifaith gatherings are preferably undertaken on an ecumenical basis.⁸

2. Location

Any place can be used since a venue is made holy by the spiritual character of those who use it. It may sometimes be more acceptable to use a neutral location such as a hall. It may also be possible, depending on the wishes of the leaders organising the event, to use a mosque or synagogue or church or temple.

It should be noted that images, whether paintings or statues, may be offensive to some participants.

3. Timing

There are very many religious festivals. In planning the gathering it is important to find a time-slot that is suitable. The 'Interfaith Calendar' website given below will be of value.

4. Language

Terms such as 'prayer', 'worship', 'God', 'faith', 'minister' etc. do not necessarily apply in all traditions. Preference should be given to more inclusive terms. At the same time, distinctions should not be blurred.

5. Ritual

A symbolic act or ritual can be more expressive than many words. Flame and water, flowers and bread, have a universal significance so that participants can attach their own meaning to the act and not feel constrained by any one interpretation.

6. Hospitality

The Jewish tradition requires food to be kosher; the Muslim tradition requires it to be halal. Hindus may insist on vegetarian food. Some Buddhists, in addition to dietary needs, may also have requests concerning timing of a meal. Participants vary greatly in attitude to the dietary requirements of their religion. It is best to seek advice.

7. Format

There can be many formats. However, the following listing reflects the pattern of the 'Ceremony for Peace and Collaboration among Religions' held in St Patrick's Cathedral, East Melbourne, on 11 June 2000, during the Great Jubilee.

1. The participants are greeted and welcomed; and the reason for the gathering is given.
2. There may be value in indicating at some point that the statements of faith made by some do not involve the assent of all. Participants can agree to disagree while at the same time coming together in harmony and mutual respect.
3. The various religious traditions make their distinctive contribution, which may be in the form of readings from the sacred texts, poems, teachings etc.
4. Music or song from the various traditions.
5. Periods of silence may be interspersed between the various contributions, during which participants transcend expressions and arrive at their source.
6. One or other leader may give some reflections appropriate to the occasion.
7. The term 'prayer' does not suit every tradition. Intentions or hopes, however, may be stated and agreed upon by means of some appropriate acclamation.
8. An element of ritual, carefully chosen to reflect the purpose of the event, may be incorporated.
9. A commissioning or blessing may be appropriate, sending the participants forth to live out the values of the interfaith experience.

Note: Marriages, funerals and other events may also involve people from different traditions wishing that the ceremony reflect their diversity. While the liturgical rituals for weddings and funerals are clearly prescribed in the Catholic tradition and will be expected by members of other traditions, it may be necessary to include elements from other traditions (within the limits prescribed by the Church) in some appropriate fashion. There is no room for 'mixing and gathering' which satisfies no one. This will require both pastoral sensitivity and fidelity to Catholic tradition.⁹

For more information:



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PART IV

Praying together?

1. The challenge

Jews, Christians and Muslims all address prayer to the one God whom Abraham worshipped. All three religious traditions also contain strict warnings against worshipping other gods. Christian prayer is made specifically “through Jesus Christ our Lord”, the Son of God.

Hindus address prayer either each to their ‘chosen deity’ or to none, for the various Hindus traditions view Ultimate Reality differently, some in personal terms, others impersonally. Buddhists, at some levels of tradition, may address prayer to the Buddha as to a god, but more typically the Ultimate Reality is Void or totally beyond words. Thus, the term ‘prayer’ in its usual sense may be ambiguous or inappropriate.

If there is no common understanding of what prayer is or in what circumstances it is appropriate, is it possible to pray together?

2. A solution?

When Christians gather together with people of different faiths, they do so with the presumption – at once both humble and daring - that God may speak to them in and through those whose beliefs are not necessarily shared.

In 1986, Pope John Paul II invited the world’s religious leaders to Assisi for a gathering that would “certainly not be religious syncretism but a sincere attitude of prayer to God in an atmosphere of mutual respect.”¹⁰ On that occasion he gave an example of ways in which Christians and those of other faiths may legitimately “be together in order to pray”.

In such gatherings, the sacred texts of each other’s faith are heard with deep respect, acknowledging that in them, somehow, God has spoken. Even if we disagree with what is said, we can still hear God speaking through what may seem uncertain and imprecise, for we are all novices and beginners.

In this way we “manifest our respect for the prayer of others and for the attitude of others before the Divinity; at the same time we offer them the humble and sincere witness of our faith in Christ, the Lord of the Universe.”¹¹

As a result of such listening we sense their faith and observe that God’s Word is also at work in them. And so we are caught up in the Word of God together. The purpose of the interfaith gathering then consists primarily not in speaking but in attending silently to the God who has spoken and still speaks. Indeed, many spiritual traditions agree that, as prayer deepens, it enters further into silence.

If we cannot say the same prayer formulas together, let us at least gather together in the profound and evocative silence which is attentive to the One who transcends all.¹²

APPENDIX I: Links

Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission

<http://eic.cam.org.au>

Catholic Interfaith Committee

(see link in EIC website above)

Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference

www.catholic.org.au

Bishops Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Relations

(see link in ACBC website above)

Victorian Council of Churches

www.vcc.org.au

National Council of Churches in Australia

www.ncca.org.au

World Council of Churches

www.oikoumene.org

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/index.htm

World Conference of Religions for Peace

<http://www.wcrp.org>

Council of Christians and Jews (Vic) Inc.

<http://www.ccjvic.org>

Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations

www.columban.org.au/Our-works/christian-muslim-relations/about-cmr.html

JCMA (Jewish Christian Muslim Association) Australia

www.jcma.org.au

Australian Intercultural Society (Turkish Muslim)

www.intercultural.org.au

Baha’i Faith Australia

www.bahai.org.au

Buddhist Australian Director

www.buddhanet.net/aus_buds.htm

Hindu Council of Australia

www.hinducouncil.com.au

Islamic Council of Victoria

www.icv.org.au

Jewish Community Council Of Victoria

www.jccv.org.au

Sikh Council of Australia

www.sikhcouncil.org.au

Interfaith Calendar

www.interfaithcalendar.org

APPENDIX II: Glossary

Interfaith / Interreligious: Describes the deliberate interaction of persons of two or more religious faiths or religions. Both terms are commonly used interchangeably. However, some theologians and sociologists may use them differently. In this document, the terms are interchangeable.

Multifaith / Multireligious: Describes the joint cooperation of persons of different faiths, religions or religious backgrounds. In this document, the terms are used interchangeably.

Evangelise/Evangelisation: The proclamation of Christ and his Gospel by word and the testimony of life, in fulfillment of Christ’s command, not to be confused with proselytism.

Proselytise / Proselytism: The act of seeking converts to one’s own religion in a manner which imposes and which precludes the grace of God. The purpose of interfaith dialogue is to foster understanding and mutual co-operation, not to engineer conversion to one’s own point of view or belief.

Relativism: The belief that all faiths and their respective theological beliefs are equally valid depending on the person involved

Syncretism: A blending of practices and beliefs from two or more religions to such a degree that the specific character of the tradition and belief is obscured or lost.

Appendix III: Some stories from the dialogue of life

Taking the first step – Through taking practical steps to reach out to the Muslim family from Bangladesh living next door – inviting them to share a cuppa, a meal, playing with their children etc. – a warm relationship of mutual love was built, to the point of their openly sharing religious beliefs and practices. We maintained contact when I moved away eight years ago. Recently the wife rang for prayers for her five year-old daughter about to undergo critical heart surgery. She said she wanted us to pray to our one God at this time of suffering and uncertainty in their lives

Making ourselves one with the other – My Hindu neighbours arrived from Fiji two years ago. There have been many opportunities to love in a practical way, especially in being prepared to share their sufferings. Many times I have chosen to put aside my own agenda to listen without judgement to different family members. We have built strong friendships based on mutual love and trust and the family are included in broader community activities. In turn I have received their love – Indian food and offers of help in the garden!

Entering into the experience of the other – After cleaning up our properties and as we sat together in the quiet of the evening, watching the flames of the bonfire, I commented to my Hindu neighbours that this might be our “Aussie Diwali”, as I was aware that this Hindu Festival of Lights had just finished. In the relaxed atmosphere the normally reserved 16- year old son began to share nostalgically about the Hindu religious traditions and family life in Fiji that they had left only a short time before.

Overcoming fear – I met an old Jewish woman, originally from Europe, and when she learned that I was a Christian she seemed to withdraw. I kept listening and eventually she told me that she was a survivor from the Holocaust, the Shoah. I listened and she began to tell me more of her life. Christian neighbours had told the Nazis that she was Jewish. This explained her initial reaction when I said I was Christian. We became good friends and remain so today.

Mutual respect of each others’ faith – Last Christmas I invited an Iranian friend and her young family to share a Christmas meal. They are practising Shiite Muslims and accepted happily. A couple of weeks later they came camping with us. She asked to use the caravan to pray in. I prayed in silence with her. I was moved by the experience and the peace we both felt.

Taking the risk to love – On her way home from the train station, a woman was asked for directions to a garage sale by 3 young Indian men. Being such a miserable wet day she wanted to help. She took the risk and offered to drive them there. She learned they were students and hadn’t eaten since breakfast. So, later she took them home for a sandwich and a cup of tea. They shared their stories, their family situations in India and their hopes for the future. They were all practising Hindus. At one stage one of the boys said to her, “Why have you been so kind to us? No one else in Melbourne has”. She explained that she too has children who travel, and that she hoped someone

would be kind to them if they needed help. She also said that she was a Christian and tried to live by the teachings of Christianity – to love God and neighbour.

Respect for the other in the workplace begins a relationship of trust – A colleague introduced himself to the new cleaner at work who said her name was “Mary” and that she came from Bosnia. Knowing a little about the culture, he thought it unlikely that this was her real name and, in asking, learned that her name was “Ismata” and that she was a practicing Muslim. From that point on he always called her by her real name and that was the beginning of a trusting relationship between them.

Maintaining unity in a friendship – My work colleague is a practising Buddhist and over the years we had built a good friendship. We openly talked about our faiths, discussing both the similarities and the differences. Not long ago he was quite taken aback after reading an article where Catholicism was declared to be the only true religion. This really hurt him and he was very upset. The best thing at the time from my point of view was not to defend my faith, but to make an extra effort to listen openly to him in his hurt. Things have now blown over and we’re back to normal.

Practicing the “Golden Rule” – I met a Rabbi in Jerusalem. I asked him what had been happening and he told me that he had just returned to Jerusalem from assisting a Palestinian family in their olive harvest.

For several years I have been teaching in a Muslim school. Most of the children are brought up in strongly religious environments where God and prayer are given first place in their lives. Being a non-Muslim I cannot explicitly give them any religious instruction, but I take advantage of many occasions throughout each day to help them to experience and put into practice the “Golden Rule” found in all religions: do to the other as you would want them do to you.

Footnotes

¹ Revised edition. The first edition of these Guidelines were officially launched by Archbishop Denis J. Hart, August 21st, 2007. This revised edition was approved by the Archbishop on 12th October 2009.

² These guidelines draw in part on *Guidelines for Multifaith Gatherings* published by the Victorian Council of Churches in collaboration with Victorian Multicultural Commission; and on *One Faith – Multifaith – a theological basis for interfaith gatherings*, published by the Victorian Council of Churches and available on its web-site.

³ Cf. “*Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*”, Joint Document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, (May 19, 1991)

⁴ The Vatican instruction *Dominus Jesus* clarifies the unique nature of our faith and our Church in relation to other religions. Paragraphs 5-8 speak of the full and definitive revelation of Christ and, in paras 11, 13-15, what is derived from this. With regard to salvation and other religions, see paras 20-22. These Guidelines are too brief to set out the teaching of the instruction satisfactorily.

⁵ ‘At the Beginning of the New Millennium’ (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*), par. 43.

⁶ Address of Pope Benedict XVI to the delegates of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of other religious traditions, 25 April 2005

⁷ The definitions are based on *Dialogue and Proclamation* published by Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Rome, 1991.

⁸ Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue are intimately related. “Interfaith dialogue will reinforce the consciousness of Christian identity, and place denominational differences into perspective. The ability of the Churches both to acknowledge their differences and to discover their unity as members of the one Body of Christ will help them meet members of other faiths and appreciate what God has accomplished in them.” Source: *One Faith – Multifaith – a theological basis for interfaith gatherings*. Victorian Council of Churches.

⁹ “When, on the occasion of weddings or funerals or other celebrations, Christians and Muslims remain in silent respect at the others’ prayer, they bear witness to what unites them without disguising or denying the things that separate.” *Pope John Paul II at the Great Mosque in Damascus*, 2001

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, General Audience, October 22, 1986

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Cf. Dupuche J. *The Summit*, May 2003, vol. 30 no. 2, pp.10-11.