

## HOUSE OF BISHOPS

## GUIDANCE ON MULTI-FAITH WORSHIP

*Foreword*

The Report of the Board of Mission '*Multi-Faith Worship*'? (GS 1011, 1992) was received by the General Synod of the Church of England on 12 July 1992 by an overwhelming majority. The Synod also agreed by large majorities to:

- (a) commend the report for study in dioceses;
- (b) encourage further attention to the theology of multi-faith questions in the coming years, even if a full consensus on such issues is never likely to be reached; and,
- (c) ask the House of Bishops to consider what guidance should be given to clergy and laity faced with situations described in the Report.

This document is offered to the House of Bishops as a suggested response to the last resolution. It is clearly impossible to anticipate all the circumstances in which some form of multi-faith worship may be proposed, and these pages therefore concentrate on general principles, rather than attempt to spell out a detailed code for every specific occasion. For events like marriages and funerals, and the particular contexts of hospital, prison and school, some guidance is already available (eg. *Guidelines for the Celebration of Mixed-Faith Marriages in Church*: Board of Mission 1992), and more is planned.

Numbers in the text refer to paragraphs in the report *Multi-Faith Worship*?

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## 1 WHAT KIND OF OCCASION IS BEING PROPOSED?

*(see 60-77, 101-116)*

Since most forms of multi-faith worship arouse controversy in some quarters, it is vital that the organisers and principal participants in any such occasion are clear in their own minds about what they expect to happen and why they might want to be involved. It is even better if they are able to be articulate about these things to the media and to their actual and potential critics. Much damage has been done to inter-faith understanding by vague and superficial explanations which appear to sidestep all the hard questions which arise from real conviction - not only the convictions of Christians, but of other believers also.

The first question - to which the answer may not be immediately clear - is:

**What is the purpose of the occasion?** *(101-116)*

There are subsidiary questions which are also important and which may help to provide an answer to this basic question. These are:

Whose idea was the occasion? Who first proposed it?

Who is prepared to 'own' it, and accept responsibility for it?

Who will support it, and why?

Who is actually making the decisions and is in control of it?

Where will it be held?

Many people who come to church leaders to arrange for some kind of special service in church ask for a form of worship which will have a 'multi-cultural' element in it. This may be because the members of their organisation, or those whom they try to serve come from many different ethnic backgrounds, and they want to recognise that in some form of prayer. They may well be surprised to learn that the inclusion of 'some Muslim or Hindu prayers' can create problems, since their primary concern is the activity of their own group and not the beliefs of any particular religious community. *(101)*

In such a situation the minister who is opposed to the use of prayers or readings from other sources in a Christian service will have to weigh not only that issue but also the effect of refusing the request. Will it be possible to explain Christian theological principles in a way that can be understood, or will such statements be dismissed as another form of racism?

Alternatively, if such material is used, but strictly selected on the basis of what is judged to be compatible with Christian belief, will this be regarded as patronising? *(96)*

A key question is that of the group which will be worshipping. Is it in any sense already a community? Is this a group of people who already know, respect and trust each other? Is there a concern or cause which they share together? Much will depend on this, since without such a sense of solidarity it will be difficult for the occasion not to feel artificial. If, however, the worshippers are already committed to one another, or if the worship comes at the end of a conference in which members have spent much time together, it is likely to be conducted with a sense of everyone's integrity. *(103, 108)*

A critical question is the venue. This will determine who is ultimately in charge of the occasion, what activities are appropriate, what kind of atmosphere is generated by it, and, to a considerable extent, the popular response from those not present at it. For some of other faiths, whatever happens in a Christian building is a Christian occasion, whoever actually participates. It certainly cannot be neutral ground for anybody. (120)

### **Visiting other places of worship (60-77)**

Under this general heading of 'What kind of occasion..' comes something which is not in itself worship, though worship may be involved, but which is simply a visit to a mosque, temple or synagogue. Despite, or even because of the fear among some Christians of entering the places of worship of other faiths, it may be important to express Christian care and recognition of other faith communities by accepting an invitation to visit them in the place which is the focus of their faith. (69)

There are particular points of etiquette to be observed in each place (72-76), but there is much for Christians to receive as well as give on such occasions. The Muslim custom of washing before prayer, the Sikh tradition of worshippers eating together after prayer, the freedom with which worshippers come and go in the Hindu temple — all these things can lead to a valuable re-assessment of Christian traditions of worship. (70) It is important, however, for this sympathetic observation to be accompanied by some clear and reliable instruction.

Decisions will have to be made about worship even in the context of a simple visit. Do the guests follow the practice of their hosts in bowing to Hindu images, or reverencing the Sikh scriptures? Without showing discourtesy, Christians would not want either to imply that these things have the same meaning for them as for their hosts, or to be involved in idolatrous worship. But they will have to decide for themselves what precisely constitutes idolatry, and what behaviour would offend their hosts. No host, however, would want guests to act against their own conscience. They understand well enough that religious conviction cannot be lightly disregarded.

It is also important, however, to recall that 'the adventure of faith may entail mistakes honestly made', and it may be necessary to experience something before you can make a proper assessment of it. (62) This is likely to be the case with some of the customs of the temple, for example the giving to visitors of *prasad*, nuts and dried or fresh fruit which has been offered in the worship of the temple. (75)

## **2. WHAT ARE THE CONSTRAINTS OF PLACE, LANGUAGE AND CUSTOM?**

*(see 117-122)*

Those involved in the arrangements for multi-faith worship must remember that if the occasion is genuinely to be multi-faith it is likely to be somewhat strange to everybody. There are inevitable constraints which determine the character of the event.

### **Place**

If the event takes place in an Anglican church it has to comply with Canon Law. What this means is further explained in section six, but one consequence is that

no Anglican minister can simply hand over responsibility for what happens in the worship to someone else. This may mean that certain forms of worship are impossible in an Anglican church. For example the 'serial' form of multi-faith worship in which members of various traditions of faith conduct their own section of the total event would mean that the minister would have no control over that part of the service. (130).

Cathedrals are often the kind of place thought appropriate for such events, yet if a cathedral is used it must be remembered that it 'belongs' not only to Anglicans. Christians of all kinds have an emotional investment in the great national cathedrals, and see them as a focus for their own sense of identity as Christians. What happens in them is particularly significant for people in many churches and is likely to cause resentment if it is felt in any way to compromise the Christian faith. Similar things apply to some city centre churches. (119)

For these reasons a neutral venue may be best (122), or in some places it is possible to have a kind of pilgrimage, processing from one place of worship to another, with worship led in each place by the people of that tradition. (131).

### **Language**

It needs to be remembered that not only will the occasion be unusual for everyone, but the language used creates additional problems. Those of other faiths will not necessarily be at home in English, and in any case may well be accustomed to worship in a 'sacred language' which is neither English nor their mother tongue, but classical Arabic, sixteenth-century Punjabi or ancient Sanskrit. It is uncommon to see books in the hands of worshippers in the temple or the mosque, and they may not need to be literate to take part in their traditional worship, yet specially arranged services invariably proceed from specially devised and printed orders of service. (52-55,87)

### **Custom**

Further issues arise when we consider the styles of worship to which people are accustomed. There are no chairs in Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim or Sikh places of worship, where all worshippers remove their shoes and stand or sit on the floor. Images are familiar to Hindus but offensive to many others, and Jews and Muslims in particular would find it difficult to join in any worship which employed material images. (58)

Sharing food together is an integral part of the Sikh temple worship, but needs to be given considerable thought in a multi-faith context, where any use of animal food or fats may cause needless offence. (87)

Also 43, 46, 52-55, 58, 87, 119, 122, 128, 130, 131

## **3. WHAT ARE THE APPROPRIATE THEMES FOR SUCH WORSHIP?**

*(see 90-97, 152-161)*

It is clear that multi-faith worship cannot be the normal diet of Christians, nor should the sacraments of the Gospel be blurred with the introduction of elements of other faiths. (43) This would be syncretism, or the thoughtless confusion of faiths. (46)

If the service concerned is a Christian service to which people of other faiths have been specially invited, then it may be appropriate to use readings from

other faith sources, provided they are not contrary to Christian faith. (97) But the point will be lost if it is not a thoroughly *Christian* service. (93)

If it is a service with an agreed common order, it will be entirely appropriate for the Christian contribution to be Christocentric, and it is certainly unnecessary and offensive to alter hymns simply to remove references to Christ, against the original intention of the authors. If, however, all those present are expected to join in a hymn a more theocentric emphasis would be appropriate.

(148,156,154)

Often the most valuable and effective part of such services is a time of shared silence, or listening to music. (159)

Symbolic actions like the Peace may also be effective, if carefully thought out and discussed with other faith participants beforehand. It is particularly important that people know what they are expected to do, and why it is hoped that they will do it. (161)

No-one should feel pressurised to do anything which they cannot do with integrity. (144)

Written translations should be provided wherever possible for any part of the service which is not in English, and it may be necessary to translate the English parts if there are a substantial number of non-English speakers present. (145)

Also 46, esp 93, 97

#### 4. WHAT IS THE RÔLE OF THE CHRISTIAN LEADER IN THE EVENT?

(see 78-82)

If a Christian leader is invited to visit a place of worship or take part in an act of multi-faith worship, his or her response, whether positive or negative, will be making a statement of how other faith communities are perceived by the Church. (81)

The leader's task is to demonstrate genuine Christian care and acknowledgement of that community's existence and membership of the wider civic and national community, without identifying the Church with the beliefs of another faith. (82)

Minority religious communities in Britain consist of people who are often harassed and marginalised, and they cherish the kind of recognition that the majority community of faith can bring them. (80)

An address will almost certainly be expected, and this is an opportunity both to express friendship and a certain religious fellow-feeling, and also to give a sensitive but distinctive Christian witness.

Leaders need to discover what will be expected of them during the visit, and to investigate where questions of conscience are likely to arise. (See Section One, *Visiting Other Places of Worship*, above)

Also 85-87

#### 5. WHAT WILL BE THE PASTORAL AND SPIRITUAL IMPACT OF THE EVENT?

(see 141-151)

This is clearly a difficult judgement to make, but certain principles must be borne in mind in addition to those already stated:

We must remain loyal to Jesus Christ, and not compromise our loyalty to him. (33)

In making our decisions we have to remember that we do not function alone and must consider the communities, both Christian and secular, of which we are part, and how our decisions will be received by, and affect them. (40)

The event will have more chance of success if the worshippers are already a community who know each other. (103)

It is unwise to mix the multi-faith issue with another controversial issue, eg. a political cause. (112)

The purpose of the event should be made clear, and ambiguity as far as possible eliminated. (141, 143)

Translations of non-English material are needed. (145)

It is important to remember that mere presence at an event should not be understood to imply total assent to all that is said or done. (142)

Avoid **needless** offence. (149)

Also 33, 40, 103, 112, 119, 138

## 6. **WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY?**

*(see 162-170)*

It is important to recognise that we are in a new situation which was not envisaged by those who framed our Canon Law. Nevertheless the principle stands that nothing should happen in an Anglican building which is contrary to the Christian faith. (164) There should be no attempt to evade the force of this by describing an event as 'a Celebration', or 'an Observance.' In cases of doubt the bishop should be consulted. Canon B5 says that forms of service authorised by the bishop must be

*reverent and seemly and... neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter.*

This clearly gives room for a good deal of honest disagreement in interpretation, as does Canon C26 (167) which says that

*a minister shall not give himself to such occupations... as... tend to be a just cause of offence to others*

Perhaps the test is that the minister should not be seen as associating himself with or assenting to doctrines inconsistent with the Christian faith. This will involve questions about the venue of the event, and its form, the words used, what response is expected of those Christians present, and whether the Anglican minister robes or not. (168)

Also 130 esp 168, 169

## A QUESTION OF JUDGMENT

*(see 6-59)*

In the end this will be a matter of judgement, or more precisely, a question of discerning the ways of the Spirit. We must be open to the Spirit who often works in surprising ways. (36) This does not mean that anything is possible. Christians will never want to engage in idolatry, or deny Christ. Nevertheless it has to be admitted that the same act — for example, accepting *prasad* offered in a Hindu temple — is capable of being understood in profoundly different ways. (75)

The theological principle must be 'an open-hearted loyalty to Jesus Christ which honours both his uniqueness and his universality'. (33)

Practical wisdom suggests that the use of non-religious buildings avoids many of the difficulties which the use of churches may pose. (122)

Also 40, 75, 98, 99

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