

# **Guidelines for Designing a Multifaith Prayer Service**

By Paul McKenna

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## **1) 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 multicultural and multifaith, 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 (or the anniversaries of such tragedies).
- 4) Prayer services at interfaith conferences, meetings and gatherings.
- 5) Prayer services in hospitals and in care & correctional institutions.
- 6) Prayer services at civic occasions, gatherings or conferences

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. In the words of Jim Wallis, an American writer and Christian social justice activist: “more and more people find themselves drinking at the wells of each other’s spiritual traditions, and engaging in a deep and common quest.”

## **2) 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 and a safe environment 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.
- Inspires common action in the realms of charity, healing, community service, social justice, scholarship, global issues and spiritual & religious care.
- Provides an occasion to practice interreligious 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.

## **3) A Note on the Term “Multifaith Prayer Service”**

Whenever one is dealing with multifaith and interfaith matters, 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, a relationship that is engaged in by way of petition, praise or thanksgiving. For faith groups who do not subscribe to a belief in a deity, “prayer” can refer to a practice which leads to interior spiritual growth, inner transformation and transformation of consciousness, a practice that involves a process of ego-transcendence or self-transcendence. These are only two of many ways in which “prayer” can be understood and practiced.

The author has chosen to use the word “prayer” in this document because of his conviction 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," "worship service," "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.

#### **4) Guidelines for Multifaith Prayer**

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

Multifaith prayer is a gift. But the creation and implementation of a multifaith service is no easy task. Multifaith prayer can be 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 organizing multifaith prayer. Quite a number of guidelines are outlined below; it is not the suggestion of this author that all of these guidelines 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, symbolic gestures or the use of prayer refrains/responses.

##### **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 also apply to the content of all hymns, songs, prayers and refrains that are sung or recited by the entire congregation.

The planning group may want to consider setting a time limit for the duration of each of the prayers, chants, readings or rituals shared by the various faith representatives.

In terms of the selection of faith group representatives who will share their prayer, chants, readings or rituals in the service, it is important to strive for a gender balance and to include lay people as well as clerics, youth as well as adults.

### **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
- the 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.

These suggestions in terms of prayer forms need to be balanced with a cardinal rule of multifaith prayer: **faith groups are encouraged to pray in their own way.**

### **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 outline of the 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.

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

### Symbolic Actions and Gestures of Peace and Greeting

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.

In terms of greetings, it is important to be aware that in this context certain gestures such as a handshake or an embrace are deemed inappropriate by 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 of the head 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 congregation should be carefully chosen by the planning group. Music without words can also be a valuable aid in meditation. The planning group should be aware that some members of the multifaith congregation may choose to not participate in the congregational singing.

## **Dance**

Dance is sometimes performed in multifaith prayer gatherings and can be an experience that is aesthetic, symbolic and powerful. 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.

The planning group may want to provide childcare during the service. Another option is to organize a children's multifaith program that takes place during the service but in a separate location in the building.

## **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 or in concentric circles.

## **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. In some services, everyone lights a candle; here safety precautions should be taken and dripping wax avoided.

## **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, all members of the congregation may be invited to repeat a refrain, response or affirmation 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, Alberta, 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 related to 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 faiths 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 i.e. terms such as Allah, Krishna, God, Ahura Mazda, the Great Spirit, Jesus. In fact, one of the cardinal principles of multifaith prayer is that faith groups are encouraged to pray in their own way, using their own language for Ultimate Reality.

But each faith group representative should be aware that some terms used to describe Ultimate Reality in his/her tradition may not necessarily be universal and all-inclusive in meaning for other faiths which are present at the service."

## **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, kippot 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 most multifaith services, the faith group representatives are invited to read or chant their prayers, readings, sacred texts or mantras in the local or vernacular language. In some cases, the

representatives are given the option to read or chant these prayers or readings in the traditional scriptural or oral language of their faith group (e.g. Hebrew, Arabic, Sanskrit, Lakota).

A further option is to invite those faith group representatives who choose to pray, read or chant in their traditional language, to also share a translation of their prayers or readings. If the representatives are given the option to do their prayers or readings in two languages, the planning group should be aware that this will extend the length of the service.

### **Venue**

There are essentially three types of venues for a multifaith prayer service:

- 1) an outdoor environment;
- 2) a “neutral” environment such as a community center, rented hall or multipurpose room;
- 3) a house of worship/meditation center of a given faith tradition (e.g. mosque, synagogue, mandir, meditation center, church, temple, gurdwara). Within the house of worship/meditation center, there are two potential locales for the service: 1) a meeting/community room; and 2) the area of the facility in which prayer/meditation services are regularly conducted. If the multifaith prayer service is conducted in the prayer/meditation section of the house of worship, the planning group should be aware that the symbols and ambience of that environment may color the multifaith service. This does not have to be a problem, but planners should be aware of this element.

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 American smudge (purification ritual) using tobacco because tobacco use is prohibited in the Sikh faith; if the locale is a Hindu temple in which the service will be 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 multifaith 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.

### **Evaluation**

In the weeks following the service, it is helpful to convene a meeting of the planning group to evaluate the service. Such a meeting has the capacity to produce a number of benefits and to contribute to the ongoing and vital goal of building and nourishing interreligious relationships.

### **A Final Guideline – Spontaneity & Flexibility**

In composing these guidelines, the author was concerned that some readers may feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of guidelines and detail. Many of these suggested guidelines

deal with the important issues of sensitivity related to the various cultures and religions participating in the service. Add to this the vital issues of “respectful presence” and “inclusivity”.

But this author trusts the instincts of the multifaith planning group to balance these guidelines with a good measure of spontaneity and flexibility so that the faith groups can pray in their own way and creatively so.

## 5) A Sample Order of Service

The following outline is merely one example of an order of service for a multifaith gathering. This outline is not meant to be a template for multifaith prayer. Please note that this model is highly structured and ordered.

Just as prayer can be done in a number of ways, so multifaith prayer can be conducted in a myriad of forms and directions. And this includes models that are very spontaneous and flexible with much less structure and order than the one featured below.

The outline below contains quite a number of component sections. It is not suggested here that a given service should contain all of these component sections. In fact, a simple, short, uncomplicated order of service can be very effective. Numerous sections are included in this sample order of service in order to give organizers an abundance of ideas and choices:

- 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

## 6) Helpful Resources for Multifaith Prayer

### 1) How to Be a Perfect Stranger: A Guide to Etiquette in Other People's Religious Ceremonies

By Stuart Matlins, J. Magida, Arthur J. Magida  
426 pages

In societies characterized by diversity, it is increasingly common to be invited to the wedding, funeral or other religious service of a friend, relative or co-worker whose faith is different from one's own. This easy-to-use guidebook helps the well-meaning guest to feel comfortable, to participate to the fullest extent possible, and to avoid violating anyone's religious principles. It contains information about numerous religious traditions.

**Available from Amazon.com**

## **2) Religious Etiquette Guides**

The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding in New York City (USA) is a secular, non-sectarian organization which promotes understanding among religions. The Center supports religious peacemakers through education, inclusive workplace policies and practices, conflict resolution, and special programs. The Center offers several guides to religious etiquette, including guidelines on how to address religious leaders, enter sacred spaces, visit houses of worship and visit religious homes. These can be viewed and downloaded at [www.tanenbaum.org/etiquette\\_guides.html](http://www.tanenbaum.org/etiquette_guides.html)

## **3) One World, Many Voices - An Interfaith Songbook**

Published in 2002 by the Interfaith Center at the Presidio in San Francisco, California, (USA), this useful document contains the words and music of fifty-seven songs 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, see: [www.interfaith-presidio.org](http://www.interfaith-presidio.org)

## **4) Litany of Thanksgiving for the Religions of the World**

This litany of thanksgiving is an ideal resource for multifaith prayer. The litany affirms the gifts and strengths of numerous religious traditions and provides for congregational participation. To view or download, see:

[http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Interfaith\\_dialogue/litany\\_religions.php](http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Interfaith_dialogue/litany_religions.php)

## **5) Guidelines for organizing group visits to houses of worship**

Visiting houses of worship of other faith traditions is one of the most effective ways to learn about other religions. This set of comprehensive guidelines provides all the necessary information for making such a visit a wonderful cultural, religious and educational experience. The guidelines were written by JW Windland, a highly respected multifaith educator with forty years of experience in visiting houses of worship. To view or download, see:

[http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Interfaith\\_dialogue/group\\_visit\\_guidelines.php](http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Interfaith_dialogue/group_visit_guidelines.php)

## **6) Dances of Universal Peace**

The Dances of Universal Peace are simple, meditative, joyous, multi-cultural circle dances that use sacred phrases, chants, music and movements from the many spiritual traditions of the earth. The Dances touch the spiritual essence in each person and enable each person to recognize this essence in others. Building on the work begun in the 1960s by Samuel L. Lewis, a Sufi and Zen teacher, the Dances promote peace and integration within individuals and promote understanding and connection within groups worldwide. There are no performers and no audience; everyone participates by forming the circle and singing and dancing together. To find local dance circles, see:

[www.dancesofuniversalpeace.org](http://www.dancesofuniversalpeace.org)

## **7) World Scripture, A Comparative Anthology Of Sacred Texts**

One of the best online sources for short quotations from the scriptures of numerous religions; this anthology features a detailed index. See:

<http://www.tparents.org/Library/Unification/Books/World-S/0-Toc.htm>

## **8) An Internet Sacred Texts Archive**

This is the largest freely available archive of online books about religion, mythology, and folklore on the Internet. The site is dedicated to religious tolerance and scholarship, and has the largest readership of any similar site on the web. See:

[www.sacred-texts.com/world.htm](http://www.sacred-texts.com/world.htm)

## 7) About the author and editors

### The Author

**Paul McKenna**, MA, teaches, writes and consults in the fields of world religions and interfaith dialogue. Throughout his 35-year career in this field, Paul has received a number of awards and honors for his interfaith efforts. Paul collaborated with a number of people in creating the Scarborough Missions Golden Rule Poster, featuring the Golden Rule – scripturally and symbolically – in 13 religions. Currently he functions as the Interfaith Coordinator for Scarborough Missions in Toronto, Canada.

### The Editors

**The quality of this document was profoundly improved through editorial consultation with the following four individuals:**

**Rev. Leslie Gabriel Mezei** of the Universal Worship is an interfaith minister and publisher of the Interfaith Unity newsletter and Resource Centre. A writer and speaker in the cause of unity and with special interest in the Golden Rule and interspirituality, Leslie has made a major contribution to interfaith networking in the Greater Toronto Area.

**Rev. David Warren SFM**, is a priest member of Scarborough Missions. David worked for a number of years in the Philippines. In recent years he has done academic studies in Islam, the Arabic language and inter-religious dialogue. He is committed to building bridges between Christians and Muslims.

**Rev. Terry Weller** is an interfaith minister and therapist. A Toronto writer, editor and educator, he also administrates and edits the Interfaith Unity website. See: [www.interfaithunity.ca](http://www.interfaithunity.ca)

**JW Windland** is a comparative mythologist and founder of the Encounter World Religions Centre in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. A gifted multifaith educator, JW has more than 40 years of experience in the study, teaching and first-hand experience of world religions.

JW regularly attends mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras, churches and temples as a testimony to his appreciation of world religions. He has genuine friendships with the practitioners of these traditions, joins in their rituals and has introduced thousands of people to the wisdom of diverse faith communities. Visit the Encounter World Religions Centre website at [encounter@worldreligions.ca](mailto:encounter@worldreligions.ca)

**Scarboro Missions is grateful for the skilful efforts of all the individuals involved in producing these guidelines.**

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