

Moral and Social Issues Council

Discussion paper: Multi-Faith Events

Approved: 19 March 2004



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Guidelines

- In recent years there have been increased requests made by civic leaders and organisations for Christian Churches to participate in multi-faith worship services. Often those making the request are unaware of the problems of belief involved and may have more of a concern about multicultural inclusiveness than about the religious aspect of the event. However, there may be occasions when some form of multi-faith event is appropriate and valuable.
- These guidelines are designed to offer those preparing for multi-faith events an outline of the issues involved and a framework in which to participate.
- The term “worship” can be problematic and The Salvation Army advises against the use of such terminology in favour of multi-faith gathering, event or celebration. Of concern are the dangers of syncretism (thoughtless confusion of different faith traditions), indifferentism (“we all believe in the one god after all”), idolatry (giving worship to that which is not God), and pluralism (giving equal status and relevance to all faith traditions).
- It is important that the reason for holding the event is clear. Care needs to be exercised with events built around a shared concern if the concern itself is controversial, party political, or in some way problematic. We should be sensitive to the international nature of The Salvation Army.
- These guidelines exclude any participation which compromises the distinctive belief of Christians (or others). For example Christians being asked not to pray in the name of Jesus.



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Why do people of different faiths gather?

Civic events

Civic leaders may want to organise an event to bring together all members of their community to reflect the multicultural nature of the community and to promote harmony and well-being. Such events help people to recognise each other's gifts and values.

Adding a religious dimension to such multicultural events needs careful consideration and clear communication.

Memorial or commemorative services

Sometimes the desire to gather together comes from a very significant community experience that needs to be shared and given meaning by people of faith, for example, bushfires, earthquake, multiple shootings, the breaking of a drought, the survival (or loss) of a fishing fleet caught in a storm.

It could also be a gathering to mark a national or international event.



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What form should the event take?

If The Salvation Army, along with other local churches, decides to be involved in a multi-faith event, each faith should be invited to play its part separately, in a segment of the whole event.

An event which blends items from a variety of Christian and non-Christian sources is not recommended. With this kind of event the problems of syncretism, indifferentism, idolatry and pluralism are particularly hard to avoid.

For this reason the term multi-faith is used as it better describes an event for different faith groups, sharing separately, something of their faith experience. On the other hand, the term interfaith suggests a 'blended' event with the attendant problems described above.

In a segmented multi-faith event, each faith tradition, clearly identified, is allocated a segment of the program in which to offer worship. Each brief act of celebration is separate and complete in itself and involves what is characteristic of the faith concerned. Each faith community selects and presents its own material. (For Christians this may include readings from Scripture, trinitarian prayer, a creed of the church and hymns.)

Early in the proceedings it should be stated explicitly that statements of faith made represent the convictions of particular groups of people; they are not presented as statements having the assent of all participants.

The SHARED nature of these gatherings is the coming together, and the strongest shared components may well be:

- In the silences that could be incorporated after each faith-sharing or story-telling by the different faith traditions,
- When the individuals of the gathering are sent out to live and work together in community.

Salvationists should share in the other faith segments only to the extent they feel able, for example, praying in one another's presence but not necessarily praying together.



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How should these events be organised?

Responsibility

Responsibility for organising a multi-faith event should lie directly with the leaders of the various faith communities or their nominated representatives.

They should ensure that the occasion focuses on the reasons for the event, the aspect of the experience which needs to be addressed, and the process by which people of various faith communities deal with such an event.

Limits

There are limits to what can be included in a multi-faith event. What might properly be included needs to be explored by those involved in the planning.

It is not appropriate for leaders of secular organisations to call different faith groups together for worship. Where this does occur it is hoped that heads of local faith communities would be approached by leaders of the secular organisations from the outset, so that they can be involved in planning the occasion. Where this does not happen Salvationists are better advised not to participate.



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Who participates?

It is desirable that a community figure be overall presider of the event, with the separate segments of the event led by leaders or representatives of religious communities appointed by the faith groups involved. Salvationists would wish to be represented by a member of a mainstream Christian denomination.

Participants should be well advised beforehand of what will be required of them at the event.

Salvationists should consider what statement is being made by their presence at, or refusal to attend a multi-faith event.



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Where should the event be held?

Neutral territory

Multi-faith events are best held on neutral territory such as a public hall, local park or town centre.

If the event being commemorated was local, the best location for this commemoration would be as close as possible to the site of the event. If the event was national or international neutral territory should be sought.

Event checklist

- Why are we organising this event? Is gathering together the best response to our felt need at this time?
- How do we deal with those of our church family who come from other cultures and have to overcome memories of past experiences in order to relate with people of other faiths?
- Are the representatives the delegated leaders from each faith community?
- Is the event being structured in segments?
- Where is the event to be held? Why?



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