

# Organising Interfaith Celebrations



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Interfaith celebrations are an important, but difficult, part of the Scout Programme. They include events such as St. George's Day celebrations and Scouts' Owns.

Interfaith events allow participants to share experiences and to explore the meaning of their own lives. When they are well planned and run they demonstrate the unity of everyone present and the rich diversity of the worldwide Scout Movement. A well-produced interfaith event will also demonstrate a way of living and celebrating religious traditions that in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

However, there are concerns about respecting the religious freedom of participants in interfaith ceremonies, and the possibility of different religions praying together. This factsheet will give you some ideas to ensure that your interfaith celebration will contribute to the spiritual development of the participants without compromising their religious beliefs.

## Before you start...

These opening comments are not meant to be negative, and they should not stop you from organising an interfaith celebration. However, there are some things that you should think about before you begin to plan an interfaith event, particularly if you are planning to include acts of worship or devotion.

Many people involved in interfaith work recommend that you don't hold any interfaith or multifaith acts of worship. Why? If prayer and worship are not handled carefully, people may find themselves taking part in worship that does not correspond with what they consider to be divine. Equally, some people may find that the event makes assumptions and does not appreciate the differences in understanding and terminology that exist between religions. Not everyone wants to pray with people of other faiths and to be told to do so can be threatening, even if no threat or insult is intended. As well as individuals' preferences, different religions take different approaches to praying with people of other religions.

Many interfaith organisations recommend that time and space should be created for different faith groups to worship in their own way. This is supported by The Scout Association's Religious Policy, which says that Members should be encouraged to attend services of their own form of religion.

## Interfaith events in Scouting

Scouting has always had Members of many faiths, and has always encouraged its Members to learn about other faiths, as well as to explore their own beliefs. It is important to remember that most Scouting events in the UK will be attended by people of different faiths and religious traditions, even if the majority of the participants come from a single religious group.

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Interfaith celebrations in Scouting can take many forms:

- 1 People from one faith invite guests from one or more other faiths to attend their usual act of worship. For instance, when local faith leaders are invited to a carol service.
- 2 People from several faiths in turn offer prayers, readings and songs from their tradition. Prayers are not said together, so those present are observers of other faiths rather than participants. This might happen as part of a linking project between two Scout Groups of different faiths.
- 3 Various prayers, readings and songs from a variety of faiths are incorporated into one event, often linked around a central theme, such as peace. Many Scouts' Owns follow this format.

Some events will include aspects of more than one of these different forms.

There are two principle activities that in Scouting often take the form of an interfaith celebration: Scouts' Owns and St. George's Day Celebrations.

- A Scouts' Own service is traditionally an informal act of worship, often on camp. It is not a substitute for an individual's own worship according to their faith, but in addition to it.
- St. George's Day Celebrations are held to commemorate St. George as the patron Saint of Scouting, as well as a chance for all Members to renew their Promise.

It is encouraged that both these celebrations are planned to reflect the many different faiths in Scouting. This factsheet will be useful if you are organising a Scouts' Own or a St. George's Day event. The Resources and Further Information sections provide links to other resources that you will also find useful.

Although interfaith events are common in Scouting, it is always good policy to also provide time and space for people to worship in their own way – not just an afterthought slotted into the programme as Scouts' 'free time'. If we believe that worship and prayer are important parts of a Scout's spiritual development, then we should reflect that in our programmes and in the events we put on for our young people and adults.

### **Planning Interfaith Celebrations**

The first thing to consider when planning an interfaith celebration is that it should be acceptable and appropriate for all the participants. The best way to achieve this is to ensure that the planning team includes members of the different faiths that will be attending, or that people from various faiths are consulted as part of the planning process.

Many interfaith celebrations are planned around a theme. Having a theme makes it easier to find suitable prayers, readings, songs and other resources to include in the event. There are many sources for themes, and the Faiths and Beliefs pages of ScoutBase have some suggested themes based on the Scout Promise and Law, the Centenary of Scouting, and general themes from different faiths. You can use one of these themes for your event, or use the lists as inspiration to develop your own theme.

The programme can be varied - think beyond just the use of prayers, readings and songs. Make use of all the five senses through the use of symbols (like fire, light and water), actions and gestures, incense, flowers, things to touch, mime, sketches, drama, dance and art.

The programme elements don't all have to be connected to a particular faith - there are many non-religious songs and readings that will be appropriate, and may have the advantage that they are familiar to the participants.

## Some Guidelines

These guidelines will help you organise an interfaith celebration that recognises the diversity of tradition but also allows individuals to reflect on their own personal experiences.

- Significance comes from how something is done as much as from what is done.
- Participation should take place primarily as reflection on experience, assisted by what is presented during the event.
- When choosing content, ask, "What is the message that this is trying to convey?"
- Extreme care should be exercised in asking participants to join in with prayers or actions. This should *only* be done when the text and meaning is acceptable to all. However remember that *all* texts reflect a particular point of view and care should be taken not to presume that the way it is expressed is acceptable to everyone present.
- It is not necessary to forbid participants from joining in, but it may be worth inviting them only to join in as they feel comfortable.
- Content can contain religious elements and be specific to identifiable traditions. The aim of a truly interfaith celebration is to recognise diversity rather than create a common form (which has all the difficulties outlined earlier in this factsheet). If people are invited to join in as they feel comfortable, adjustments don't have to be made to adjust the message so that it applies to all traditions. Terms such as Allah and Jesus can be used.
- Be careful that your content doesn't draw too much from a single religious tradition so that people from other faiths are unable to relate to the event.
- Items don't need to be accompanied by explanations: in the same way as a joke is not funny if it has to be explained, so a symbol is stripped of its power if it needs explanation. Words and actions together should normally suffice.

## Resources

These resources are suggestions for sources of readings, prayers and songs that may be suitable for you to use to at an interfaith event. They are starting points only; there are many more resources available in print and on the internet that you can use. With any resource, there may be particular occasions or items where further discretion might be required.

### • ScoutBase

The ScoutBase web site has a range of prayers, readings and songs that you can use, as well as more information about organising Scouts' Owns, St. George's Day celebrations and other interfaith events. There are also downloadable copies of resources used by recent Moot and Jamboree contingents.

<http://www.scoutbase.org.uk/ps/fab/>

### • Books

There are many, many books that contain collections of prayers, readings and stories that will be suitable for interfaith celebrations. Here are a few suggestions, but you may find others not listed here that will be equally as useful...

*Sharing*, published by Girlguiding UK, is a collection of thought provoking readings and prayers.

*Pause for Thought* and *More Pause for Thought*, published by Hodder and Stoughton, are readings from the Pause for Thought slot on Terry Wogan's Radio 2 programme.

*The Oneworld Book of Prayer*, published by Oneworld Publications, is a compilation of prayers from around the world, drawn from the many different religious traditions.

- **Internet**

There are many useful resources available online, including collections of prayers, readings, and poems. Here are a few useful web pages:

**Biographies**

<http://www.biography.com/>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Biography>

**Poems**

<http://www.theotherpages.org/poems/>

<http://www.poemhunter.com/>

**Prayers**

<http://www.worldprayers.org/>

**Proverbs**

<http://creativeproverbs.com/>

**Readings**

<http://www.inspirationalstories.com/>

**Resources for schools**

<http://www.assemblies.org.uk/>

Resources for school assemblies, but the ideas can also be used for other occasions.

<http://cowo.culham.ac.uk/>

Collective worship resources for use in schools.

<http://www.hibbert-assembly.org.uk/>

Material provided by the Hibbert Trust on topics for school assemblies

<http://www.reep.org/>

Resources promoting the link between religions and the environment.

**Further Information**

- **Interfaith Network**

The Inter Faith Network for the UK was founded to promote good relations between people of different faiths in this country. They provide support and information about interfaith relations, including organising interfaith activities.

<http://www.interfaith.org.uk/>