

Culture and Religion

Information Sheet



Christianity

October 2009



Christianity

Introduction

Western Australia is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural society. Religious freedom and mutual respect for different religions is an important underlying principle of multiculturalism and democracy.

Service providers who recognise, value and promote cultural and religious diversity can address more fully the needs of their clients. Respecting the roles of religion in various cultures is part of courteous, ethical and professional behaviour, which promotes a just and equitable society.

This Information Sheet aims to raise awareness and understanding of Christian religious and cultural practices to assist service providers in the government and non-profit community sectors in improving service delivery.

Christians have been in Western Australia since 1827. There are more than one thousand Christian churches or other worship centres in Western Australia. Christian churches are divided into a variety of denominations, each with their own specific ways of worshipping and teachings. However, all are united in the acknowledgement of the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour as witnessed to by the scriptures and in the life of the Church. Christians believe in the Trinity: one God in three persons, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Christians in Western Australia worship in over 40 languages. They come from many different countries, and this means that they can also share the culture of their homeland as well as being part of the worldwide Christian church. West Australian Christians may be:

- From a variety of European countries such as the United Kingdom, Italy, Greece, Spain, Holland, Germany, etc.
- From Asian countries including the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Korea and China.
- From Pacific Island countries including Tonga and Samoa.
- From African countries including Egypt, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and South Africa
- From Latin American countries including Chile and Peru.

Some of these cultural Christian communities arrived in Australia as refugees.

Christians belong to a variety of different Churches. These may include:

The Anglican Church
 The Armenian Apostolic Church
 The Assemblies of God
 The Baptist Churches
 The Catholic Church (Latin and other rites such as Ukranian, Melkite and Maronite)
 The Churches of Christ
 The Coptic Orthodox Church
 The Greek Orthodox Church
 The Lutheran Church

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The Religious Society of Friends (The Society of Friends is a non-credal Church. This means that, unlike some other Churches, there is no official statement of beliefs to which members adhere).

The Reformed Churches

The Salvation Army

The Syrian Orthodox Church

The Uniting Church

Demographics

Between the 2001 and 2006 Census, the number of people in Australia who identified themselves as Christian had decreased to 12,685,861, a decrease of 78,480 or 0.6 per cent. According to the 2006 Census, there were 1,162,507 people affiliated with Christianity in Western Australia, an increase of 5390 persons or 0.5 per cent compared to the previous census.

Background and Origins

Christianity commenced over 2000 years ago, in Israel. Christianity began with Jesus, a Jewish man who taught a group of disciples about a new concept of the Judaic religion. Jesus' teachings emphasised love of God and love for people. When Jesus was identified by religious and political authorities of the time as a threat, they arrested him on a trumped-up charge and executed him by hanging him on a cross. Three days later his disciples were surprised to discover an empty tomb where Jesus had been laid. Many resurrection appearances convinced the disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and that this was God's validation of all he had taught them.

Christianity spread around the world from these humble beginnings.

Major achievements of Christianity include:

- The beginnings of hospitals;
- The beginnings of schools, universities and general public education;
- Numerous charitable institutions in which the command of Jesus that his disciples should "love one another" were put into practical effect; and
- The inspiration for many world-famous art works, and musical compositions.

Key Beliefs

The Christian religion and way of life is enshrined in the Bible. The Bible is a book of writings which is considered to be sacred by many Christians, and which includes the Hebrew Scriptures and a collection of writings from the early Christian Church. The Christian writings include 'gospels', or stories of the good news of Jesus, and letters from the leaders of the churches.

The word Christian means disciple or student of Christ. The Christian way of life is based on:

- Belief in Jesus as the Son of God; who is part of a Trinitarian God- Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christians describe their faith in "One God, in three persons".
- Acceptance of Jesus' teachings;
- The significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus for the transformed life of the believer.

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- Prayer and worship; and
- Social justice and practical assistance to others in need.

Greeting

The following sensitivities need to be observed on greeting or introduction:

- Christians usually shake hands when greeting one another. Some Christians will embrace. The religious leaders of some churches are greeted in a special way by their adherents, who will kiss their rings or the crosses they carry. Non-adherents are not required to do this.

Names and Titles

- Many Christian leaders are given honorific titles. The most common is that instead of “Mr” or “Ms/Mrs/Miss” the word “Reverend” is used, such as “The Reverend Jones” or ‘The Reverend John Jones’. The “Reverend Jones” may also be referred to as “Father Jones” if he is male.
- Female Christian leaders are not usually called “Mother”, but “Reverend”. The title “Mother” usually refers to a Christian female leader of a group of religious women called nuns.
- There are other honorific titles for Christian leaders who are in higher leadership positions in the Church. These titles may include: Archbishop, Bishop, Archdeacon, Moderator, President, etc.
- Other Christian leaders may prefer the word “Pastor” instead of “Reverend”.
- Salvation Army officers are given names which are taken from the regular army, such as “Captain” or “Major”.
- The members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) do not use honorific titles at all with their names. Many will not use “Mr” or “Ms/Mrs/Miss”.

Seating

Many Christian communities would be happy for men and women to sit together in a public meeting, but it is wise for the organiser of a meeting to check this with the participants, as some Christians from different cultural groups may prefer men and women to sit separately.

Dress and Appearance

- Some Churches have distinctive dress to distinguish their leaders from others. Many churches use the ‘clergy collar’, a plain, often black, shirt with a white tab in the collar, as their distinctive dress. Others wear a cross or crucifix prominently, as a way of defining their role in the Church.
- Orthodox priests wear black tunics and distinctive headdresses or hats.
- Salvation Army members, as well as officers, wear a uniform with distinctive badges.
- Many church leaders have specific garments for use when they lead worship. If a Christian worship service is being conducted, the leaders may require a room in which they can dress in their special liturgical garments prior to the service.

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Food, Drink and Fasting

- Many Christians have no particular cultural practices regarding food and drink.
- However some Christians do not drink alcohol. These include many members of the Salvation Army and other Protestant churches. It is wise to provide alternatives for these people.
- Many Christians fast during Lent, the six week period prior to Easter.
- Many Christians do not eat meat on Good Friday and Fridays of Lent.

Religious Festivals, Observances and Days of Significance

A Christian can worship at any time of the day or night but the expected worship time is Sunday mornings.

There are numerous Christian festivals:

Christmas: the 25th of December each year, celebrates the birth of Christ. The Eastern celebration is on 6th January. Christian celebration of Christmas should not be confused with the secular holiday of Christmas. Christians celebrate with carols which talk of the incarnation of Jesus. Whilst the giving of gifts is part of the Christian celebration, it is not the main focus of the celebrations. Many churches emphasise the need to give to the needy through charities at Christmas.

Easter: a celebration which begins on Maundy Thursday (the night before Jesus died), then is celebrated solemnly on Good Friday (the day Jesus died) and through Easter Saturday (a time for special prayers and meditations) to Easter Day (a joyful celebration of the resurrection of Jesus). Easter falls at different dates each year, during March and April the Western World uses the Gregorian calendar to calculate the date of Easter, the Easter (Orthodox) Churches use the Julian calendar so there may be differences in these dates. Easter eggs are symbols of resurrection for many Christians. Many Christian communities will have special foods at Easter.

Pentecost: the joyful celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit to all believers. Always celebrated 50 days after Easter.

Saint days: some Churches celebrate saint's days.

The following religious practices are also important to Christians:

- The Eucharist, Communion, Lord's Supper or Mass: these are different words for the same ritual of commemoration of Jesus' last meal with his disciples
- Baptism or some other form of initiation
- Corporate worship
- Bible reading
- Prayer

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Language and Communication

- It is Western Australian Government policy to provide competent interpreting and translating services to clients who are unable to communicate effectively in spoken or written English.
- Government agency staff can contact the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on telephone 131450.

Family and Marriage

The varying family characteristics of religious groups should be appreciated. For Christians these include:

- Many Christian churches allow divorce, but some do not.
- The family is seen as the basic unit of society.
- Churches advise members not to engage in sexual relations outside of marriage.
- Many Christian churches do not accept the validity of homosexual relationships.
- Christian singles are free to choose their own marriage partners but many Churches encourage Christians to marry other Christians.

Medical Ethics

Many Christians have very strong views surrounding issues such as abortions, euthanasia and in-vitro fertilisation procedures.

Death and Related Issues

Death and the grieving process are particularly significant for all religious communities. For some Christians the following sensitivities are to be respected:

- The Last Rites for Catholics
- Baptism for dying infants
- Respect for the body

Funerals may include either burials or cremations. Some Christians have strong preferences for burials, and some Christians prefer crypts rather than graves. Funerals are always a Christian worship event, usually led by a Minister. They may occur in a church or at the cemetery.

Counselling/Interviews

Christians wish to have a Christian counsellor for many issues. Many will ask their own religious leader to be called for them. Chaplains are provided in many institutions. These chaplains may work ecumenically, that is, they will be available to any Christian no matter what denomination they belong to, though they would respect the ritual or sacramental practices of the individual.

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Other Sensitivities

Other cultural and religious sensitivities that need to be acknowledged and respected include:

- Most Christians object to the use of the name of God or Jesus in a non-respectful way. This is called “blasphemy”.
- Christians have great respect for the Bible and for their religious symbols, including the Cross. They would be distressed to see them mishandled.
- Churches are places in which it is usual to be reverent and to behave appropriately.
- Most Christians will not worship in places where the religious symbols of other religious groups are prominent.

Further Enquiries

This information sheet has been produced by the Council of Churches of Western Australia Inc with the support of the Office of Multicultural Interests. For further information please contact:

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