



Department of **Local Government,
Sport and Cultural Industries**
Office of **Multicultural Interests**

Culture and Religion Information Sheet

Christianity



Aim

This information sheet aims to raise awareness and understanding of Christian religious and cultural practices to assist service providers in the government and not-for-profit community sectors to improve service development and delivery.

Introduction

Western Australia is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural society. Religious freedom and mutual respect for all religions are integral parts of our shared culture and are important underlying principles of multiculturalism and democracy.

There are a number of international treaties and national laws that recognise freedom of religion and belief as fundamental human rights, such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948*, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966* and the *Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986*.

In Western Australia it is unlawful under the *Equal Opportunity Act 1984* to discriminate against a person because of their religious conviction in certain areas of public life including employment, education, the provision of goods, services and facilities, in accommodation, clubs and in application forms (see the Equal Opportunity Commission website <http://www.eoc.wa.gov.au/Index.aspx>).

Service providers and employers who recognise, value and promote cultural and religious diversity can address more fully the needs of their clients and

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staff, thus providing services based on good practice. Respecting the roles of religion in various cultures is part of courteous, ethical and professional behaviour, which promotes a just and equitable society.

History of Christianity in Western Australia

Christians have been in Western Australia since the establishment of the Swan River Colony in 1829. The first church service to be held in a church took place in January 1841 at the All Saints Church in the Swan Valley.

There are now more than one thousand Christian churches or other worship centres in WA. Christian churches are divided into a variety of denominations, each with their own teachings and specific ways of worshipping. However, all share a common belief 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 Holy Trinity: one God in three persons, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Christians in WA are very diverse and worship in more than 40 languages. Western Australian Christians may be:

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

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

- Anglican Church
- Armenian Apostolic Church
- Assemblies of God
- Baptist Churches



- Catholic Church (Latin and other rites such as Ukrainian, Melkite and Maronite)
- Churches of Christ
- Coptic Orthodox Church
- Greek Orthodox Church
- Lutheran Church
- Seventh Day Adventist Church
- The Religious Society of Friends (the Society of Friends is a non-creedal church. This means that, unlike in some other churches, there is no official statement of beliefs to which members adhere)
- Reformed Churches
- Salvation Army
- Syrian Orthodox Church
- Uniting Church.

Demographics

According to the 2011 Census, there were 1,308,548 people affiliated with Christianity in Western Australia, an increase of 141,812, or 10.8 per cent, compared with the 2006 Census.

Between the 2006 and 2011 Censuses, the number of people in Australia who identified themselves as Christians decreased by 464,843, or 3.7 per cent.

Christianity: background and origins

Christianity originated more than 2000 years ago, in Israel. Jesus, a Jewish man, taught a group of disciples about a new concept of the Judaic religion—his teachings emphasised love of God and love for people.

Jesus was identified by the religious and political authorities of the time as a threat, and was arrested and executed by hanging on a cross, a common form of punishment by the Romans at that time. The cross has become a key element of Christian symbolism.

Three days after the execution his disciples discovered that Jesus' tomb was empty. Many resurrection appearances convinced the disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and that this was God's validation of all that Jesus had taught them.

Key beliefs

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
- prayer and worship
- social justice and practical assistance to others in need.

The Christian religion and way of life is enshrined in the Bible. The Bible is a book of writings that is considered to be sacred by many Christians, and that 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.

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 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 and President, among others.

Other Christian leaders may prefer the word 'Pastor' instead of 'Reverend'.

Salvation Army officers are given names that 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'.

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.

Food, drink and fasting

Many Christians have no particular cultural practices regarding food and drink.

However, some Christians, including many members of the Salvation Army and other Protestant churches, do not drink alcohol. It is wise to always provide alternative drinks at meals and gatherings.

Many Christians fast during Lent, the six-week period prior to Easter.

Many Christians do not eat meat on Good Friday and the Fridays of Lent.

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.¹

Government agency staff can contact the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on telephone 131 450.

1. The Western Australian Language Services Policy, 2008, Office of Multicultural Interests, Western Australian Government.

Seating

Many Christian communities do not segregate men and women at public meetings but it is wise for the organiser of a meeting to check with the participants; some Christians from different cultural groups may prefer men and women to sit separately.

Family and marriage

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

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

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.

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.



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 birth of Christ is celebrated on 25 December each year. The Eastern Orthodox celebration is on 6 January. The Christian celebration of Christmas should not be confused with the secular holiday of Christmas. Christians celebrate with carols about the birth of Jesus. While 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 that 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 on different dates each year, during March and April. The Western world uses the Gregorian calendar to calculate the date of Easter, whereas the Eastern

(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 have special foods at Easter.

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

Saint days: some churches celebrate saint days (specially designated feast or holy days for particular saints).

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
- communal worship
- Bible reading
- prayer.

Other sensitivities

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

- 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 may be distressed to see them mishandled.
- Churches are places in which it is usual to be reverent, to dress modestly 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 Office of Multicultural Interests with the support of the Council of Churches of Western Australia Inc.

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