

In Jesus' name? Interfaith worship: Interfaith worship

From the Editors in the [September 25, 2002](#) issue

Public prayer with non-Christians is risky business, at least if you're a Missouri Synod Lutheran. Pastor David Benke of the LCMS is going through a disciplinary process for having prayed at the interfaith "Prayer for America" service held at Yankee Stadium in September 2001 following the terrorist attacks. That event included Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus. No matter that he prayed "in the name of Jesus" or that he twice sought and received permission to participate from the president of the synod. It doesn't seem to matter either that his denomination had just months before passed a resolution approving participation in civic ceremonies like inaugurations, graduations and "once-in-a-lifetime" celebrations. For his role in the interfaith event, Benke must fend off charges of encouraging syncretism.

The Missouri Synod leaders who want Benke's hide are right about one thing: interfaith gatherings present a case of cognitive (and spiritual) dissonance. People of different religions not only have different worship practices, they make different claims about the god they worship. As attempts at worship, then, interfaith events are often less than satisfactory, especially when they are stripped to the lowest common denominator in search of some ethereal religious universal. Wanting to cause no offense to anyone, such gatherings can seem like a multiethnic potluck dinner to which each group brings the dishes that are least offensive to uninitiated palettes and, to be on the safe side, goes easy on the seasoning.

Still, the "Prayer for America" event and other forms of interfaith worship can be an expression of human solidarity, a means of embracing the "other," of recognizing our common humanity while celebrating our differences. We are creatures of the same God, regardless of what we call God; we inhabit the same planet and we're joined together by reason of geographical proximity and national identity. Such gatherings send a signal to adherents of the separate religions that we need not be enemies. And though this fact is disconcerting to diehard patriots, these gatherings may reveal that faith traditions transcend national boundaries.

For Christians, interfaith worship can be an act of humility, suggesting that though we believe God has been revealed through and incarnated in Jesus, we who follow Jesus don't have a corner on the truth. At best we can witness to the truth as we know it and have experienced it. We're not the jury and the judge; we're simply witnesses. Besides, we might be surprised by the grace of having our spirits ministered to through a rabbi singing a prayer or an imam chanting from the Qur'an, even if we don't understand the words.