

Paying Attention to Cultural Difference

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Sally, a Euro-American, is pastor of a multicultural congregation. When the mother of a Vietnamese parishioner in her church died, she knew nothing about the evening service customarily held between the death of a Vietnamese person and the final funeral, nor was she aware of the need to allow time in the service for the distribution of the mourning bands.

Bob, a Euro-American pastor of a multicultural congregation was waiting at the church to lead a funeral for the father of an African-American member of the church. The family however, was waiting at their home for the pastor to arrive and pray with them before escorting them to the church for the funeral. Neither was aware of the expectations of the other.

Numerous Euro-Americans serve multicultural congregations, and many clergy of various ethnicities occupy cross-cultural pastoral positions. Issues such as those experienced by the clergy mentioned above often arise when the assumed worship practices of the pastor are those of a different cultural orientation than those of the congregations. In such situations, ministry is hindered.

Every cultural tradition gathers weekly for worship, and many gather two or three times each week to praise God in the bond of community. All churches, of whatever ethnicity, celebrate the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion and have rituals of passage for marriage and death.

It is not surprising that the funeral rites of various cultures are the most diverse of all the rituals of the church. The expectations people have at the time of death

emerge from the depths of their cultural heritage, from the traditions passed down from generation to generation throughout the many ages. In the Tongan-American culture, an all-night "Awakening" service precedes the burial, which takes place the morning after death. In the Ghanaian-American community however, a quick burial is seen as dishonoring the deceased. The body is held for a month before the burial takes place. Samoans have three funeral services: Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. Korean-Americans prefer to bury their dead on the third or fifth day after death since the number four is considered an unlucky number (similar to the number thirteen in Euro-American culture.) Among Christians hold three funeral services every day for six days with burial on the seventh day. Every culture honors their dead but the ritual practices vary.

Despite the difficulties and variables involved in identifying specific worship practices of a particular culture or multicultural context, much that is extremely valuable can be gained. Knowing even the generalities of the different worship practices is essential for clergy who increasingly are called to minister in a multicultural context. Appreciation for one another's worship practices deeply enhances our sense of the great diversity involved in the praise of God. □

This article is excerpted and adapted from *Worship Across Cultures* by Kathy Black (Abingdon Press) and is used with permission. Kathy Black is associate professor of homiletics and liturgics at Claremont School of Theology.

This article is excerpted with permission of the publisher from *Worship Across Cultures* by Kathy Black (Abingdon Press, 1998). The book includes separate chapters on the worship practices of 21 cultural traditions represented in Protestant congregations in the United States:

- AFRICAN AMERICAN
- CAMBODIAN AMERICAN
- CHINESE AMERICAN
- EURO-AMERICAN
- FIJIAN AMERICAN
- FILIPINO AMERICAN
- FORMOSAN AMERICAN
- GHANAIAN AMERICAN
- HAITIAN AMERICAN
- HISPANIC AMERICAN
- HMONG AMERICAN
- INDIAN AMERICAN
- JAPANESE AMERICAN
- KOREAN AMERICAN
- LAOTIAN AMERICAN
- LIBERIAN AMERICAN
- NATIVE AMERICAN
- PAKISTANI AMERICAN
- SAMOAN AMERICAN
- TONGAN AMERICAN
- VIETNAMESE AMERICAN

