



Is There Room At The Table?: Prayers at the Inclusive Table

A Prayer Service

The following prayer service is a model that has been written for this web site. It is an adaptation of a prayer service used by a Chicago high school student organization called COR (Catholic Schools Opposing Racism) some years ago. We suggest that you further adapt this prayer service and be creative, making your changes for your own needs, setting and worshiping group.

You might want to change further some of the wordings, symbols or ethnic groups mentioned in the prayer service to fit your students' ages and the racial makeup of your community. Choose symbols that have meaning and are understood by your praying participants. As you prepare your prayer service, please make sure that "the outsider" group is represented. Involvement in the planning and creation of your prayer service can be an engaging activity and project for some of your students/organizations. The following prayer service is meant as a model for you to use as is or to adapt.

The focal point in this prayer service is a simple, bare table at the center or front of the worship area. The table may be covered with a tablecloth, though you might want to consider using a tablecloth as one of the symbols that represents an ethnic group and is carried into the worship space by a participating student.

Song Leader rehearses the whole group through songs (suggested: "Go Make A Difference," by Steve Angrisano and Tom Tomaszek, published by Oregon Catholic Press and "All Are Welcome" by Marty Haugen, published by GIA Publications, Inc.) or songs/hymns of your choice.

A CALL TO PRAYER

Leader #1:

We come in prayer to give thanks and praise and to make a commitment to God and to each other that we will seek to move forward in the ministry and challenge of eradicating racism and creating a more inclusive school, church and world.

Leader #2:

Before us is set a table. It is a symbolic table of our lives together and the common work and ministry to which we are called. It is a reflection of our Eucharistic table, and it is a table where everyone is called to a place prepared for all. Let us seek in prayer the strength to make room for all God's children.

Leader #1:

Joining us today at our table will be (identify participants) who will bring to our table messages that show us there is room for all. We invite you to stand as we welcome them and sing together from your song sheet our song of hope for an inclusive world – "All Are Welcome."

The students enter singing the verses of "All Are Welcome." They form a circle around the congregation or they may form two clusters at the front on either side of the table. Those who will set the inclusive table are at the back if there is room for them to process, or they may position themselves near the microphones.

The singing ends.

Leader #2:

Let us Pray : Almighty, ever-loving God, your care extends beyond the boundaries of race and nation to the hearts of all who live. May the walls, which prejudice raises between us, crumble beneath the shadow of your outstretched arms. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen

Selected students are symbol-bearers. Pre-chosen, each pair has a statement/offering. Each pair represents an ethnic/racial group. They move forward reverently to the microphone. One makes the statement while the other elevates the symbol with silent dignity. Both bearers move slowly towards the table and place the symbol(s) on the table. They bow and move to form a semi-circle around the back of the table. Soft instrumental music under.

Leader #1:

Please sing the refrain of our song "All Are Welcome" after each pair of students comes forward and has finished speaking. We ask God's blessing and strength as we seek to prepare a table that has room for all of us. I invite the first gift bearers to come forward now. (Music accompanies.)

Student(s) enter carrying cloth representing Native Americans:

We represent all Native American and indigenous people from this continent and around Mother Earth. We bring the gift of woven cloth as a symbol of our ancient and creative artistry and culture. It is also a symbol of our historical willingness to set the table of welcome for strangers in our land. In the past, even when we extended our hands in friendship and were turned away with the force of systematic genocide, we continue to offer our gifts of spiritual wisdom, stewardship for the earth, storytelling and peacemaking. But we also bring the pain of forced relocation, poverty and hopelessness. Is there room for us at your table?

ALL: YES!

Students carry the cloth to the table and spread it out reverently on the table. They bow and begin to form a semi-circle around the worship area.

ALL: Cantor leads sung response of the refrain from "All Are Welcome" as an affirmation from the whole group.

Students enter carrying a blessing cup to represent Arab Americans:

We represent all Arab and Middle Eastern women, men and children who carry the burdens of hateful stereotypes and fear of terrorism. We bring the gift of a blessing cup as a symbol of our thirst for peace and justice through years of war and broken lives. We offer the gifts of our ancient stories and sacred traditions from the Holy Lands of Abraham and Sarah. While Americans rally behind cries to retaliate and hunt down terrorists, we all hear stories of our children being ridiculed, our adults under suspicion. It may seem risky to sit down at the table with us. Is there room for us today?

ALL: YES!

Students carry the cup to the table and place it reverently on the table and bow. They join the semi-circle around the worship area.

ALL: Cantor leads sung response of the refrain from “All Are Welcome” as an affirmation from the whole group.

Students enter carrying a platter to represent White/European Americans:

We represent the diversity of white/European Americans who bring the gifts of Christianity and the courageous stories of immigrants. We bring the gift of rich cultural traditions symbolized in this platter that we bring to share family-style at our inclusive table. We also bring the paradoxical reality of white privilege and the willingness to risk everything for freedom. Will you continue to make room for us at this table?

ALL: YES!

Students carry the platter to the table and place it reverently on the table and bow. They join the semi-circle around the worship area.

ALL: Cantor leads sung response of the refrain from “All Are Welcome” as an affirmation from the whole group.

Students carry a large, decorated candle to represent African Americans:

We represent the richness of African-American peoples who bring the gifts of magnificent artistic expression and wisdom traditions passed down through vibrant family systems. We offer the stories of strong Churches, resilience, and the dream for civil rights symbolized in the light of this candle. Oppression and discrimination have failed to extinguish the warmth and radiance of our candle, but more subtle forms of institutional racism continue to exclude us from this table. Is there yet room for us?

ALL: YES!

Students carry the candle to the table and place it reverently on the table and bow. They join the semi-circle around the worship area.

ALL: Cantor leads sung response of the refrain from “All Are Welcome” as an affirmation from the whole group.

Students carry a basket to represent Asian Americans:

We represent all Asian Americans who bring ancient gifts of science and healing, philosophy and art, preserved through a rich multi-generational family system. We bring a basket in which we place the gift of our traditions which ensure honor for our teachers and elders. We also bring our struggle for human rights and the pain of dehumanizing stereotypes. Is there room for us at this table?

ALL: YES!

Students carry the basket to the table and place it reverently on the table and bow. They join the semi-circle around the worship area.

ALL: Cantor leads sung response of the refrain from “All Are Welcome” as an affirmation from the whole group.

Students carry a candle representing Latino Americans:

We represent Latinos and all Spanish-speaking peoples. We offer the gift of our reverence for faith and family. The symbol of this candle represents the light of our strong traditions that have endured the darkness of oppression and the disrespect of being overlooked. We bring the struggles of migrant families and parents willing to risk everything for their undocumented children who quickly learn to say, "I love you" in two languages. Is there room for us at this table?

ALL: YES!

Students carry the candle to the table and place it reverently on the table and bow. They join the semi-circle around the worship area.

ALL: Cantor leads sung response of the refrain from "All Are Welcome" as an affirmation from the whole group.

Please add stories/affirmations and symbols from your own school and neighborhoods.

Students carry a bowl of lapel ribbons:*

We represent all people who are forgotten and who yearn for acceptance. Our gift is that of enduring hope symbolized in the spring green color of these ribbons that will be shared as a memento of our gathering today. Our challenge is to recognize the dignity of all people regardless of race or culture, class or gender, ability or disability. Is there room for all of God's children at this table? *(These were made beforehand into lapel loops crossed with a straight pin, enough for all participants.)

ALL: YES!

Students carry the bowl to the table and place it reverently on the table and bow. They go and join the semi-circle around the worship area.

ALL: Cantor leads sung response of the refrain from "All Are Welcome" as an affirmation from the whole group.

Leader #1:

We celebrate the Inclusive Table. A table that is open to all. The table that has a place for all of our ethnic groups and races. The table for all our peoples, no matter how rich or poor. The table for those who are different from me. From you. From us. The table that has a place for all our neighborhoods. The table that has a place for all our families and parishes. The table that has a place for all our schools. The table for you and me. The table that has room for all of us. Let us listen to the Word of God.

Leader #2:

In today's reading we are reminded of the call we all receive to be God's disciples. If we are true disciples, as Cardinal George's pastoral letter on racism "Dwell in My Love" reminds us, we must dwell together in God's love.

Reader: The Lord be with you.

All : And also with you.

Reader: This is a reading from the Gospel of John:
If you dwell in me, and my words dwell in you, ask whatever you want and you shall have it.
This is how my Father is glorified; you are to bear fruit in plenty and so be my disciples.
As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Dwell in my love. If you heed my commands,
you will dwell in my love, as I have heeded my Father's commands and dwell in his love.
(John 15:7-10) The Word of the Lord.

All: Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ!

This part of the prayer service is meant for a creative faith expression or testimony that relates to the theme of the Inclusive Table. A dramatic reading or a short essay/poem may be used. E.g., Prayers from your students or from other sources that relate to our theme of inclusion and welcome.

Below is an excerpt from Storyteller Susan O'Halloran's story "Dividing Lines : The Education of a Chicago White Girl in 10 Rounds." (www.susanohalloran.com)

(Powerful and personal stories or testimonies like this are the most effective in this setting.)

" I want to tell you a story. You know we gather around the table for many reasons and, sometimes, we need stories, we need each other, as much as we need food. I want to tell you about how I first learned about race and how that can happen without a word being spoken.

This happened in 1955 - the first time I ever met someone of another "race." The boy was black. I, of course, am identified as white. But we both wore Davy Crocket caps. It was a big deal back then - maybe how you felt when you got your first Rainbow Brite doll or your first Transformer. The boy and I met at a downtown State Street bus stop. Our mothers had gotten us to Marshall Field's just in time for the first release of Davy Crocket raccoon skin caps.

I had just turned five. I assumed the boy was the same. We compared caps, showed each other our Jim Bowie rubber knives, chased each other, running around all the people standing or sitting at the bus stop bench. We even sang Davy's song - "Killed him a ba'ar when he was only three. Davy, Davy Crocket, King of the Wild Frontier" - much to the amusement of the grownups. His bus came first and before either mother could see what was happening, I followed him on. He reached back for me and I reached up the stairs to him. Just as we touched, we flew away from each other. I felt my mother's fingers dig deep into my arm as she yanked me into her body. She whispered, "We don't go his way." I strained to see my friend through the reflection in the glass.

I said, "Maybe we'll be in the same kindergarten class."

"No! You won't!" My mother chopped the words into my ear. Then added, "He lives . . ." she looked over both shoulders to the people behind us, "He lives in a 'different' neighborhood." Still, her voice whispering in a tone I didn't understand.

But the lesson transmitted all the same. He was different. For the first time, I saw the difference my mother's way. And even more subtle, more damaging, never spoken but transmitted through muscle to bone - We lived in different places and where we lived was better."

After the creative expression, a period of silence.

Leader #1:

In this silence, in our silence, let us pause and turn our hearts to the call to end racism in our household. As we conclude I ask you to stand. Inspired by the call to gather at the inclusive table and the call to break the silence, uncover the truth and to live a new story, let us say together commit to lives that are devoted to harmony.

**ALL:
PLEDGE**

Starting today, I commit to educating myself and others about the many differences and cultures in our country and our world.

I vow to speak out openly against those who stereotype or discriminate against race or other differences.

I will not ignore racist or discriminatory comments, and I will not tell or laugh at insensitive jokes.

I promise to assume the responsibility to identify and speak out about racist TV programs, advertisements and news broadcasts that stereotype or discriminate against different races or groups.

Not only will I oppose acts of racism and intolerance in all their forms, but I will also examine my own attitudes and behaviors so that I can be an example of harmony to others.

In my struggle to be a person of harmony, I know I will need to be a person of courage, a person of peace.

(You may want to write your own anti-racism school/class Pledge or use the above.)

Leader #2:

And so we ask for the strength to build a kingdom of justice and equality, as we say the prayer that Jesus gave us...

All: Our Father ... Amen.

Leader #1:

In a moment we will receive a blessing that will send us forth. I then ask you to join in the singing of our final hymn/song as our students distribute the green ribbons as a symbol of hope and fresh beginnings as we recommit ourselves to this important work in our community.

ALL: Amen

Leader #2: Please join hands for the final blessing.

Loving God,

We give thanks for your table of fellowship

That binds us to each other and to you.

It is here we find your promise of

Welcome for the stranger

Comfort for the widow and orphan

Food for the hungry

Justice for the poor

Freedom to captives.

Live on in our hearts.

Give us light and grace for the journey

Until we all gather in your house

At the one banquet table of never-ending feast

Where no one will be left out

And all will have come home.

We pray this through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen

Leader #1: Please join us in singing “Go, Make a Difference.”

As the congregation sings the last hymn/song, students distribute the green ribbons to all.

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