



California Lutheran Homes



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## **'Happy Holidays': Missing the Point?**

*Donald Koepke, Director*

"Happy Holidays" has become the responsible and acceptable greeting in many long-term care facilities. Driven by a desire to be inclusive and by a fear of lawsuits, the staff members of many long-term care communities share greetings of "Happy Holidays" in place of "Merry Christmas."

I wonder, however, if our desire to be open to all by not offending some is missing a crucial point . . . spirituality, often expressed through the practice of religion, *is* important to people. In fact, as one ages and discovers some of the 'problems of age,' spirituality and/or religion may be the only thing that holds heart and soul together. Spirituality can enable a person to seek integrity rather than slip into despair (the eighth stage of human development, according to Erik Erikson). Sometimes, by attempting to be non-offensive to everyone and thus removing the 'holiday tree' from the lobby, we unintentionally remove one of the pillars that help to hold people up in the later years of life.

I am not in favor of pushing a particular religious faith upon everyone. Everyone's religious expression, and indeed their spirituality, is very personal and thus it touches the core of who they are. People, whether they are Christian or Jewish, religious or non-religious, hold strong views on the place of religion in life.

What I am in favor of is being multi-religious rather than anti-religious or even a-religious. I am in favor of expanding religious and spiritual celebrations to include anyone and everyone. The word "holiday" seems to be a very safe word, until a person considers the root of the word. The word, "holiday" comes from "holy day" which is an appropriate description of any religious celebration, no matter what the faith. What if long-term care communities would celebrate all of the holy days, inviting all residents to recognize the importance and value of each. Even if the entire community does not believe in the significance of the day, they can recognize that the day is meaningful to someone in the community, whether a staff member or resident.

Why can't Christians celebrate Eid al-Fitr, the day following the long fast of Ramadan, and thus honor and affirm the Muslim in our midst? The celebration of Purim (a Jewish holiday) can be fun for everyone. Chinese New Year can be celebrated by residents in

wheelchairs forming a 'dragon' in the skilled care center. And yes, Christmas can be celebrated as Christmas, because it is of value to many within the community. As a overtly religious person (I happen to be Christian) I can give thanks for and grow spiritually as I experience the religious celebrations of other faiths. Their experience of faith deepens my faith. The religious/spiritual celebrations of other faiths do not have to challenge my faith.

Therefore I can celebrate a holy day even if that day is not a part of my tradition. I can celebrate with Mexicans and share in the feast of Our Lady of Guadeloupe. I can experience the faithfulness expressed by Muslims as they pray five times each day. And I hope that even atheists, who don't believe that Jesus was divine, can affirm the holy day of Christmas as an important day because it is important to me as well as other Christians.

November and December will see the completion of the month of Ramadan (December 6th is Eid Al-Fitr), the festival of Hanukkah, and the joy of Christmas. What a rich, life-affirming time of the year.

Happy Holidays . . . Happy Holy Days.

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*Responses from others*

I love the article about celebrating ALL "holidays" and "holy days" . . . we have both Jewish and Christian residents, and so celebrate the holidays of both religions with displays and spiritual programs. When I was with the YMCA (which, you may know, stands for Young Men's Christian Association), I spent much time as membership director getting out the word that YMCA was not just for the young, or males, or Christians. We served all members of the community. My favorite program one December was Family Fun Night (a weekly event), when we celebrated the diversity of our members with presentations and crafts about Ramadan, Hanukkah, & Christmas. It was such a wonderful event, and not one person was offended. All felt included. Thanks for your thoughts on the "holy days." And Happy New Year to you!

Peggy R. Tschauner  
Wellness Director  
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I just had this very discussion with a group of people yesterday. I have gotten into the habit of saying Happy Holidays, just because I was challenged by someone when I said Merry Christmas, and it offended a person of another religion. In this time of our ethnically diverse world, it does seem to be a good idea to recognize our uniqueness, while also still holding firm to our own beliefs.

Cultural diversity on the part of the residents and the caregivers is a big issue these days, which gets a bit of lip service and even less attention. Please read an article titled

"Cultural Sensitivity" in the November issue of Nursing Homes magazine. It is excellent and certainly relates to this discussion.

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