

A Destiny Together

Justice for First Peoples

A practical guide to fasting

When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. (Nehemiah 1:4)

At the 13th Assembly in July 2012, over 200 Uniting Church members heard stories about the ongoing experiences of racism and the effects of government policies on Aboriginal peoples and communities in the Northern Territory. Many wept. A decision was made to call the whole Uniting Church in Australia to pray and fast that we might reach out to God in our need and commit ourselves afresh to struggle together for God's justice and peace for First Peoples.

Fasting is a commonly used spiritual discipline in some congregations and communities in the Uniting Church. However, outside of Lent, fasting is not widely practiced across the life of the Uniting Church. Some people assume that fasting means not eating at all but there are many ways to fast. Here are some suggestions about what you could give up eating for the week:

- one or two meals a day
- meat
- dairy products
- something else that is a regular and/or valued part of your diet, for example, takeaway meals, cakes, biscuits, desserts, chocolate, coffee, wine, beer or soft drinks

To undertake a fast for a whole week can be demanding if you have never done it before. Hopefully there will be other members of your congregation who are participating in this week of prayer and fasting and you can support and encourage each other.

Remember, this is a week of prayer and fasting. Fasting is a discipline that turns our attention to God. It is not simply about not eating; it is not eating, with a purpose. The time of fasting gives additional time for prayer which could be personal prayer and/or daily prayer organised within your congregation. A daily order of prayer and reflection has been prepared especially for this week. A biblical and theological reflection on the practice of fasting is also available. You can access both of these resources at www.assembly.org.au/adestinytogether.

It is important that you choose a way of fasting that is suitable for your health requirements. You may, for example, choose to fast only for part of the week or every second day. Some people should not enter into a fast under any circumstances, for example, women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, those who have diabetes or who have another chronic illness. If you are engaged in heavy physical labour, you should also take care and it may be better to consider giving up the evening meal if you need regular food intake while you are working.



If you take regular medication or are at all unsure about what may be suitable for you, you should seek medical advice before embarking on a fast.

Regardless of the nature of the fast you decide to undertake, it is essential that you maintain an adequate fluid intake by drinking plenty of water. Drinks like tea, coffee and other caffeinated drinks and alcohol do not count as fluid intake and are best avoided during a fast. Fruit juices are better but remember that they have a high sugar content and it is generally better to eat fruit! If you are only eating one or two meals a day, ensure that the meals make a nutritionally balanced diet. Takeaway food should also be avoided.

When you begin a fast, you will generally feel hungry, though this usually diminishes after the first day. Drinking plenty of water certainly helps. If you are a regular coffee drinker, you may experience caffeine withdrawal symptoms (like headaches) but they usually disappear within a couple of days. On the positive side, you may experience an increasingly heightened level of awareness and alertness!

As we enter into this week, it is important for us to remember the words of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 58 (verses 3b-4, 6) – fasting has integrity before God when we live faithfully, seeking and working for the justice of God in the world:

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

