What do you know about Christianity?

Followers of the teachings of Jesus Christ are called Christians. Christian staff and students form a part of the UWS community. Acknowledging and respecting Christian identities therefore requires, in part, a basic understanding of what Christianity is about.

About Christianity

Christianity is focused on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Christians believe that God wisely and generously created the world so that we might live in relationship with God and with all creation. In time, the good world that God created was marred by evil. The Bible attributes this, in part, to human frailty and sin. In his life and teachings Jesus showed how humans ought to live. He summed this up as ‘Loving God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength’ and ‘Loving your neighbour as yourself’. Having perfectly lived such a life, Jesus demonstrated the full extent of his love by laying down his life on the cross, thus securing our salvation. Christians believe that God raised Jesus from the dead and that he now forgives all those who turn from evil and turn to Jesus in faith. Christians believe that God’s Spirit empowers them to live in a kind and peace-loving way. Most Christians throughout history have believed that Jesus is both fully God and fully human. Christians use the term Trinity, meaning that there is one God who exists in three persons: The Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Catholic

Many faiths believe in one God. Christians do and follow Jesus Christ, whose wish for us is that we experience life to the full and fullness of joy. Some distinctive characteristics of being ‘Catholic’ include:

- Having a realistic optimism about people and the world where we find God disclosed. Community is where we thrive and discipleship is radically communal.
- Being buoyed by the wonderful goodness of all the faithful who have gone before us, those living now and those yet to be born.
- Having a deep respect for the past, for Scripture and authentic Tradition including a reverence for Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The Pope is elected by the Cardinals to be a pastoral, spiritual leader and will be warmly welcomed at the World Youth Day 08 celebrations, (after Thomas Groome, “What makes us Catholic”).

‘Catholic’ means ‘according to the whole’ or ‘universal’.

Orthodox

The Orthodox Churches are of the oldest Christian Churches founded by the Holy Apostles. The Orthodox Church teachings and faith are built upon the person of Jesus Christ, the Holy Bible, the Seven Sacraments and the Ecumenical Councils. The life and ministry of the Orthodox Churches focus on the life of worship and prayer; the life of fellowship with the Angels and Saints; the life of service, reaching and assisting those in need and the life of witness by radiating the light of Christ to the world.

Protestant

The Protestant churches arose during the 16th century Reformation. Inspired by their reading of the Bible, these men and women sought to restore the Church to its original beliefs and practices. Characteristic of Protestant faith is the notion that salvation comes only by God’s grace, through faith in Christ, as revealed in the Scriptures, to God’s glory. Protestantism is associated with simplicity of style and the participation of all believers in church meetings. Today there are many different Protestant churches, some being divided by belief and others simply by geography.

Other Churches

Though not in formal dialogue with the above groups, other churches include The Jehovah’s Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Christian Religious Observance

Place and style of worship

Though Christians are free to worship in any place, they do this collectively at churches. Worship at church involves prayer, singing, and reading of the Bible, along with an explanation of the Bible passages, typically by the priest or minister. Church services in Australia are usually held on a Sunday.

Religious Text

The primary source for Christian faith and practice is the Bible. It contains stories and historical accounts about creation, the Hebrew peoples, the coming of Christ and the early church. It also includes reflections on the purpose of life and songs of praise to God. Many Christians believe that the whole Bible points to the need for Jesus and explains the wonders of his life and ministry. The majority of Christians recognize the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds as expressing their key beliefs.
Christian Dress Code
Christianity prescribes no dress code, though modesty is encouraged. Traditional clerical dress within Western Christianity includes the wearing of black with a special white collar. Orthodox priests wear a black tunic and headdress or hat. These days, most clerics and nuns do not dress traditionally.

Dietary Requirements and Restrictions
Some Christian denominations require the abstinence from some or all foods for a period of time (fasting). Fasting is considered by some Christian denominations as a way of improving one’s self-discipline and appreciating the sufferings of the poor and allowing for more time to be spent in prayer.

Significant Religious Ceremonies, Dates and Events
While different Christian denominations celebrate and observe different holy days, most denominations observe the following:

Baptism
Baptism with water is undertaken just once as an expression of union with and commitment to Christ.

The Lord’s Supper
The Lord’s Supper (also known as the Eucharist, communion or mass) is a special, occasional meal held in memory of Jesus’ death and in anticipation of his return.

Christmas Day
Christmas Day marks the birth of Jesus Christ and is celebrated with church ceremonies, carols and the exchange of gifts amongst the family and friends.

Western Christian Churches follow the Gregorian calendar while Orthodox Churches follow the Julian calendar. Therefore, they celebrate Christmas (and Easter) at different times. For Western Christianity, Christmas falls on 25 December, while for Orthodox Christianity, Christmas falls on 7 January.

Easter
Easter is the most important Christian festival. Good Friday (Easter Friday) commemorates Jesus’ suffering on the cross. In Australia, Good Friday is a public holiday and most shops are closed. Many Christians go to church on this day.

Easter Sunday commemorates the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In Western Christianity, Easter falls sometime between 22 March and 25 April. In Orthodox Christianity, Easter falls between 4 April and 8 May.

In Australia, there is a public holiday on Easter Monday. This is not a religious holiday.

For further religious dates and events:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/holydays/

Christians in Australia
- The history of Christianity in Australia began with the arrival of Europeans settlers in the 1800s, who brought their own faiths to Australia. Included were the Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran and Baptist churches.
- By 1901, approximately 40% of the population was Anglican, 23% Catholic and 34% other Christian churches. About 1% followed non-Christian religions.
- The profile of Australian religious affiliations has since diversified, largely due to waves of migration that have taken place in the following decades.
- Following World War Two, the impact of migration from Europe led to increases in followers of the Orthodox churches. The Greek, Macedonian, Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches have significant numbers in Australia.
- Christianity remains the dominant religion in Australia and holiday periods usually follow significant Christian dates such as Easter and Christmas.

Respecting Religious and Cultural Diversity at UWS
UWS Equal Opportunity Policy
It is the policy of the University of Western Sydney to provide equal opportunity for all staff and students regardless of sex, pregnancy, race, marital status, homosexuality, age, family responsibilities, disability, transgender, political conviction or religious belief.

Multifaith Facilities
Multifaith facilities are available for students and staff on all UWS campuses. For Meditation and Prayer Room locations:
http://www.uws.edu.au/students/ods/chaplains

References and Further Information
Christianity – www.christianity.net.au
Catholic Church Official Website – www.vatican.va
Orthodox Church in America – www.oca.org
World Council of Churches – www.wcc-coe.org
Bible Gateway – www.biblegateway.com
ABC: The Sacred Site – http://www.abc.net.au/compass/explore/christs.htm
BBC Religion and Ethics: Christianity http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/
Flinders University Cultural Diversity and Inclusive Practice http://www.flinders.edu.au/cdip

Acknowledgements:
Flinders University, Rob Elder UWS Anglican Chaplain, Christine Gapes UWS Uniting Church Chaplain, Br Pat Thompson UWS Catholic Chaplain, Fr Matthew Attia UWS Coptic Orthodox Chaplain