



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

ASH WEDNESDAY IN THE WORKPLACE

Inclusive Employer Guide

EQUITY · DIVERSITY · INCLUSION

WHAT IS ASH WEDNESDAY?

Ash Wednesday is a Christian holy day of fasting and prayer that falls on the first day of Lent. In 2024, Ash Wednesday falls on Wednesday, February 14. In the Orthodox tradition, Ash Wednesday falls on March 20.

WHAT DOES ASH WEDNESDAY COMMEMORATE?

For many Christian communities, Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, which is the penitential 40 days of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving prior to Easter. It is traditionally a time of reflection and prayer as a part of preparations for Easter, which commemorates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

During Ash Wednesday, observants reflect on mortality and the need for reconciliation with God and neighbours. Christians enter the Lenten season solemnly while also looking forward to the joy of the message of Easter.

WHAT DOES ASH WEDNESDAY MEAN AND HOW IS IT OBSERVED?

Ash Wednesday derives its name from the placing of ashes on the foreheads of observants.

Many churches in Canada hold special Ash Wednesday services, where worshippers traditionally are marked on their forehead with the sign of the cross from blessed ashes. In many congregations, the ashes are prepared by burning palm branches from the previous Palm Sunday. The marking of ashes on foreheads symbolizes the forgiveness of sins through Jesus' death and resurrection. This occasion reminds people of their mortality and sorrow for sins, as well as the will for change and the hope of forgiveness.

Many Christian denominations emphasize fasting and abstinence during the season of Lent and, in particular, on Ash Wednesday. Some Roman Catholics may fast and abstain from eating meat on Ash Wednesday.

HOW CAN WE CREATE AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT?

1 **Get educated.** Ensure staff who supervise Christian colleagues are aware of Ash Wednesday and how they can be supportive.

2 **Intentional planning and accommodations.** Update your scheduling tools to reflect religious observance dates and to support the planning activities. Avoid booking meetings and scheduling events on Ash Wednesday if possible.

The University of Toronto recognizes its obligation to prevent discriminatory impacts on members of its community that arise from the failure to accommodate based on religion or creed. It is the responsibility of both the Manager and the individual seeking accommodation to work cooperatively and respectfully to explore and implement appropriate accommodation options. Accommodate requests for time off for religious observances. If shift work is the norm, staff may want to switch shifts to observe Ash Wednesday. Look for solutions that suit all parties.

3 **Don't make assumptions.** For personal reasons, not all Christian colleagues will take time off but may still observe the day in various ways.