



UNIVERSITY OF  
TORONTO

# ORTHODOX CHRISTMAS

Inclusive Employer Guide

# What is Orthodox Christmas?

The feast of the Nativity of Jesus Christ (Christmas) on December 25 is one of the most joyful days of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the church to which most Christians in the Middle East, Greece and Eastern Europe belong, along with many people from those countries who have emigrated to Canada. The celebration of the birth of Jesus, together with Theophany or the feast of the baptism of Christ, focuses on the meaning of Emmanuel, “God with us,” the incarnation of God as a human being, uniting heaven and earth, and enabling us to share in the life of God.

Some Orthodox churches follow the older Julian calendar, which currently runs 13 days behind the civil Gregorian calendar, meaning 25 December falls on 7 January.

## How is Orthodox Christmas observed?

In the Orthodox Church, Christmas is primarily a spiritual and liturgical celebration. The feast of the Nativity is preceded by a 40-day period of preparation or Advent fast. During this period people are invited to shift their focus from themselves to others, spending less time worrying about food and using more time in increased prayer and caring for the poor. In return, this time of fasting enables one to fully enjoy, appreciate and celebrate the Nativity of Christ.

On Christmas day the service commemorates the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, the adoration of the shepherds, and the arrival of the wise men with their gifts. The services are hours long with many readings from the Scriptures and New Testament, emphasizing the fulfilment of the expectation of Israel in the birth of the Messiah. At the feast and throughout the festal season, Orthodox Christians greet each other with the traditional greeting of “Christ is born!”, and respond, “Glorify Him!”

In addition to the liturgical commemoration of the feast, each Orthodox cultural tradition has its own local family customs associated with Christmas. Both the feast of St Nicholas and then of St Basil on New Year’s Day, are associated with gift giving, particularly to children and those in need. In different countries, there are various traditional meals served. In Greek Orthodox tradition, baklava, kourabiethes, melomakarona, and other pastries are baked on Christmas Eve, and Christopsomo (Christ’s bread) is baked on the day of the feast. In some Ukrainian Orthodox traditions, the meal on Christmas Eve (which is the last of the 40 fast days before Nativity) includes twelve different lenten foods, including a traditional Kutia, made from wheat, honey, poppy seeds and raisins. The Kutia is like a porridge, and the seeds represent symbols of hope for the new year. Serbian Orthodox traditionally cut a branch from a tree and bring it into their home, symbolizing the incarnate Jesus entering their home and hearts.

# HOW CAN WE CREATE AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT?

- 1 Get educated.** Ensure staff who supervise self-identified Orthodox Christian colleagues are aware of Orthodox Christmas and how they can be supportive.
- 2 Intentional planning.** Avoid booking meetings and scheduling events during Orthodox Christmas if possible.
- 3 Be flexible.** Accommodate requests for time off for religious observances. If shift work is the norm, staff may want to swap shifts to observe Orthodox Christmas. Look for solutions that suit all parties.
- 4 Don't make assumptions.** For personal reasons, not all Orthodox Christian colleagues will take time off, but they may still observe in various ways.