ASH WEDNESDAY
Inclusive Employer Guide
What is Ash Wednesday?

Ash Wednesday is a Christian holy day which in 2021 falls on Wednesday, February 17th.

What does the day commemorate?

For many Christian communities, Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, which is the penitential 40 days of fasting and self-examination prior to Easter. It is traditionally a time of reflection and prayer as a part of preparations for Easter and commemorates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. During Ash Wednesday observants reflect on mortality and the need for reconciliation with God. Christians enter the Lent 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 repentance ashes on the foreheads of participants. 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 that sins are forgiven 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. Roman Catholics are expected to fast and abstain from eating meat on Ash Wednesday.
How can we create an inclusive environment?

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

2. **Intentional planning.** Avoid booking meetings and scheduling events on Ash Wednesday.

3. **Be flexible.** Accommodate requests for time off for cultural observances. If shift work is the norm, staff may want to swap shifts to observe Ash Wednesday. Look for solutions that suit all parties.

4. **Don’t make assumptions.** For personal reasons, not all Christians will take time off but may still observe the day in various ways.