

An Inclusive Approach to Holidays, Observances, and Celebrations

A Guide to Celebrating and Observing Equitably in the Workplace



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Introduction

This resource provides some initial suggestions to expand the holidays, observances, and celebrations we recognize in our organizations. At its core we hope it will encourage us all to move beyond our assumptions and embrace experiences unlike our own. Some celebrations intend to lift spirits and bring joy, but they can create inequity and sometimes do more harm than good.

This resource highlights a few holidays, observances, and celebrations and stories from people's personal experiences with these events. Holidays, observances, and celebrations are unique, personal, nuanced, and dependant on cultures, contexts, locations, and histories. These examples are not meant to be comprehensive or wholly representative but work as a starting point for further discussion.

It intends to push the status quo and to encourage us to expand the holidays, observances, and celebrations we recognize and how we acknowledge them. We can create spaces where more people feel validated, welcomed, encouraged, and affirmed. Holidays, observances, and celebrations can be used to bring people closer; as such, we hope this guide has provided a starting point to satisfy this objective in new and more inclusive ways.

- Feminuity Team



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Section 1: Expanding Workplace Cultures Around Holidays, Observances, and Celebrations

During holidays, we must consider who may be left out. Whether our team members celebrate different holidays or celebrate in different ways, we must make space to support them and learn about cultures, religions, nationalities, groups, and identities other than our own.

Non-Dominant Holidays, Observances, and Celebrations

Not all holidays are religious, traditionally celebrated as ‘happy,’ or officially recognized by governments, organizations, and workplaces. These events are often considered “non-dominant” as they are less likely to be recognized in media and organizations.

For example, in North America, Christmas is a dominant holiday; it is promoted and often socialized as universal. Yet, many do not celebrate Christmas or experience this holiday as a positive time of year, which can be lonely or othering. Expanding our workplace celebrations and acknowledgments to these holidays can be validating and welcoming.

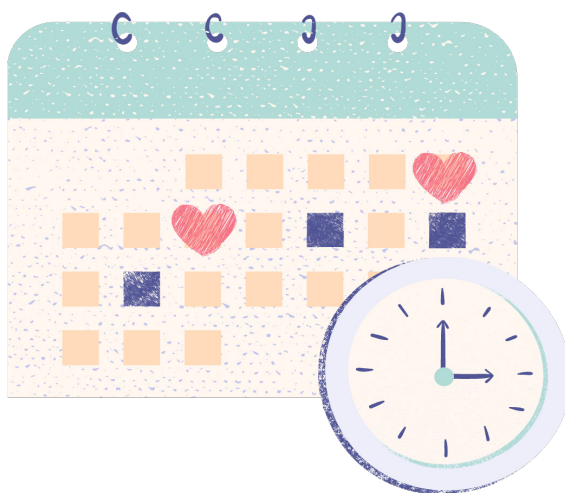
Here are some other perspectives on non-dominant holidays, observances, and celebrations to consider:

Diversity in Methods of Celebration

- Be aware that people celebrate and observe different holidays, observances, and celebrations, and how they do so varies.
 - Celebrations take different forms depending on the culture, traditions, and norms.
 - Some people prefer to celebrate in big groups, while others prefer to relax alone and take time to recharge.
 - Celebrating can be a privilege, and some cannot do so for various reasons such as financial resources, mental health issues, medical barriers, lack of family acceptance, or familial obligations, etc.



- People who are a part of multiple groups or communities might celebrate numerous holidays that may seem contradictory or non-traditional to some.
- People express celebration in different ways.
 - For example, Dia de Muertos is observed in many Latin American countries, where loved ones' death is celebrated.
- Not all celebrations are “happy” in the traditional sense.
 - Some people may choose to commemorate days that signify mourning and loss, such as Trans Day of Remembrance.
- Not all celebrations are religious or cultural.
 - Pride can be a significant part of the year for many folks who belong to the LGBTQ2+ community or have loved ones in the LGBTQ2+ community.



For more information about celebrating Pride as an organization, and creating an LGBTQ2+ inclusive workplace, check out [our resource](#).



“Pride celebrations are some of my favourites because I witness so many people feeling called to greater authenticity at these events and truly showing themselves to the world, sometimes for the first time. Pride is colourful, fun, and unabashedly queer--it’s so refreshing to see that front and center in public spaces when LGBTQ2+ people are so often shamed, stigmatized, or rendered invisible in pop culture and mainstream conversations.”

- Keith Plummer (they/them)

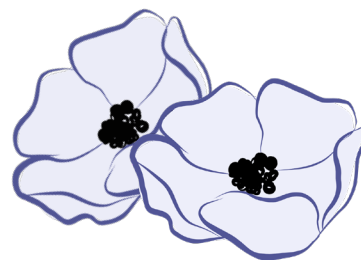
Holidays, Observances, and Celebrations with Complex Histories

Many holidays, observances, and celebrations have complicated histories. As such, they can mean different things to different people. For some, these celebrations can be a positive form of commemoration, recognition, and celebration, but for others, these holidays can be a continual reminder of trauma, inequity, or pain. If you choose to celebrate these holidays, we encourage you to apply a “yes, and” approach. An approach that allows you to, **yes**, embrace what you believe is positive about the holiday **and** consider potential injustices these holidays may bring to others.

The following are some of such celebrations to apply a “yes, and” approach:

Canada Day

Canada Day commemorates the Canadian federation anniversary, where three separate British colonies were united and officially recognized as “Canada.”



- For many, Canada Day is an opportunity to celebrate what Canada has provided or provides to them as a country.
- However, this holiday also represents the French and British colonization of Turtle Island and its Indigenous Peoples and the enslavement of Black and Indigenous Peoples.
- Celebrating Canada Day can erase this history and pacify the ongoing genocide of Indigenous Peoples and Black people’s oppression by creating false national narratives.
- You can learn more about Canada day in our [blog post](#).

Juneteenth and The Fourth of July

In the United States, the Fourth of July claims to celebrate “freedom” and independence from Britain.

- In reality, this holiday represents the official establishment of the colonization of Turtle Island, the institution of slavery, and the beginning of a destructive and violent global empire.
 - On the Fourth of July, we must acknowledge that throughout history and to this day, Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized peoples do not have the same types of freedoms as other citizens.
 - It is also critical to acknowledge the importance of [Juneteenth](#), which celebrates the emancipation of slavery in the United States.
- Many Caribbean countries celebrate similar holidays, such as Emancipation Day.

War and the Military

During holidays that celebrate veterans, fallen soldiers, and military achievements, we can critique violence and imperialism while also mourning the loss of loved ones.

- Instead of celebrating the nation, celebrate, mourn, and support veterans.
- Take an intersectional approach and acknowledge the relationship between the military and folks who are marginalized.
- Consider donating to veteran support organizations, as many veterans face issues with mental health, substance abuse, and homelessness.
- We can also mourn the lives of those lost due to war and imperialism who weren't from our home nations; their lives are equally as important.
- Avoid glorifying war by being critical about the role of violence, death, and imperialism.

Holidays with Colonial Histories

Be critical about holidays that pacify the relationships between colonizers and Indigenous Peoples.

- Thanksgiving pacifies this relationship to erase the history of genocide and further oppress Indigenous Peoples.
- Each year, its celebration emboldens the false narrative that Indigenous Peoples and European colonizers had positive relationships and that Indigenous Peoples were passive and even welcoming to the colonization of Turtle Island.
- Learn more about how the narrative of Thanksgiving was and is changed over time to excuse genocide and colonization in [this article](#).
- If you are someone who celebrates Thanksgiving, do so while remaining critical of its history.
- Find ways to foster a discussion or teaching



Apply a critical lens to holidays celebrating historical figures known to have committed oppression and colonization, such as Christopher Columbus.

- The truth about [Columbus Day](#) should be acknowledged.
- Many U.S. states and towns have decided to [replace the holiday with Indigenous Peoples Day](#).

Not All Holidays are ‘Happy’

People experience holidays in different ways, not only because of their identities but because of their lived experiences. Holidays are not always joyous, for various reasons, and assuming that they are can be harmful. These can be described as “non-dominant” holiday experiences.

Allowing space in our conversations for non-dominant holiday experiences is essential in supporting our friends’ and colleagues’ inclusivity. Last year, we released [a blog titled “‘Happier’ Holidays,”](#) [elaborating on some non-dominant experiences.](#)

Thinking critically about how we reference, discuss, and practice celebrations is a necessary first step, so here are some reminders:

- Don’t presume that everyone has a ‘home’ or family to visit.
- Don’t presume that everyone has a nuclear family.
 - ‘Family’ comes in many forms, and for many, chosen families are critical.
- Pressures to gift can reinforce classism.
 - Indulging in consumerism is an economic privilege many cannot participate in. Having limited finances to spend during this short period may cause feelings of guilt and shame.



“My family always enforced the idea that family matters above all else, but I’ve realized that my chosen family is far more important to surround myself with. Holiday celebrations with my blood family are stressful; as the only queer, genderqueer person in my family, I have to prepare myself mentally to educate while being (mostly) unintentionally misgendered. My chosen family respects and celebrates my name, my pronouns, and my boundaries. Being with them charges my batteries, while my blood family drains it.”

- Anonymous

Section 2: Expanding Workplace Cultures Around Holidays, Observances, and Celebrations

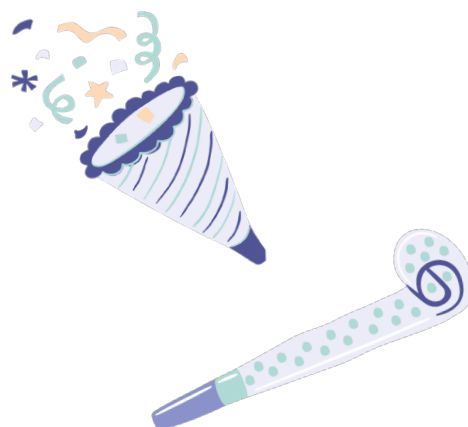
Experiences with holidays, observances, and celebrations are not universal, so what can we do? This section focuses on expanding our understanding of a diversity of holidays, provides tactics for being inclusive of those with non-dominant experiences, and gives some strategies for being more intentional in our workplace policies and practices.

Expand Your Knowledge

Instead of assuming which holidays are most celebrated in your workplace, seek out the information. Learn what is important to your people, allocate time and resources to expand your knowledge, and put these practices into place.

If you are an HR or people leader or on your organization's planning committee, create an equitable way to gather information. Consider an optional survey that asks:

- Q:** What holidays, observances, and celebrations would you like recognized in the workplace?
- Q:** What holidays, observances, and celebrations are important to you?
- Q:** How would you like those holidays, observances, and celebrations to be celebrated and acknowledged?
- Q:** Is there anything else we should know about the holidays, observances, and celebrations that are important to you?



If you would like to learn more about your colleagues' experiences with holidays, don't pry unless the conversation arises naturally.

- Some people may feel exoticized or uncomfortable if they are put on the spot.
- Consider bringing up the topic of holidays in general. Discuss it in a way that doesn't require them to divulge information but gives space to do so if they wish.

Take the time to research holidays you aren't familiar with to learn what your co-workers and employees might be experiencing.

- Learn about what non-Muslim friends can do to support Muslim people during Ramadan using these tips developed by Fahmida Kamali in [our Instagram post](#).

Now that you know which holidays are important in your organization, ask employees what support they may need during this time. This is helpful information for planning and creates an understanding of people's experiences.

Q: How will you be observing this holiday, observance, or celebration?

Q: Will you take time off?

Q: Will you be spending extra time with family or friends?

Q: Will you be working from home during this time?

Q: Will you have increased friend or family obligations?

Q: Is there something that I could do to support you during this time?

Q: Is there something that the organization could do to support you during this time?



“Growing up in India, I have always been part of Catholic institutions, which have a reputation for teaching ‘good values.’ My holiday experiences mainly included yearly Christmas skits at school, where students were Hindu, Muslim, and Christian. I still remember how Christmas events received more budget and resources while Diwali was usually a small event, and Eid celebrations rarely happened. Thinking about it now, in the context of inclusive holidays, I realize how kids are socialized early on to give importance to certain holidays more than others.”

- Siddardh Alwar (he/his)

Educate Others

- When presented with new information, share it with others in a respectful manner.
 - This can take the burden off of those who experience holidays in a non-dominant way.
- Educate those who are new to your country or unfamiliar with holidays with complex histories.
 - Newcomers can experience pressure to conform to dominant holidays and assimilate into the dominant culture to be accepted.
 - The pressure to do so can contribute to their oppression and contribute to others' oppression in celebrating holidays with complex histories.
 - There are many ways to introduce holidays and create celebrations that don't pressure people to celebrate in ways that contradict their personal beliefs and customs.

Be Inclusive About Non-Dominant Experiences

Being surrounded by colleagues and leaders who assume positivity and consider dominant holidays, observances, and celebrations as the ‘norm’ can be lonely for many.

Here are some ways to be more intentional about inclusion when acknowledging these non-dominant experiences.

Validate Non-Dominant Experiences

- Acknowledge that non-dominant experiences exist and validate them in communications to your team, clients, partners, and social audiences.
- Provide some context surrounding holidays.
 - Reach out to employees in private and ask if they would like to share how they observe holidays and celebrations.
 - Try and make it a collaborative effort to learn and educate; don’t leave the responsibility only to those participating.
- Create awareness of other religions. Start with an interfaith calendar and let everyone in the organization know which holidays your employees will be observing; you don’t need to specify who.

Don’t Make Assumptions.

- Avoid assuming a dominant holiday experience in our dialogues.
 - Not everyone can afford gifts, so asking, “have you finished your holiday shopping?” can cause inequities.
 - Not everyone has parents or family who are accepting, so asking people if they are “celebrating with their family” should be avoided.
 - In places where Christmas is dominantly celebrated, “Merry Christmas” is shared widely.
- If someone mentions they celebrate a particular holiday, ask them about it openly and let them lead the conversation.
- When people share non-normative experiences relating to holidays, actively listen to them.
 - Do not minimize their experiences, and don’t tell comparative stories; both act as a means of suppressing people’s real and lived experiences.

Avoid Comments Related to Food and Drink

Don't make comments about what people choose to consume.

- Do not expect people to eat, drink, or consume alcohol.
- Do not make comments about what people are eating/drinking, how much they are eating/drinking, and if they are eating/drinking.
- Food and drink oriented events can be triggering and uncomfortable for people with disordered eating or people who face shame because of their size.
 - This can also be tough for people managing addiction or people in recovery.
 - If someone close to you struggles with meal times, eating in front of others, or being around alcohol, make an effort to reach out to them and learn how you can make the celebration more comfortable.

Value Community Over Consumerism

Purchasing and wrapping gifts can support capitalism, consumerism, and excessive waste,

- Many might feel shame or guilt because they cannot afford to buy gifts and decorations or do not have the time or resources to plan elaborate celebrations.
- During celebrations, try to focus on the holiday's core values rather than tangible items.
- If you have the means:
 - Support small and local businesses.
 - Purchase sustainable gifts and gifts that come in sustainable packaging.
 - Try gifting experiences. These gifts might be more meaningful, and in some instances, they create a lower environmental impact than tangible items.
 - Organize a gift exchange of "pre-loved" items.
 - Instead of giving gifts, ask friends or family to donate to a community organization that you support instead.



"While in school, a peer asked what I had planned for the official 'holiday' break. I said I was visiting my family to celebrate Christmas and asked if she would see her parents. To which she said she doesn't have parents. I diverted and asked if she was going to spend time with other family members. She said "no" due to their lack of acceptance of her identity. I empathetically [and embarrassingly] apologized. Although I may have rationally known not everyone has a positive relationship with their families, at that moment, and when tied up with the lens of a positive holiday experience, my bias was evident and harmful. It's as if the promotion of festivity around this time of year leaves so little space for careful attention and thoughts of inclusion. This needs to change."

- Anisha Phillips (she/her)

Change Organizational Policies and Practices

Create an inclusive and intentional policy around holidays, observances, and celebrations to support people who celebrate holidays that aren't traditionally recognized. The following are some methods for shifting and reframing organizational policies and practices to be more inclusive.

Implement Inclusive Holiday Leave/Days

Create a format for team members to take time off for celebrations relevant to them, and opt to work during dominant holidays and statutory holidays.

- Many workplaces in North America make taking time off for Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving mandatory, yet, this is not relevant for all. Celebrations such as Rosh Hashanah or Diwali, or Pride may be more important.
 - Leaders and organizations need to be open to reallocating days off of work. Check out [our guide for inclusive holiday leave](#).
 - For example, Spotify has implemented a flexible public holiday policy where employees can “trade” time off during public holidays for holidays they prefer to celebrate. Learn more in [their blog post](#).
- January 1st does not mark the start of the new year for everyone, so allow for employees to celebrate more than one new year holiday.
- Check out a [list of different New Years' days](#) to learn more.

Allocate Budget

How your organization uses their budget communicates which holidays, and in turn, which groups of people your organization values.

- Create a comprehensive budget plan that expands which holidays are celebrated, and redistributes funds, so certain holidays or times of the year aren't prioritized.
 - Consider celebrating holidays like Pride, Kwanzaa, Indigenous Peoples Day, etc., throughout the year.
- Reallocate money that would have been spent on a single holiday party to other internal initiatives that foster belonging and inclusion for more employees.
 - Allow for more inclusive or expansive work perks/benefits.
 - Access [our info sheet on inclusive work perks and benefits](#) to learn more.
- Allow employees to select a charity to donate their portion of a holiday budget, choose a charity and make an organizational-wide donation.
- If choosing to buy gifts for team members, consider supporting small, local businesses, particularly ones run and owned by folks who are marginalized (Access [this list](#) for ideas and examples.)

Considerations for Celebrations

This section outlines a framework for planning celebrations more equitably to create belonging, togetherness, and comradeship. It also provides some ideas and strategies for celebrating inclusively both in-person, online, and for winter holiday celebrations specifically.

Determine Which Holidays You'll Celebrate

“Celebrating” means that your organization will celebrate these holidays as a group, whether through a party, corporate event, a day off, or gift-giving.

Your organization can:

- Create one or multiple multi-faith holiday parties throughout the year.
- Celebrate company-specific holidays like the date the company was founded or the first sale date, instead of centring your party around certain holidays.
- This can give team members time to bond and celebrate the great work they've accomplished.



“Growing up, I was reluctant to celebrate Chinese holidays like Chinese New Year, Mid-Autumn Festival, and Qingming Festival because it felt too “different” from what I was exposed to in the media, in school, etc. To this day, I feel detached from celebrating any holiday. Several years ago, my sister decided that our family should celebrate something over the winter holidays, so we have designated the Winter Solstice as our family celebration. It’s just a day in December for us to get together and have a family dinner because we now all spend Christmas day with our partners’ families.”

- Tania Cheng (she/they)



Determine Which Holidays You'll Acknowledge

Being inclusive throughout the year doesn't mean your organization has to throw parties during every single holiday. You can acknowledge holidays in smaller ways to show employees you care about what's happening in their lives.

You can:

- Send email reminders, celebratory thoughts/warm wishes, educational pieces, and considerations about the holidays.
 - If you have Muslim colleagues who are fasting during Ramadan, it might be helpful to include in your holiday email that colleagues should try to schedule meetings in the morning, when people are more alert.
 - For more information on how to support employees during Ramadan, [access this blog post](#).
- Send e-cards
- Handwritten cards/notes
- Announce the holiday during team meetings, share what you've learned about the holiday, and make space for others to share if/how they are observing if they feel comfortable.
- Check-in with employees to see if they need more support during this time or if their obligations are adding extra pressure.

Plan Equitably

Create a diverse planning committee

- Create planning committee positions that are valued, respected, and delegated to all types of people.
 - Many times, organizations rely on women and other marginalized folks to take on much of the emotional labour, event/birthday planning, decorations, cleanup, and administrative tasks.
 - Consider how you can compensate employees for their time, as company parties are integral to forming bonds and improving workplace productivity and culture.
- Communicate your values and goals to the planning committee and ensure that your team members are equipped with the skills and knowledge to create inclusive celebrations.

Make Your Party Voluntary

- Communicate that employees are not obligated to attend.
- Keep tabs on those who may need support and make a thoughtful effort to communicate your appreciation for them.

Schedule Your Date and Time

- Consider scheduling the party when employees are not stressed with deadlines.

- Plan your event during work hours.
 - Many employees have obligations and important commitments after work hours and might feel obliged to rearrange their priorities to attend.
 - For example, employees should not be forced to arrange child or family care to attend unpaid work events.
- If your event is after work, check employee availability, and let your team know ahead of time.

In-Person Celebration Considerations

Decorate!

Make your decor festive and cheerful, but avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes or disrespecting valuable dress, symbols, or ceremonies.

- For example, many holidays like the celebration of Cinco de Mayo by non-Mexican people in the United States, are celebrated with appropriation at the forefront.
 - For ways to celebrate in a way that honours Mexican independence, access [our Instagram post](#).
- Focus on selecting decor that reflects the values of the holiday rather than choosing culturally specific decor, since many celebrations vary in their expression across cultures.
 - For example, Muslim celebrations and their respective decorations are usually associated with the Middle East and the Arab world, even though Muslim celebrations are commemorated worldwide.
- When purchasing decor, consider selecting reusable items to limit waste.
 - This is also more economical and can redirect your budget towards other more sustainable items and experiences that your employees value.

Account for Different Comfort Levels

Consider a two-stage party.

- Plan a party with two parts: no alcohol in the initial stage when leaders thank employees, make any special announcements, and later celebrate where alcohol is available.
- The events' schedule should be spelled out in the invitation to know what to expect and make choices accordingly.
- Many people don't consume alcohol and may not want to be present where alcohol is served.
 - Pregnant people, people managing addiction, people in recovery, and people of different faiths, such as Muslims, might appreciate the alcohol-free portion of the event.

Prioritize Accessibility

- Is your venue accessible?
- Is lighting sufficient enough for those with visual impairments?
- Is the music suitable for those on the Autism spectrum?
- Can all enjoy activities?



“During the month of Ramadan, my previous coworkers realized that so many of our team members would be celebrating Eid in the coming weeks, yet we didn’t have an organization-wide celebration planned. We celebrated Christmas as an organization, so it made sense to celebrate Eid. We created a planning committee, and our long overdue Eid celebration was a hit! Everyone learned how to make traditional dishes, so it was a celebration and an educational moment. What means most to me is that the tradition has carried on, and my previous workplace still hosts an Eid lunch celebration every year.”

- Corrin Whiteway (she/her)

Virtual Celebration Considerations

Holidays, observances, and celebrations are meant to build community, comradeship, happiness, and connection between employees. Luckily, there are so many other ways to achieve this in a virtual format!

Foster Long Term Team Bonding

Instead of a virtual ‘holiday party,’ encourage employees to plan a series of watercooler chats over the month.

- Let them book with people of their choosing across the organization, or create a formal sign up and pairing system.
- If they sign up, consider providing an e-gift card to a coffee shop or other option.
- This could also be done for a team meeting.

Find New Ways to Organize

- Organize virtual celebrations that are not centred around a particular holiday.
- Try just collecting together to celebrate your team and organizational accomplishments!
- Have financial resources? Organize an “event in a box.”
 - These packages are sent to each individual’s home and include everything required to participate in a fun and remote experience.
 - The theme could be self-care, arts and crafts, or something company-related!

- Plan accessible virtual games and activities that will foster bonds between employees and allow everyone to have fun and connect.
- Check out the links below for a list of virtual games to play during your holiday celebrations!
 - [24 Fun Games You Can Play On Zoom and Other Conference Calls](#)
 - [30 Fun Zoom Games to Play with Coworkers in 2020](#)

Christmas-Specific Celebration Considerations

Inclusion and Expansion

- Allow people to opt-in to workplace events and, when possible, expand the theme of the event.
- Try “Winter Wonderland Party” instead of “Holiday or Christmas Party.” Get creative!
- Instead of a “Christmas sweater” theme, try an “ugly sweater” theme, or consider other ways folks can dress up, such as wearing fun hats.

Decor

If choosing to decorate the office or workspace, instead of being representative of Christmas (Christmas trees, presents, angels, Santa, elves, etc.), consider winter decorations (snowflakes, garlands, lights, woods, etc.) There is so much inspiration online!

Festive Treats

Ensure plenty of non-alcoholic options, and vegan, vegetarian, halal, and kosher food options are available.

Conclusion

This resource reflects a particular moment in time, North America in 2020, and like most things in life, will eventually need updates. Everything changes — from technologies and innovations to social norms, cultures, and languages. As such, this resource is not meant to be a static guide, but rather a compilation and reflection of our learnings to date.

Please feel free to reach out to us at hello@feminuity.org if you have any thoughts, questions, or comments.

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