

# Guidelines for initiating and sustaining local interfaith relations

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**Why and what kind of interfaith experience are you considering?** Local interfaith gatherings are designed to build community and mutual understanding of our faith traditions. The gatherings can be regular over an extended period of time, or begin with an Open House to explore what the faith communities could do together to improve relations in their local community. These gatherings can be either an **informational program *about* interfaith dialogue or an experience *of* interfaith dialogue.**

## 1. Planning:

The most effective interfaith experiences are when congregational leaders of the various faith traditions are involved in the planning. Begin with informal meetings with the local religious leaders to discuss your intention and develop mutually agreed expectations.

## 2. Number of Participants expected:

Depending on the total number of participants expected, design your program to have either one large group of 10-15, or small groups of 8-10 people with small group facilitators from all the faith traditions represented. There is a general “interfaith rule” that you never place only one representative of a faith tradition in a discussion group and expect him or her to be the only source of information or experience of their faith tradition. There are diverse experiences and traditions within each faith tradition.

If you do not have enough representatives from each faith groups to have balanced numbers of participants of each faith in each small group, you can shift the sessions towards **information** rather than dialogue. In this case you might have **a panel of one or two members of each faith tradition speak to the whole group on the topic at hand.** Always allow representatives of a faith tradition to choose what resources or books they would like to use to inform the gathering about their faith tradition.

If the people interested in participating are predominantly from one faith group, you should choose to a program where people learn **about other faiths and interfaith dialogue.** You would use the same materials, but recognize that most of the time will be talking *about* other faith groups rather than talking *with* members of those faith groups.

If you have sufficient numbers of more than one faith tradition, you may choose to provide **an experience of interfaith dialogue.** It is ideal to have an equal number of people from each of the religions in each small group. If this is not possible, seek to have a reasonable balance of participants and avoid isolating minority group members by having a small group with just one member from any one of the faith groups. This is a lonely place and sets up dynamics that are difficult to overcome. So, for example, you might have a group with three Jews, two Muslims and three or four Christians (but no more).

## 3. One-time event or ongoing program?

Small group research indicates that groups take 6-10 sessions to “bond” – i.e., to establish sufficient trust to enable participants to be open and honest. Ideally, an interfaith dialogue group should meet 6-10 times over a year. People are reluctant to engage in a one-time interfaith dialogue. No one wants their religion or their lifestyle to be the focus of discussion in an unfamiliar setting with no anticipated or

planned future sessions. People are more interested in making interfaith *relationships* in their local community than just talking about their faith tradition to an audience.

#### 4. Small Group Facilitators:

It is helpful if you recruit the small group facilitators yourself or are part of a team that recruits the facilitators. Before you do so, take some time to identify the gifts and skills you are looking for in a small group facilitator. Your list will probably include:

- Interest in and commitment to interfaith dialogue
- Small group facilitation skills and experience (confirm this if you don't know the person)
- Respect for those of other faith groups
- Diversity of faith, age, race/ethnicity, etc.
- An ability to handle conflict
- An ability to set and maintain norms and boundaries
- An ability and commitment to facilitate vs. participate

If you are uncertain about their skills or want to make sure that everyone is comfortable with their role, it would be best to **offer training or orientation to the facilitators**, which should be an interfaith experience in itself, and provide a preview of what the participants will experience. This is more important if you plan to establish an ongoing interfaith dialogue than if you are doing this on an informational model. In the former case, it is important that the group facilitators know how to handle any awkward circumstances that may arise and how to build community and trust.

If you decide that some training is needed for the facilitators, you can provide training (if you are a skilled trainer), or invite a trainer to work with the group or engage the group itself in discussing and practicing key skills. If you have at least some skilled group members, it is fairly easy to bring others on board by reviewing and then practicing these skills in role play situations. Use the actual texts and topics for your role plays. Brainstorm a list of issues or circumstances the group might envision. These will probably include things like:

- How to handle someone who talks too much or takes the role of “expert”
- How to draw out someone who doesn't jump in often or at all
- How to deal with a group that goes off on a tangent (frogging)
- How to get a group refocused and re-energized (bogging)
- How to deal with someone who violates the confidentiality norm and broadcasts information about what other said (blogging)
- How to handle someone who says things that are offensive, judgmental or provocative
- How to support someone who is may be hurt or offended
- What to do if a group member quits and you suspect he/she did so because of what happened in your small group
- How to help group members take responsibility for their own beliefs, actions, feelings and ideas.
- What to do if serious conflict erupts
- How to handle someone who focuses on converting others
- How to handle someone who ask inappropriately personal questions or makes inappropriate assumptions about other group members
- How to invite people to share at a deeper level – and how to know when they might be ready to do so

## 5. Inviting Participants

Participants in the interfaith dialogue should be committed to their own faith tradition and involved in their religious community. The interfaith dialogue is not for “seekers” or for those who wish to convert others to their faith tradition, or for those that have a political interest or agenda.

There are a variety of ways in which participants might join your program. **First, and best method: personal invitation.** Begin by contacting the Jewish rabbis, Christian clergy and Muslim imams of local synagogues, churches and mosques and arrange a time meet with them to present your proposal to create an interfaith education event or an interfaith dialogue. It is important to have their support either as participants themselves or to recommend this experience to members of their congregations, and to invite them to serve as small group facilitators.

**Second method of attracting participants: standard methods of communicating: announcements, newsletters, newspapers, etc.** While this might still attract some who choose to be disruptive, the format makes that both less likely and less damaging to other participants. If you are recruiting general participation, remember that repetition is essential. People need to hear something three times before they remember it and seven times before they “buy it” (read: “sign up”). So, use multiple avenues to reach the largest number of people.

## 6. Logistics:

The location of the dialogue is best when it is seen as “neutral” and comfortable to each of the faiths. E.g. a home, public library, school, meeting room of a congregation where no religious symbols are evident; not in the worship space of any faith tradition. Tours of the place of worship can be part of the group’s experience, especially if the group agrees to meet in a different location each time they meet. Have a table to welcome participants as they arrive and nametags available for everyone to wear. Arrange chairs auditorium style if the program has a panel of speakers. Arrange small groups in a circle (or several small circles) of 6-8 persons. Each circle should have a facilitator. Invite each person in the circle to introduce themselves before you begin the dialogue.

**Begin with an Open House** in the Public Library or hall in one of the places of worship in your community. This is less awkward for some who may want to meet the other potential participants before they commit to an ongoing dialogue. Having an Open House as the first session will help determine the format possible by allowing participants to indicate their willingness to commit to the process. Invite those who attend the Open House to be part of an interfaith planning team, which will select the topics or resources to be discussed each time the group meets.

## 7. Refreshments:

Any food that is served should include consideration the dietary restrictions of all its participants. It is best to **offer store bought products with a kosher hechsher** on them that indicate that the product has been certified as kosher, and that ingredients are kosher, rather than serving home-prepared foods. Jews and Muslims cannot eat pork, or meat from an animal or fowl that is not slaughtered and drained of blood according to specific method and blessing. Muslims will eat kosher meat, but it is best to avoid serving any meat or cheese that contains enzymes. Fish and vegetarian foods are preferable. Serve food on paper or disposable plates. No alcohol or meat should ever be served. Encourage leaders and participants to bring food to share.



**D** Dairy  
**DE** Dairy Equipment (no actual dairy in ingredients, hence it can be eaten even after a meat meal)  
**P** Passover Kosher for all year including Passover (Note: "P" NEVER designates pareve )  
**Pareve** Non dairy  
**Cholov Yisroel** Kosher supervised milk used in ingredients  
**Pas Yisroel** Jewish baked foods  
**Yoshon** Not from current grain crop  
**KG** Kosher Glatt

8. **Time and date when these dialogues are held** should not interfere or inhibit participation from any religious group. When setting dates, use an “interfaith calendar” to note when there are religious observances in any of the world religions expected or invited to attend. [www.interfaithcalendar.org](http://www.interfaithcalendar.org) Since Friday noon is a holy time for Muslims, and Friday sundown through Saturday sundown is the Sabbath for Jews, and Sunday morning is the day of worship for Christians, these times should be avoided. A week night (Monday - Thursday) or Sunday afternoon is best. A quiet place for Muslims to pray privately is necessary if the meeting times include one of the five times a day when Muslims must pray. Being knowledgeable of everyone’s religious practices is essential in developing trusting and respectful interfaith relationships.

### **The group has gathered and its time to begin:**

**1. Depending on size of group and the chair arrangement, introduce yourself to the large group or to your small group.** Use this time to introduce any resources handed out to participants.

**Distribute index cards** for participants to record their answers to the hopes/fears questions.

Invite each participant to introduce themselves to their small group by answering these questions:

- Why are you doing this?
- What experience in inter-religious life do you have?
- What has been the most important thing you have previously learned about inter-religious conversation.

Ask participants to record their answers to these questions, anonymously. Collect all the cards.

- What your hopes for the outcome of this conversation?
- What are your fears?

Redistribute the cards collected. Invite each person to read aloud the response on the card they hold. Record these responses on newsprint. If there are any unrealistic hopes that you know you and this process can not fulfill, say so. Highlight those hopes that you believe can be fulfilled. Do the same for the fears.

**2. Establish ground-rules for your time together**

§ Invite participants to suggest ground-rules and write each one on newsprint

§ Make sure the list includes anything *you* feel is important. This should include:

- We listen to each other with respect
- Only one person speaks at a time
- We speak for ourselves (using “I language”)

- We will avoid denigrating each other's faith or perspectives
  - Proselytizing, or attempting to convert (someone) from one religion, belief, or opinion to another, is not permitted.
  - Smoking will not be allowed in the meeting space
  - We will listen for the sacred in each other's words
  - We will keep an open mind and heart
- After the list is complete, ensure that every group member is comfortable adhering to these norms – if not, rewrite or re-negotiate them until everyone is willing to observe all of the norms and hold each other accountable to them.
  - Breaking of one of the ground-rules can become a “teachable moment”. When someone in the dialogue does not follow a ground-rule, the facilitator can refer to the ground-rule rather than pointing out the errors of the participant. “Remember we agreed to.....”. “Can anyone point out which ground-rule is not being followed at this moment?”

The Ground-rules below were developed and used by interfaith dialogues at the Cathedral, the Abrahamic Roundtable and with the Daughters of Abraham, a women's monthly interfaith book group:

1. Enter into dialogue so that you can learn and grow; not to challenge or convert the other. Introduce yourself and identify your faith tradition.
2. Participants will listen for understanding, and speak from his or her own religious tradition or experience using “I” statements.
3. The dialogue is based on a book read by all, or a film seen by all, or a topic chosen in advance. The dialogue should be focused on the book, film or topic, and not altered by anyone during the dialogue, except by consensus. Acknowledge that the particular book or film has a context and perspective and does not represent the experiences of everyone of that religion or of all generations.
4. Everyone must be honest and sincere, even if that means revealing discomforts with your own tradition or that of the other. Everyone must assume that everyone else is being equally honest and sincere. Everyone should be willing to be self-critical.
5. Everyone must be permitted to define his or her own religious experience and identity, and this must be respected by others.
6. Participants are not expected to be the spokesperson for his or her entire faith tradition or to know everything there is to know about it. Admit confusion or uncertainty you might have if a puzzling question arises. Be willing to get information is requested.
7. Participants should refrain from making assumptions of where points of agreement or disagreement will exist between or among the three faith traditions.
8. All should strive to experience the other's faith “from within” and be prepared to view him or herself differently as a result of an “outside” perspective.
9. Trust and confidentiality must be assumed and respected.
10. Every gathering is as important as the one before or ones that come later. Do not compare discussions.
11. We will be responsible for preventing the perpetuation of misinformation about the other faith traditions after we have heard and learned otherwise.
12. If you feel hurt, angered, or disrespected personally, or your faith tradition is being misrepresented or disrespected, speak up. Say “ouch”, if you feel personally offended or say, “I would like to respond”.

**Watch the time and give each group a 5-minute warning before the conclusion of the group's dialogue.**

**After the Program, thank the participants and facilitators.** It is helpful to give the facilitators a chance to talk about their experience. A dinner or festive dessert after the last session is a nice way to express your appreciation. You might want to provide a report to your congregation or share your impression with the leaders of the faith groups involved in the dialogue. Also consider doing a story about your experience for your local newspaper or the paper of your faith group(s).