

Communities of Reconciliation

An Interfaith Small Group Journey to Encourage and Facilitate Understanding, Friendship, Peace and Reconciliation

Introduction

The "Communities of Reconciliation" small group experience outlined in this guide intends to bring Christians and Muslims together for a period of time to break down walls, create a culture for friendship and dialogue, and build bridges of peace, reconciliation and service to the community at large.

Communities of Reconciliation is designed as a guide. We encourage leaders of small groups — including at least one Muslim and one Christian — to take it as a template with exercises and steps that can be fine-tuned to the group itself, before or after the group begins. Leaders can work together to amend the outline as the Spirit of God guides them, shaping the content and timeline.

The goal is to assemble a group of five to 10 Christians and five to 10 Muslims (total of 10–20) who agree to meet together over a period of 24 sessions, twice a month or weekly for 12–24 months. We are looking for both younger and older adults to participate. Our intention is for these groups to be co-led by both faith communities under approval by the leadership. The groups will meet for four three-month periods, with each period ending with a dialogue dinner to discuss each faith community's learning



experiences and the spiritual impact of the journey for that quarterly period. There will be a book recommended for the interfaith small groups to read as a supplement for each quarter. These books will come from an agreed upon list from both the Muslim and Christian communities.

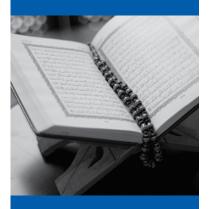
Once the group is set, it will be a closed group until the journey is completed.

Adding participants later in the process would be counterproductive, as each gathering will build on the other. Group participation of those committed is crucial, but we understand that not everyone will be able to make it to each meeting. Still, commitment on the front end is critical.

We will meet on the premise that there is misunderstanding and distrust in both faiths about the other. Can we come together to learn about the other in an environment that is safe in order to build genuine friendships? Our intention is not to debate or engage in polemics, nor is it to proselytize. Such actions lead to further distrust and conflict among Muslims and Christians. It is our hope as believers in one God and in God's messengers that we can seek the straight path together. When we seek God together in an atmosphere of love, safety and respect, then we are all changed by the presence and Spirit of God.



Mission Toolkit: Christian-Muslim Relations



Use the right column of each page to write down thoughts and observations to share in your discussions.



Notes

Communities of Reconciliation

FIRST PERIOD

The first period of meetings should be held at a neutral place (a private dining room of a restaurant is great).

Meeting 1 — Introductions and icebreaker games

Meeting 2 — Expectations and fears of the process

Meeting 3 — Basic identities (place of birth, family, vocation, etc.)

Meeting 4 — Sharing life's passions and hobbies

By now we will have started developing friendships based on commonalities of our fears and expectations, on who we are as people (we work, we play, we have families) and on our common goals for life (passions and hobbies). Next we will move the friendship level deeper by talking about our identities as they relate to family and faith.

For the next phase we will move into a home or homes, breaking into small groups of four to six people that are mixed in regard to faith and gender. After a set of group breakout meetings we will come back together to share thoughts in the large group through a **Dialogue Dinner.***

Meeting 5 — Bring a family photo; share what we learned from our family — the good and the bad.

Meeting 6 — Discussion on how our worldview was shaped by our family of origin

Dialogue Dinner:* After the end of the sixth meeting, all of the small groups comprised of both faith communities will be encouraged to have a dinner together to discuss what the small group journey has meant up to this point. A speaker or speakers from each faith community could be invited to discuss a topic that would be relevant and meaningful to both Muslims and Christians who want to work toward peace and reconciliation.

SECOND PERIOD

Meeting 7 — Bring a Bible or Quran and share a favorite verse from it; explain why this is important to you.

Meeting 8 — Share faith journey.

By now participants will have identified similarities and some differences around family and faith. The common ground we are going for here is the common wound we have growing up and our need to connect with God to heal our hearts. We should begin to see that we are all created in God's image and that we share a common bond as humans who are living for a better future for themselves and their children. We are all children of God created in God's image to serve God and to serve others.

We are developing a safe place for both Muslims and Christians. As we meet in homes, we will begin to look at what makes us different. We will look at what culture, our family and our faith leaders have told us about the other. We will express our thoughts and feelings about the other. We will set a few ground rules here about sharing with respect.

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Meeting 9 — What does the Muslim community think and feel about the Christian community? In this meeting the Muslims will do the talking and the Christians will do the listening. We will neither defend nor judge their perceptions and feelings. After the Muslims have shared, the Christians will look at the list to see what points they agree with and what points they cannot agree with. My experience shows me that Christians agree with what Muslims think and feel about their perceptions.

Meeting 10 — What do Muslims think and know (perceive they know) about Christian theology and doctrine? Points that we don't agree on typically are the Trinity, Jesus as God and his death and resurrection, plus the authority of the Bible. The same process that was used in Meeting 9 will be used here. Some Muslim and Christian leaders believe that many of our theological conflicts result from a deadly misunderstanding. This is an opportunity to explore questions in a safe, respectful and friendly environment.

Meeting 11 — The format of this meeting is the reverse of Meeting 9 and with same results. In other words, this will be an opportunity for the Christian community to share what it thinks about the Muslim community. However, in general the criticism (i.e., fear) of Muslims by Christians has been greater since 9/11. This is a tremendous opportunity for Muslims to alleviate those fears and help Christians see that peace and understanding is on the hearts and minds of American Muslims.

Meeting 12 — This meeting will be a reverse of Meeting 10 with same results: What do Christians think and know (or perceive they know) about Muslim theology and doctrine? However, usually the understanding of Islam is minimal. Just as there are key areas of theology on which Muslims will typically differ with Christians, there are usually points that Christians don't agree with Muslims on, such as the belief that Jesus was only a prophet, the authority of the Quran and the role of Muhammad.

By this point in the journey the group should now be closer in their friendship. People likely will have felt heard by the other. There will have been no attempt to tear down the other; rather, participants will have established a safe place where they can express themselves without defensive objections. We will have heard one another and will have been able to agree or disagree, maintaining respect for each other.

Next we will move to the place of prayer based on our religious tradition. In the next month we will meet at a mosque for Islam 101, explained by a Muslim. Following Islam 101 we will move to a church and do Christianity 101. My experience in doing Christianity 101 is based on the premise that Jesus did not come to start Christianity but came to reveal the kingdom of God to humankind. Christianity started under Constantine, and the goal of a follower of Jesus is not to be a good Christian but to love God and to love your neighbor by following Jesus and accepting his sacrifice for our disobedience. In similar fashion Islam acknowledges that although there are many Muslims, not all of them are believers. A Common Word initiative (acommonword.com) has taught Christians that the essence of true Islam is similar to Christianity in that the Quran teaches that all must love God with all their being and to love their neighbor as themselves. In this important sense God's kingdom can speak to both faith communities.

*Dialogue Dinner

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Notes

Communities of Reconciliation

THIRD PERIOD

Meetings 13–16 — Islam 101 includes at least once participating in the evening prayer. The last session is for questions and answers, though this will go on throughout the presentation. Key here is to stay on target — again, not for adherents of the other faith to argue but to hear about Islam from a Muslim, whether Christian attendees agree or not.

Meetings 17-20 — Christianity 101 (same format as Islam 101)

Now we will move into the action phase of our gatherings. At this point, we hope the Christians and the Muslims will have had a paradigm shift. Neither side should see the other as the "enemy" but as fellow human beings struggling to relate to God (Allah). We will now come up with a list of what we have in common as well as the list of what makes us distinct (again here we see it is the main theological issues but these come as no surprise to the other, e.g., Jesus, the Quran, etc.).

The next round of meetings will be back in a home, and together we will come up with action items:

Session 21 — What will we tell our friends we have learned, and how will we do this?

Session 22 — What ways can we serve the community together?

Session 23 — How can we continue our friendships and bring others into our fellowship?

Session 24 — Tell each other what our new friendships mean to us. End in prayer.

*Dialogue Dinner



After the completion of 24 sessions:

- 1. Do at least one community service project.
- 2. Get together for at least one social event.
- 3. To nurture natural friendships that have formed, encourage participants to call, email and plan time together.
- 4. Read and study holy books together in the natural friendships that have been formed.

