

## **Frequently Encountered Challenges in Interfaith Relationships**

*Often, once you begin a relationship with people of other faith traditions, unexpected issues, obstacles or questions arise. These can appear suddenly or slowly, and may manifest themselves in subtle changes of behavior or increased awkwardness, or may be clearly communicated. Such issues or obstacles can have their origin in the dynamics of the relationship, or in the reactions and responses of your own community or the community you are engaging. Here are some guidelines to help you on your way.*

### **Relational Issues**

#### **Can we do something besides compare our religions?**

A series of programs in which a scholar or religious leader of each tradition explains the tradition's view of a topic, such as death, or revelation, or medical ethics, can become stale or limiting for many participants. It becomes clear that our different doctrines and belief systems have similarities and differences, and yet the interesting comparisons seem distant, or even distancing, and your relationship-building seems in danger of becoming only an abstract exercise.

When religious ideas are considered with too little attention to their embodiment in life, or with too little time for participants to form human relationships, relationships can threaten to stall. Engaging in inter-religious relations is not an abstract exercise in which we stand apart from and forensically “examine” the other as if we were involved in a dissection. To engage in interfaith relations is to *encounter and engage* the people who embody another tradition, and another way of relating to the holy. It is to become vulnerable and to search humbly to see among them the God who we know created and loves all people.

While doctrines or belief systems can appear to be at odds with each other, as if allowing no channel for reconciliation, *people* in relationship to one another often find a path. Though also a matter of scholarly and professional vocation, interfaith relationships are first and foremost about people of faith relating to people of faith – not about beliefs relating to beliefs. *“It’s all about relationship...”*

#### **Is there a right way to “engage” in inter-religious relations?**

There are countless ways to engage in interfaith relationships. And yet vigorous discussions, even arguments, often arise among those working to build relationships, in an attempt to identify the best way forward. It is tempting to claim the value of one option over another, but this is often a mistake. The best way to engage for you and your congregation is better determined by giving careful attention to your specific setting and its history, your partner religious community, and the commitments of the people involved.

#### **Which is better: dialogue or collaboration?**

Engagement often takes one or both of two forms: joining together in cooperative activity in the community, and intentional dialogue between communities of faith. Some who have convened long-standing dialogue groups may see interfaith cooperative activity as important but “superficial,” because the “real” understanding only comes when you risk enough to discuss important issues. Others believe that dialogue should only be conducted as a tool to help us work together as partners in our communities. They see the differences and difficulties that often emerge in dialogue as unhelpful distractions to collaborative community efforts in which there is often little or no impediment to partnership.

Both dialogue and collaborative projects are important, and both contribute not only to understanding but also to healthy community. Both also have limitations.

It is true that groups with very different religious commitments or ideological disagreements frequently can find common cause in public policy or community development efforts. Collaborative efforts in such cases can soften long-standing avoidance of one another, and lower real or imagined barriers. Too much focus on the religious or ideological differences between us can, over time, limit our imagination about what is good for the health of our separate communities, and possible in terms of relationship between us. Many describe their ability to weather political or religious crises to be a result of long-standing collaborative working relationships.

But time and again we also experience that collaborative efforts alone can mask or avoid very serious differences that can fester if unattended. A lack of engagement in dialogue about such matters will perpetuate misperceptions and caricatures. Sometimes it is actually the absence of deeper understanding between our religious traditions that causes apparently strong working relationships to falter. Partners suddenly discover they don’t know as much about each other as they thought they did, and what were believed to be strong bonds suddenly feel more fragile than imagined.

**We got started in this interfaith relationship to deal with a particular crisis. What do we do now?**

Crises (such as the events of September 11, 2001, an incident of violence or vandalism in a neighborhood, or a disagreement about how to provide for the needs of a religious minority group in the local high school) often open the way to inter-religious relationships. But while crises often precipitate interfaith engagement, they are not usually the best settings in which to develop interfaith relationships. In the context of a local, national, or international crisis the pressure is very high, what is at stake can feel daunting, and all communities are usually less willing to take sustained risks. If possible, seek to build relationships *before* a crisis. If you can do this, you will have relationships and a history together to rely on in a difficult time.

Many issues and concerns will be in your mind as you consider an interfaith relationship. What’s important is that you choose a starting activity that makes sense to you and your partner based on mutual interest or shared concerns. Where you start is only the beginning! See “Strategies for living together as friends” in this toolkit for suggestions.

## **How is it best to manage serious differences once interfaith dialogue has begun?**

Any relationship of length and depth will at some point experience tension and disagreement. This often happens when groups of differing religious tradition that have engaged in collaborative activity together decide it is time to enter into more formal, intentional dialogue for deeper understanding. Suddenly people who have seemed comfortable and familiar colleagues become dialogue partners with whom you encounter significant and sometimes uncomfortable difference. As with any relationship, a dialogue relationship requires time to mature and for commitment to deepen. There are some important, tried-and-true “basics” to keep in mind:

*First*, before you begin, remind yourself of your motivations for entering into relationship. Most of us will find more than one impulse. Sometimes it is because you seek religious understanding. Sometimes there are community tensions which require a process of reconciliation. At other times it may simply be that common activities have given all of you the desire to go deeper in relationship. Being aware of what drew you to the relationship in the first place will make you a better dialogue participant because you will know what motivates you and you will be, even without trying, a more transparent partner.

*Second*, know that your specific identity as a Christian is important both to you and to your partner. It is tempting, when a relationship has developed enough to expose difference or disagreement, for partners to want to minimize or even eliminate these differences for the sake of a comfortable conversation.

Many Christians who begin to develop interfaith relationships have an appropriate anxiety about proselytizing, and want to avoid heavy-handed, manipulative testimony to the faith. Often this is the case because Christians are acutely aware of some of the harmful ways “Jesus” and the message of the gospel has been used to convert through coercion. This same instinct, however, sometimes leads us to want to disguise our particularity – that is, our understanding of who Jesus is and our own faith and beliefs – and eliminate them from interfaith dialogue altogether. While that impulse is understandable, it often confuses our dialogue partners. It is not uncommon for a partner of another faith tradition to ask, long into the dialogue, why their Christian partner has not mentioned Jesus! Our partners of other religious traditions bring their distinctive witness into the conversation with full integrity, and expect that we will do the same.

Our partners are not helped to understand the God of love that Christians know incarnate in Jesus if we never speak of him, and are not helped to understand the Christianity we embrace if we focus only on those things about which we have no difference or disagreement as people of faith. Also, if your dialogue partners feel you are keeping things from them, this will undermine their ability to trust you – even if what you withhold is done with good intention.

*Third*, assume that your dialogue partner is as capable as you are to think clearly and carefully. This is critical for those moments when differences or disagreements surface. If your partners believe you respect their ability to state positions and perspectives with care and maturity, navigating the waters of disagreement will be much easier. If, on the other hand, you respond to disagreement with an attitude, even implicit, that communicates “you wouldn’t be saying that if

you were more educated, mature, or rational,” the dialogue will end before it begins, and the relationship will be difficult to maintain.

There is a *very* fine line between, on the one hand, presenting information you feel will clarify your perspective and enhance the dialogue, and, on the other hand, implicitly communicating an assumption that your disagreements are a result of your partner’s ignorance or lack of education. Any important relationship experiences serious disagreement over time, and it will not be healthy if your partner does not feel able to state disagreement without being told, explicitly or implicitly, that they would see it like you do if they simply had better or more sophisticated information. That posture communicates disrespect, and will make the partner less willing to take risks of honesty. It creates, over time, anger and resentment that blocks relationship. As relational partners, you come with different background and experiences, which inform your perspectives. Inundating people with “information” does not guarantee a change in perspective or elimination of disagreement, but will nearly *always* guarantee feelings of disrespect and distrust.

*Fourth*, resist comparing another’s “worst” to your “best.” This principle is critical in inter-religious relationships. All of our traditions present both historical and current examples of mistakes, flawed leadership, and inconsistency. It is very tempting, especially when you encounter disagreement, to place another tradition’s failings under a microscope and compare them unfavorably to the ideal rendition of your own tradition – sometimes only found in theology books! It is a human but not helpful impulse in any dialogue context.

*Fifth*, listen. It is so easy for dialogue participants to spend the time during which another is speaking to formulate their own answers to the question, or a response or “rebuttal” to the speaker. Through poor listening it is easy to miss many opportunities to hear and begin to appreciate connections that may make disagreements and differences easier to understand. In some cases, good listening can even reveal what appeared to be a difference as no more than a misunderstanding. And in those inevitable instances where differences and disagreements will remain no matter how long you dialogue, deep listening can enable insights to help both of you learn to live with it.

*Finally*, keep an open mind. No matter how hard we try, each of us comes to a relationship with some preconceived notions. This is normal. Try hard to be open to what the partner has to say. And try hard to avoid the assumption that you know the answer – or that you already know what you feel about something – before you begin the conversation. Sometimes Christians fear that if they “change” through the course of a relationship they will suddenly find their Christian commitment compromised. Erosion of one’s own religious commitments is not a byproduct of healthy dialogue! When we seek honest relationship and understanding, it is very often the case that we come to a deeper understanding of ourselves and a stronger commitment to our own faith. Deep commitment to one’s own tradition and strong appreciation of another’s are not mutually exclusive.

**Though my congregation has maintained relationships with people of other faiths for some time, world events and our different perspectives on them can put a strain on even the strongest ties. How do we manage this?**

Such strains are frequently encountered right now in the context of Jewish–Christian relationships and three-way conversations among Jews, Christians and Muslims. In these relationships, the ongoing crisis in the Middle East is inescapable and can be extremely difficult. It is often the case that everyone feels they have the best perspective on the situation and its solutions, and that the partner does not adequately understand the situation. Partnerships which once felt strong may suddenly appear quite fragile in the context of a crisis about which all parties feel very strongly. The Middle East situation can also create confusion for many Christians, who become uncertain about how best to maintain relationship with multiple communities, and in the face of what sometimes feels like conflicting expectations.

In addition, the reality of immigration and multi-cultural churches now brings together in one congregation people from very different backgrounds, who think about interfaith relationships in very different ways. Their history and earlier experiences with people of other faith traditions can lead some Christians to very different conclusions about dialogue or even collaborative activity. It is critical to listen carefully to each other so as not to recreate marginalization by implying that the perspectives of those newer to the congregation and to its inter-religious engagements are irrelevant or even just “wrong” because they are different. A widening or changing range of perspectives on the part of one partner community in an inter-religious relationship may necessitate changes in what is being done.

While such differences can be very creative, sometimes they are so painful that dialogue feels impossible. There is no generic “fix” to the difficulties presented by our different backgrounds and the convictions we carry as a result. It is important for dialogue partners who experience tension for the first time to know that such tensions have arisen before, will arise again, and that the relationships most often survive them.

It is vital that you know your specific context, because it, and the relationships you have developed, are the best indicators of how to proceed in times of serious relational strain. Some dialogues – or even collaborative projects – choose to take a “break” to give people room to breathe. This is exactly the right response for some settings; and exactly wrong for others. In some relationships there may be a tendency to seek an excuse for the relationship to “fade away,” and the best path may in fact be to continue the discussion through the difficulty so as not to make a termination of the relationship easy.

In *all* cases, however, maintaining some kind of communication is critical. When one faith community does something that hurts or angers the other, the party labeled as the “offender” or “offensive” will often feel anxious and avoid reaching out for fear of rejection. While understandable, this is often the wrong impulse. It is critical that both partners make the decision about the future of their relationship, dialogue or collaborative activity *together*. This common agreement itself can serve as a “bridge” to keep the relationship alive even if the pattern of relating changes for a while.

## **Are there some relationships we should cultivate more intentionally than others?**

Thirty years ago, for most Christians in the United States the phrase “interfaith relations,” if it meant anything at all, was often synonymous with congregational exchanges, and cooperative activity with the Jewish community. Very important work in local, regional and national settings has been done to establish and maintain Christian-Jewish relationships and collaborative projects.

The events of September 11, 2001, and other factors, have lent urgency to the development of Muslim-Christian relationships in those communities where there were previously few or none. But Jews and Muslims are far from our only neighbors of other faith traditions! Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Baha’is and many others live alongside Christians in neighborhoods, schools, and places of work and leisure. It is important to know the wide range of our neighbors – not only those about whom we hear the most, or those we think we understand the best.

Who are your neighbors? With which communities has your congregation not yet extended an invitation to relationship? What are the issues in your local setting that would benefit from your increased interaction? What changes in demographics or new developments in your town need attention? Be intentional about cultivating inter-faith relationships that are related to your own place and situation. Often the simplest things are the most effective. Taking the initiative to invite another community into relationship can lead to a better quality of life where you live, and to new partnerships in seeking justice and more effective service projects.

Use the established commitments of your congregation to guide you. Members of your church may have inter-religious relationships that can provide a natural opportunity for discussion or collaboration. Remember to consider your own goals, and ask about your partner’s expectations. Be sure you are both clear about hopes and expectations. Then, shape your common goals together. Build in time for reflection about the future, and don’t let your activity become too dependent on, or identified with, just one or two people over a long period of time. The broader the leadership and commitment, the easier it will be for the relationship to be sustained, especially through periods of leadership transition.

## **What should we be studying?**

In addition to action and dialogue with partners of other religious traditions, and asking them to tell you about their life and faith, it can be important to do more study of their tradition on your own. But it is critical that you study your own biblical, theological and spiritual perspectives on interfaith relations – as an individual, as a congregation, and with other Christians. If you have never discussed what is appropriate in relating to people of other religions, or have made assumptions about what your congregation believes without deeper exploration, you may find yourself in conflict that you are not prepared for. Or you may discover a lack of understanding of why you, as a Christian, are building inter-religious relationships. Take the time to discuss these matters as a regular aspect of your own biblical and theological study.

## **Internal Christian Issues**

**What is the difference between interfaith and ecumenical relations – and is one more important than the other?**

### *Ecumenical Relationships*

Building ecumenical and interfaith relationships are both aspects of the Christian vocation, but the goals are very different. Our witness and work to make visible the unity of the church is predicated on our common life in, and confession of, Jesus Christ. We know we have already been given God's gift of unity, though we experience some division in the way we as Christians live our lives and have not yet been able to make that unity fully visible. Churches around the world express theological commitments in different ways, understand the role of doctrine differently, have divergent perspectives on the church's presence and mission in the world, order the life of the church and its leadership differently, and indeed have very diverse understandings even about what constitutes unity! But we seek and nurture ecumenical relationships as part of our commitment to live out the full visible unity of the church in whatever ways possible for us, guided by Jesus' prayer in John 17:21 "that they may all be one."

### *Interfaith Relationships*

The word "ecumenical" itself is derived from the Greek word "oikumene," which can be translated "the whole inhabited earth." When seeking relationship with brothers and sisters from other faith traditions, however, we are not seeking to realize the unity of the church. We begin these relationships out of our belief that God created all things, that all human beings are formed in the "image" of God and that, therefore, in all peoples God's image can be seen. We understand that humanity was made to be in community. In our interfaith relationships we seek neither unity in belief nor in institution, but rather the gift of loving human community that is also God's gift, and God's will for us all.

The very person of Christ, however, teaches us a great deal about God's love, and makes clear that our call and mandate is to live showing love for our neighbor as a reflection of God's love for us. Jesus constantly crossed boundaries to relate to people whom society considered "off limits," "unclean," or just plain wrong in belief or practice. He lived, and invites us into, a life and practice of continually seeking reconciliation and relationship. If we follow him, we are also called to reconciliation and relationship; together we must build strong bridges of understanding.

**How should we respond to other Christians who may disagree with our interfaith activity or relationships?**

Sometimes the most difficult moments are not disagreements with our interfaith partners but with those closer to our own family – other Christians! Because Christians can disagree about how we should be in relationship to people of other faiths, you may at some time encounter a challenge to your activity from another congregation, or from a church leader in your community.

In those instances, use the same dialogue principles you would employ in interfaith dialogue. Be receptive to conversation, state your perspective clearly, listen to theirs, and be open to learning what you might from them. Careful conversation doesn't mean you will change their convictions, or your own – it simply allows you to present your own perspective in a way that is respectful of others, and that invites further dialogue at a future time.

**When I talk to other Christians, and when I read parts of the Bible, I see evidence that points to Christ as the only way to salvation, as well as a mandate for Christians to “make disciples of all the nations.” Does this mean that our goal in any interfaith relationship should ultimately be conversion?**

This is one of the thorniest issues for many Christians today, and a great deal of scholarship has been produced on the subject. It is a very complex topic about which theologians and church leaders have disagreed for centuries, and members of our congregations are not of one mind on the subject either! A few tips may help in talking and thinking about this question:

*First*, don't “proof-text.” Said another way, don't let just one or two verses from the Bible shape your entire belief about these questions, or serve as “proof” of a perspective you've already formed. While passages such as John 14:5-6, Matthew 28:18-20, 1 John 5:11-12, and Acts 4:10-12 can lead you to one view on what should be our attitude toward other faiths (and therefore guide our relationships to people who follow them), other passages give a different perspective – for example, Matthew 8:5-13, Luke 9:49-50; and some Hebrew scripture texts: Genesis 9:8-17 and Isaiah 19:19-25. Remember to look at texts like the creation stories of Genesis, in which we see that God makes all people in God's image, and the first verses of Psalm 24, which proclaims the whole world to be God's, and that God is to be found in all of it. Some Christians even see opposing views on the question in John 14:2 and in verses 3-7. In other words, it is important to consider the full range of Biblical teaching on this subject.

*Second*, the question raised especially in Matthew 28 (often known as the “Great Commission”) – that we should make disciples of all nations – does not give Christians a blueprint for what that should look like. John 17:21, often shortened to read “that they may all be one,” actually finishes by saying “...that the world might believe that you sent me.” Most Christians read in that verse, coupled with Matthew 28, a mandate for Christians to spread the word of the gospel throughout the world. Indeed, sharing the story of the Gospel is a part of discipleship, and Christians throughout the history of the church have found many different ways to do this.

For some Christian communities, living consistent and public lives of faith seems the best witness to the gospel; whether others come to Christianity is in the power of the Holy Spirit and not the job of the Christian to control or dictate. For these Christians, it has felt important to distinguish between *offering witness to one's faith* on the one hand, and *building relationships for the purpose of conversion* on the other.

Other Christians believe that it is in fact the task of all who are baptized to proclaim the gospel to all we meet, and to actively invite and urge others to embrace Christian faith, but that only *God*



will know whether the people we encounter will hear our proclamation in such a way that will result in Christian belief.

In some eras of the church's life, however, the evangelical mandate has taken the clear and often deadly form of forced conversions – both across the globe and right here in North America.

*Third*, talk with each other within your own church family about these questions. All of the views and history mentioned above will be in people's minds, even if unspoken, as you consider beginning an interfaith partnership. What do you believe the Bible says regarding the proclamation of the gospel? What is your understanding of salvation and how a person receives it?

*Fourth*, when you feel it is appropriate, find ways to talk to your partners from other religious traditions about this also. The fact that you are not talking about it does not mean that they are not thinking about it! People of other faith traditions in the United States are very aware of the history of the church both in North America and around the world, and will probably want to know your perspectives. Don't *start* with this conversation – but be prepared to have it at some time.

**Because the church in North America carries a great deal of history related to forced, or coerced, conversion of indigenous peoples, we are aware of the damage and even destruction that proselytism has inflicted on communities. Is it possible to reconcile the Biblical texts that send us to “make disciples to all the nations” with a history filled with mistakes which have been damaging for some people?**

It is true that the history of the church's understanding – and implementation – of “the Great Commission” found in Matthew 28 has been intertwined in many cases with oppression and injustice, and complicit in sometimes deadly mistakes. For some Christians, this history has rendered the biblical mandate to make disciples of all the nations almost irredeemable. It is critical that we not discount the theological perspective of people in those communities for whom history has taken too devastating a toll to allow any legitimate reading of this biblical text. We live our faith in concrete settings and sometimes experience produces lasting, and devastating, impact.

It is also true, however, that there have been many, many settings in which Christians have lived and taught the faith, and offered a witness to the gospel in such a way as to produce healthy, vibrant partnerships resulting in a voluntary growth of new church communities. In those settings Christians made a witness to God's with respect for the lives and religious and cultural traditions of the communities where they found themselves, producing good results. Many Christians who came to the faith through missionary activity speak, yes, of the mistakes, but also, and more profoundly, of the blessings of the church.

Both experiences of being on the receiving end of Christian witness are legitimate; neither negates the other. It is a part of the complexity of the church community, and to try to impose one perspective by discounting the other can be dishonest and disrespectful. Members of local

congregations should become aware of the many different ways the church through the ages has proclaimed the faith and the impact of those activities on the world, religious traditions, and the communities it encountered.

**Although our society seems suddenly much more conscious of the presence of people of other religious traditions, my congregation has had an open posture to interfaith relations for a long time. What more is there for us to learn, and why should we engage in study?**

Many congregations in the United States have engaged in one aspect or another of interfaith relationships and activity for a very long time. For some, this engagement has meant joint participation in community social services or witness on important social issues. For others, it has taken the form of “congregational exchanges” and dialogue that bring neighbors of different religions together to know one another’s religious traditions and commitments. For those congregations, a discussion of the theological bases for engaging in interreligious relations may feel like “old news.” Four elements, however, are worth considering.

*First*, every year many congregations receive new members, some of whom may come from Christian settings that are very different from the majority. New members may have had no previous religious experience at all. It is important not to assume that all new members will understand why your congregation engages in interfaith relationships. If not ever addressed, it will be easy for them to assume a rationale for your congregation’s commitments – and some of those assumptions may not be accurate.

Most denominations in the United States are very diverse, comprised of communities with widely varying perspectives on Christian faith and what the church’s posture toward other religions should be. Our personal history is a deep part of each of us and informs how we respond to our congregation’s activities and commitments. We are even sometimes unaware of our feelings until an activity triggers a response. So, even if you have had the conversation before, others may not have – and new ideas may emerge for all!

*Second*, even longtime members should be urged to ask the deeper questions on a regular basis. Perhaps *especially* those congregations which have long histories of interfaith activity can lose sight of the theological and biblical underpinnings for their activity and relationships over many years. Our relationships will be stronger with regular conversation about why we do what we do, and how our activity relates to God’s word in scripture and our Christian discipleship.

*Third*, our societal context is always changing. Once it was assumed that the only place to encounter religious diversity was outside the United States, or in large cities. Now such pluralism is to be found in almost every setting in our country. In addition, local, national and world events constantly bring a changing perspective to urgent social and religious issues. What was a “front burner” issue when your congregation first began its relationships and dialogues may be very different from what you – and the world – face today.

*Finally*, few families remain untouched in some way by interfaith relationships, either through a member who is married to a person of another faith, or through children, siblings or other

relatives who follow the path of another religious tradition. In contexts where issues of our Christian faith and its relationship to neighbors of other traditions are discussed openly and with respect, those members for whom this is a living, daily reality will have somewhere to share their experiences, their questions, their doubts, and their celebrations.

Don't assume that members of your congregation will feel permission to be open about their family experiences of interfaith relationship if serious theological and biblical questions related to these questions are never discussed. It is surprising how often people say they feel unsafe in broaching this subject for fear of being misunderstood, or somehow being labeled as "wrong" and becoming alienated from their own community of faith.