

Getting Started in Interfaith Relations

Finding Ourselves in Faithful Company

How have you become interested in interfaith relations? What drew your attention to the many religions of your neighbors?

There are many ways by which we become more engaged with our neighbors who follow religious traditions other than our own. Perhaps you have a new co-worker who is a Hindu. You may live in a dormitory with people of many different religious beliefs and practices. Perhaps, after several years of living on the same street, you have just learned that your neighbors are Muslims. You may have been invited to celebrate an occasion in the lives of Sikh friends. Maybe you have invited acquaintances of many different faiths to discuss an issue at your children's school.

Or, you might have decided that you just need to know more about people of other religions. However you start, your interest is a gift — to your neighbors, and to yourself. In most cases, your desire to understand your neighbors and their faith traditions will be received with gratitude, and may well open the door to even deeper relationship. Your interest is also an invitation to yourself and others in your congregation, inviting you to new learning about your own faith.

Getting started in exploring other faiths or in building interfaith relationships may seem complicated or daunting. Like anything new, it will require you to learn new skills, and it will involve reaching out to people whose perspectives are different from yours. A little courage is needed, but the interest and curiosity you already have put you well on your way!

Begin a relationship

Beginning is as easy as picking up the phone or sending an email. Remember that taking the initiative is the only way to be sure that there is a possibility of developing your relationship — waiting for someone else to do it won't work! You may be surprised about how often your neighbor was thinking the same thing — but perhaps didn't quite know how to ask.

Be prepared to propose something specific. You may want to start by sharing a meal at your church, with a specific topic for discussion. You may choose to discuss a particular community concern that you feel is relevant for both you and your partner. You may invite your partner to a shared task in the neighborhood. A specific invitation will be easier to respond to than an open-ended request for "relationship."

Start with realistic and time-structured expectations. Place some timelines on your activity so that both you and your partners can renegotiate your activity without embarrassment. For example, rather than propose an "open ended" dialogue or book study, propose a certain number of sessions. That way, when you come to the end of what you initially proposed, you can feel good about having done what you set out to do (if you will bring your activity to an end), or make an intentional decision to continue with a next step.

Be ready to respond and adapt what you are proposing. Remember that, as a Christian, sometimes you will be perceived as a part of the "dominant" culture even if you don't experience yourself or your church in that way. Be sensitive to the implications of this dynamic — which can include a perceived power in the relationship — as you go about your activity. Taking the initiative will send an important message that you believe that relationships between people of faith, no matter the size or prominence of the community, are important to you and for society.

Being ready to hear and respond to changes that may be proposed regarding what you might do, or how you might begin, allows you to step into more equal partnership.

Learn about your partner's traditions - and your own

Engaging people of other faith traditions almost always results in knowing or understanding your own tradition better, because it requires you to explain your traditions and perspectives in ways that you don't often have to do.

Just as your partners will bring some assumptions about who you are to the relationship, you will also bring assumptions about your partners – even if you're not aware of it! Be very careful to ask questions rather than presume the answers. Allow your partners to tell you what they believe, what they think, and what is important to them rather than assuming you know. This will communicate respect and a genuine interest that will have a long-lasting impact on the relationship. Ask for the same opportunity to tell your story as well.

Share stories of faith

It's easy to think that in order to share our traditions, we must be trained theologians. Not true!

One of the easiest ways to learn about each other's faith traditions is to offer stories of faith as we experience it. This will allow you to share concrete examples of lived faith rather than abstract perspectives on a religious tradition. Keep it personal – in other words, use the "first person" as you describe your own faith, rather than trying to speak for the faith as a whole. That will help you resist generalizing about your own or another's tradition. Even those in your own church may find that they have a very different perspective from yours, and speaking for yourself will help others, who may see things differently, offer their own understanding and experience.

Sharing stories also helps "keep it real" – in other words, it will help you avoid the temptation to become too theoretical and remove your faith from your experience. This will help you avoid comparing an "idealized" version of your own faith to a "lived" experience of someone else's. This is critical for good dialogue.

Cooperate to address common concerns

Just as important as *dialogue* about your traditions is your commitment, as people of faith, to *work* together on issues and projects of shared concern. These two activities are not mutually exclusive, but rather are of mutual benefit. Whether you begin with dialogue or with shared activity will depend on the nature of your community, your specific interests, and the desire of your partners – there is no generic "right" way!

Even if you take the initiative to propose a common project with your partners of another religion, be sure that you make a final decision together, and that what you will work on together is mutually affirmed. Sometimes projects that seem easy at the outset will encounter bumps in the road as you continue – but if there has been a strong mutual commitment, you will have a much better chance of weathering whatever challenges you face.

Cooperative activity, especially those projects which address shared concerns, does more than accomplish good work. It serves as a witness to the wider community that people of faith, even those who are very different and who may disagree on a variety of issues, can take responsibility to come together for the health of the communities we share.

Explore what you have in common – and how you are different

One of the hardest things to do when developing an interfaith relationship is to successfully navigate the transition from the first stage of enthusiastic participation (and excitement about what you discover you have in common), to the second stage, in which you begin to realize that your differences are also real – and some of them will be deep! This is often the moment when people begin to worry about how to maintain a relationship that may at times include some tension.

The best approach is to find honest, safe and careful ways to discuss not only those things that you have in common but also those areas where you differ. Your partner knows you are different – and ignoring it will not change that! In fact, when partners are willing to acknowledge both the commonalities and the differences equally, they come to trust each other more. Minimizing or avoiding the differences will cause your partner to wonder how genuine your presentation of yourself and your beliefs is, and this will diminish trust over time.

So, don't be afraid to discuss your differences, using ground rules that will create a safe environment to share your perspectives either about faith or community concerns.

Act on what you are learning

It is important to note that relationships are of value even if there is no tangible, concrete "outcome" from them. Christians are compelled by faith to be in relationship to all those created by God, and there need not be any specific agenda for these relationships.

Acting on what you learn, however, can be important, and can take many forms. You may find that what you learn about your partner causes you to be more careful about, or sensitive to, certain kinds of language, either in worship or outside. You may discover a particular issue that is of real concern to your partner about which you had no previous knowledge, and about which you feel compelled to make a community witness. You may decide that your relationship is important and want to share the experience with other congregations in your neighborhood or denomination, and in that way make a witness to its value for others as well.

However you take action as a result of your partnership, remember that you will be providing an example for others – both those who already engage in interfaith relations and those who have not yet considered it.

Reflect on your experiences along the way

One of the most important things you can do as you embark on a new relationship do is evaluate what you are learning. What has surprised you? What has caused you concern? What is easier (or harder) than you expected? What more do you need to learn to take the next step? How will you deepen the relationship, and your knowledge? While it's important to do this with your own church family, also consider such evaluation with your partner. You may be surprised what you are both learning!

Over time, it is also critical that you evaluate your motivation for your interfaith activity. What guided you in the beginning may change over time, and if you are not alert to those shifts, you may find your relationship changing but not know why. Trust your partner enough to work through these changes with them

Deal honestly with responses from other Christians

It is likely, as you embark on interfaith collaboration or dialogue, that you will encounter diverse reactions from the wider Christian community. Some will be inspired by your witness and may ask for help in getting started themselves. Others may respond less favorably, and might even

challenge the validity of your activity based on their beliefs about people of other religions and about interfaith relations.

Be honest with Christian colleagues about why you feel it is important to engage in interfaith relations in the way that you are, and remain non-defensive about differing views. This subject is one about which Christians hold many different perspectives, and it is very important that we listen to each other carefully.

If you know that others disagree with your approach or your activities, don't avoid engaging them in a dialogue about interfaith relations! Discuss things like how a Christian should relate to people of other religions, the value of interfaith collaboration, the role of witness and conversion, or any other topic. Facing your disagreements may deepen your Christian relationship as both of explain your beliefs and convictions to each other. Stand firm in your convictions, but be open to what you can learn from Christians whose perspectives are very different from your own.