

Principles for Starting an Interfaith Dialogue

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A Few Principles

Don't Start With Hot Button Issues

Your group doesn't need to deny the points of contrast or conflict. They exist. But they are a lot easier to deal with after you have created rapport between members of the group so that people are talking to people, not symbols. Where conflict is likely, steer away from it until the group is strong enough to survive it. Leave it until such time as the relationships are mature enough for people to "agree to disagree." In building a coalition, you must always begin with the areas that are points of simple agreement. Success in simple matters first.

So if we avoid the contentious issues, how do we find the issues of common cause? Poll the group. I'm sure you will find that every faith community wants to be understood and wants to tell its story in its own words. One would hope that the majority of participants are eager to learn something about the faiths of others. Because there really is something to be learned, and sharing another person's perspective of faith can profoundly impact our own expressions of faith.

Emphasize That Wisdom Doesn't Belong to Any Single Faith

People of true faith are admired beyond the confines of their own religions. As an exemplar of faith, Mohandas Gandhi was a beacon of inspiration to Muslims, Sikhs, and Jains as well as his fellow Hindus.

People of every faith have expressed admiration for Dr. King, Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, His Highness the Aga Khan, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. There is really very little distance between people of true faith--no matter what faith they practice. Working together, people of true faith can accomplish much. Who else could have hammered out a peace accord that would form the basis of Mideast peace but an evangelical Christian (Jimmy Carter), a devout Muslim (Anwar Sadat), and an Orthodox Jew (Menachem Begin)?

As people of faith, we hold more in common than we are accustomed to acknowledging. The work of interfaith dialogue is to explore these areas and build on them. And once we have built these bridges of understanding, it will be easier to explore the points of difference.

Don't Assume Consensus

Well-intentioned convenors of interfaith dialogue often make the mistake of assuming all faiths have a common worldview and a similar set of priorities. There are plenty of difficult areas where the faiths do not agree.

Be forewarned. Far too often interfaith organizers start out with a preconceived notion of the issues that will elicit agreement among all parties. So they tend to trot out a set list of issues and are shocked to find there is no universal agreement.

Don't automatically assume that all parties in interfaith dialogue will eagerly embrace these issues or have a common position on them...because they won't:

- Protection of the environment
- The equality of the races
- The equality of men and women
- Care of the poor
- More equitable distribution of the world's wealth
- International cooperation
- Human rights
- Capital punishment
- Hunting and animal rights
- Political discussions and endorsements
- God. There is a wide gulf between the faiths regarding the definition and existence of an Almighty who directs the affairs of mortals and the universe.

Possible Areas of Common Ground

Surprisingly, the types of issues that unite all faith communities across the entire spectrum are much simpler than the ones listed above. For example, as we enter the twenty-first century, most of the religions are united in:

- Gambling. Opposition to the spread of government-sponsored gambling and casinos
- Family. Belief in the importance of family life
- Spiritual education. Reinstating some form of religious education in the schools.

If you are ready to stow your assumptions and honestly poll the group, you will find plenty of common ground in some surprising places.

How to Hold a Successful Interfaith Meeting

There's more to successful interfaith dialogue than simply choosing the common ground or right topics. You will need some methods and processes in place that ensure your meetings work well for all parties. So, the group members arrive for their first meeting. Now what? In advance of their arrival, you will want to consider the logistics of the meeting place. You want to set a tone that makes everyone feel comfortable immediately.

Rules For Making A Favorable First Impression

1. Location: What does your setting say about your meeting? Ideally, you should choose a setting that is public and is not identified exclusively with any of the religious groups involved. You can understand that Jews and Muslims might not feel entirely at ease in the sanctuary of a Roman Catholic Church. You don't want the meeting place distracting any of your participants or raising fears that they have been lured into being part of a group to which they do not wish to belong.

2. Room setup: Your seating arrangement should be a horseshoe or circle which will signal those attending that they are all equal partners. Try to avoid creating an altar-like head table at which your key people are located. After all, you want to reinforce the notion that all parties are coming together as equals.

3. Tone: You set the tone by making everyone feel comfortable. You do this in your choice of refreshments, remembering that many eschew alcohol and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will not partake of hot beverages like coffee and tea. Greet each person individually. Allow no one to be left completely alone.

How To Open Your First Meeting

1. Introduce yourself: Begin by introducing yourself as the convenor.

2. The opening prayer: Ask for an opening prayer which is all-inclusive or choose a range of prayers from all different traditions. In other words, you don't want to open with a single prayer that ends in Jesus' name, amen. You don't want a prayer that is centred around the notion of a single almighty or you may offend the Jains and Buddhists in your midst. Yet, if you remove these, you can end up with a bland, feel good, psychobabble opening prayer. If you choose to open with just one prayer, try something like this:

We are gathered here together as friends. All of us in the continuous search to live lives that benefit our fellow human beings. Some of us prompted by our undying faith in God, others in our lifelong commitment to perfecting ourselves and the world--all of us committed to fostering greater understanding between the religions and beliefs. All of us want to contribute to peace and justice among all beings. Bless our affairs and our deliberations as we seek to find the true path that joins us all. Banish from our consultations any hint of selfishness or rigidity. Grant us insight, wisdom and understanding. Create among us love, fellowship and harmony so that our unity is reflected in the world, today and for all time.

3. Select the leadership: After the introductions are made and each person tells why he or she has come to the meeting, you will need to choose an interim chair and then agree upon a proposed agenda. It is important that the group have an opportunity to choose its own leadership. You will want to take whatever measures are necessary so that no one feels they "own" the group.

4. Have an agenda ready: There's absolutely nothing wrong with the convenor(s) bringing a proposed agenda. In fact, it's a good idea to have a selection of different ideas and a context for the initial meeting. However, attempts to steer the group to a specific agenda are likely to meet with failure.

How many people is too many for an interfaith dialogue? And how do you deal with certain types of people in the group?

How Many Is too Many?

The rules of engagement outlined in the previous few pages are best suited to groups of up to nine people, and maybe as many as 11. But after you reach 11, social psychologists will tell you that group process becomes slow, difficult and often unwieldy, no matter how capable the chair, nor how mature the participants.

Instead, try these rules:

1. The chair is a traffic cop. The chair is simply a traffic cop, ensuring that each person is heard on the points each wishes to address and making sure that the consultations remain on topic. With only ONE vote. The chair votes as does everyone else. The chair has no preponderant vote. In other words, the chair votes on every issue and represents one vote only. In some groups, where there is a tie vote, the side the Chair votes with will carry a motion. How absurd! Under the consultative model, the Chair isn't restricted to voting only when a tie must be broken, and his or her vote counts as just one vote.

2. Consensus: the aim of consultation. The aim of consultation is to arrive at a common consensus without having to incur the disunity of voting on opposing sides of a resolution. If the participants are mature in their deliberations, there will likely be no need for a vote.

3. Take five. If you do indeed find that there is no agreement on what you are discussing, don't be afraid to step away from it and return to it later or at a subsequent meeting. Surprisingly, most of us in interfaith dialogue groups tend to forget that when matters are at loggerheads is the best time to stop, pray and meditate.

4. Leave your baggage at the door. So you don't like Buddhists and you positively loathe evangelistic Christians. You think Joe is too old, Selena is too young, Selim is completely off the wall and you feel threatened by the smart younger fellow (though you give yourself another more self-flattering reason for rejecting his every idea). Too bad!

Once the meeting begins, all the labels are suspended. That also goes for people you like or to whom you may be related. If a consultation is about finding the truth, any pre-conceived notions or biases you bring into the meeting will prevent the truth from emerging. Just because you are Jewish doesn't mean you can't support a point raised by a Muslim or oppose one raised by a fellow Jew. All the identities are suspended in a true consultation. This also means you'll have to do some soul-searching of your own. When you come to the meeting, attempt to suspend the notions you have about yourself. If you are an All-Believer, allow yourself the room to accept that some plain wrong ideas are going to come up. If you are a Pious Prophet, remember that you are equal to everyone else in the room--not superior. If you are an Intellectual, remember that in true consultation sometimes the most untutored soul will come up with the idea that saves the day.

Don't arrive with a hidden agenda expecting to get your own way or to ioram throughlg your pet project. This will create opposition and discord and will prevent the truth from arising.

5. The Clash of Opinions. The truth emerges when opinions clash. But it cannot come forth when personalities clash. Personalities clash when people take ownership of an idea. When people bring other ideas to attack the one you have put forth, you feel as though you are being attacked personally. There's no room for pride in true consultation.

Worst of all, the others rub it in by incessantly identifying the flawed idea with you. To compound things, a weak chair will allow undisciplined participants to keep repeating the same attacks on your idea. What's the net effect? Well, you launched a trial balloon and then you got to hear six or seven people attack it while associating it with your name--one would have been enough. That makes you feel lousy, especially since you could see the idea was flawed after the first person harpooned it. But a weak chair has forced you,, to listen to you and your idea get trashed for half an hour. And if you're really lucky, yet another

person will attack the idea after the consultation or at the next meeting of the group. It's no wonder some people refuse to speak up in groups.

However, when opinions clash without reference to personality, the shining spark of truth can emerge.

6. The Right to Change Your Mind. Because of our news media, we have become accustomed to a sort of cat-and-mouse chase where people's opinions and beliefs are concerned. The media corner the politician: "Well, Senator, 22 years ago you held a different view on this matter. Is this some kind of flip-flop?" Since when did we lose the right to change our views, to grow and perhaps even renounce positions we once held? I don't remember ever giving up that right, do you? People should also be allowed to change opinions and the processes in any interfaith dialogue up until the time the decision is made final by the group.

However, in fairness, once a decision is made, that's it. If you have bold and brave new evidence that encourages you to ask that the matter be re-opened, that's fine.

How to Handle Different Types of People

Talkative types. You may have long-winded or know-it-all participants who have lengthy opinions and condescending tones to their comments. The methods that I have found successful in dealing with such people is first of all, have the chair reduce eye contact with the long-winded speaker. If the chair is looking elsewhere or at his or her notes, the long-winded type will lose an audience and gradually peter out. If this is not successful, then a careful chair will listen attentively, wait for the person to inhale, and then quickly jump in and ask the person to rap up his or her point or may simply thank the person and recognize the next speaker. There is no harm in telling the group that you want to ensure that everyone is given an equal opportunity to speak. You must do this without singling out an individual. Over a period of time, this will cause the long-winded person to speak less and more directly to the point.

Silent types. Quite the opposite, the reluctant participant may avoid speaking because of shyness or because he or she is content to listen to others or is hiding something. As chair, you should make every effort to allow the withdrawn types to express themselves on all key issues. This may mean going around the room or circle and asking each person if they have something to add. You may also find this type of person is more willing to speak in a smaller group or one-on-one.

Misinformed types. The erroneous group member inadvertently provides the group with inaccurate information. Often enough, a know-it-all will jump in and let the erroneous person know that he or she is wrong by saying something like, "Your facts are wrong" or "Mr. Smith's facts are not accurate." This type of statement identifies the person with the erroneous information and brands the person as "wrong." That shouldn't be acceptable. If you tell someone that he or she is wrong often enough, that person will eventually withdraw from the group. If it is critical that the erroneous information is refuted or corrected immediately, then another group member can say, "The facts that I have say...". Then you may allow the erroneous person to save face by responding, "I may have my facts wrong" or "I got my information from etc., etc."

Guilty types. Interfaith dialogue groups may also attract people who carry with them a burden of guilt (and perhaps shame) that is often played out in consultation. Remember, guilt and shame are too often fellow travellers of religion. These people do two destructive activities during consultation. First, they use the undifferentiated first-person plural ("we"). Second, they speak and act as though they themselves are acting with the authority of the group or some higher source.

I've seen it used to spread a feeling of crippling guilt to everyone in the room. For example, I've attended meetings where someone will make comments like "We don't pray enough" or "We aren't good at organizing" Please speak for yourself and yourself only.

Authority types. By the same token, you may have people in your group who have superior insights on many issues. Again, to attach a correct or popular position to a person is counterproductive. Every time you say "I agree with Anne" or "Ahmad's point reflects my opinion," you are again identifying an opinion with a person. Over a period of time this tends to lend authority to one or two people in the group so that they become first among equals. Here again, the process has become tilted. So, it is better to identify the substance of the opinion or fact rather than the person.

As a dialogue group you cannot afford to allow yourself to be tyrannized by anyone who claims to have "the truth". No one can claim to speak for the entire group, unless they have been assigned to do so by the group. It is the group's responsibility to ensure that responsibility is diffused and that no one, whether they founded the group or joined it recently, considers themselves the spokesperson for the group without prior group consent.

Dialogue is...

...a balance of advocacy and inquiry. Advocacy is reasoning with supportive data. Inquiry is suspension of reason and exposing your mental models and heart, giving the other person a "window to your reasoning" and to your humanity"

Good Dialogue is ...

- an exchange of ideas and experiences that is so active, effective, and highly charged that it leaves none of the participants unchanged.
- means learning to suspend one's opinions and judgments in order to truly listen to one another.
- requires staying in the dialogue, even when one's closely held beliefs are challenged.
- requires all participants to contribute from where they are – even half-formed ideas.
- can result in divergent views converging, discovering a new social intelligence.

What is the difference between dialogue and debate?

Dialogue

Discussion and Debate

To inquire and to learn	To tell, sell, persuade_
To unfold shared meaning	To gain agreement on one meaning
To integrate multiple perspectives	To evaluate and select the best
To uncover and examine assumptions	To justify/defend assumptions