

Principles for Starting an Interfaith Dialogue

By Richard Landau

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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.