

# How to engage in interfaith dialogue

Why engage in dialogue? There are many reasons - to understand each other better; to learn from each other's insights; to form new friendships; to work together for the common good; to help build a more cohesive society. People often find that their own faith is deepened, and their understanding of it enhanced, through dialogue.

## Where can I get a good overview of world faiths? **Some key principles of dialogue**

Two good volumes to dip into are:

- Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions*, Cambridge University Press, 1998 (2nd ed)
- Gwilym Beckerlegge, *The World Religions Reader*, Routledge, 2001 (2nd ed)

Oxford University Press' 'Very Short Introductions' are very helpful on individual faiths.

Also see [www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions)

## How can I find out what's happening locally?

There are many interfaith bodies around the UK - local, regional and national. Most can be found on the website of the Inter Faith Network: [www.interfaith.org.uk/members.htm](http://www.interfaith.org.uk/members.htm).

Local groups and forums vary considerably in structure and purpose: some are informal friendship groups, designed to help people get to know each other, while others may be more formal, with representatives of local authorities, public agencies and voluntary and community sector bodies as well as faith communities. See [www.interfaith.org.uk/local/index.htm](http://www.interfaith.org.uk/local/index.htm).

- Trust and respect are central, and dialogue won't work if one or more of the partners seek to convert the other(s).
- Listen to what the other person has to say about themselves and their faith.
- It's good to celebrate points of similarity between faiths, but it's also important to acknowledge difference and uniqueness. There are many things we have in common, but it's oversimplistic to say that "all faiths are the same."
- Avoid generalisations ("All Hindus/Christians/Muslims etc. believe...") and stereotypes.
- Don't compare the best in your own faith tradition with the worst in someone else's, or your ideals with another person's practice.

## Visiting a place of worship

Contact someone from the place of worship, or someone you already know from that faith, to check matters of etiquette in advance. These may include whether or not to remove shoes, whether to cover your head, how to sit when facing sacred objects, how to greet a member of the opposite sex, whether respectful titles and terminology are used when referring to holy figures or sacred texts.

When visiting a place of worship, keep in mind any points of etiquette mentioned above, and follow the advice of your guide. Questions will usually be welcome, but avoid appearing critical. If you are present at a time of prayer, meditation or worship, find out what would be appropriate behaviour on your part.



You won't be expected to do anything that will compromise your own faith and integrity, but it will be important to show respect. If possible, ask for an explanation of the meaning and significance of words and actions used.

### Interfaith on campus

Universities vary as to the number and range of their faith societies – and in the availability and quality of spaces where dialogue can take place. But most universities today provide opportunities for interfaith engagement. Much of this happens anyway through friendships and chatting with people on your course – what's sometimes called the 'dialogue of life.' However, you may want to join – or help set up – something a little more structured. If so...

### People to talk to

Have a word with your chaplains and faith advisors. They could help you tap into existing interfaith networks on campus and offer helpful suggestions. Does your Student Union/Guild have someone who links with faith groups?

### What kinds of things often work?

- A panel discussion on a subject of common interest. As the purpose is to build relations and learn about each other, try and avoid difficult subjects, especially to start with.
- Events focussed on food. Because of different dietary requirements, all food should be vegetarian; it would still be worth checking whether any faith groups would have difficulties participating. See [www.interfaith.org.uk/local/catering.htm](http://www.interfaith.org.uk/local/catering.htm).
- Shared projects. It's often easier to do something practical together to start with, such as a fundraising event in support of an agreed charity. Dialogue can arise naturally from this.
- A faith trail/peace walk around local places of worship. You can organise this yourselves together with your chaplains, or you may be able to join in something that a local interfaith group has planned.

### Resources: organisations

The Lokahi Foundation provides support for interfaith engagement on campus through its project Campus Lokahi. See [www.lokahi.org.uk](http://www.lokahi.org.uk)

Inter Faith Network for the UK:  
[www.interfaith.org.uk](http://www.interfaith.org.uk)

Council of Christians and Jews: [www.ccj.org.uk](http://www.ccj.org.uk)

Christian Muslim Forum:  
[www.christianmuslimforum.org](http://www.christianmuslimforum.org)

Three Faiths Forum: [www.threefaithsforum.org.uk](http://www.threefaithsforum.org.uk)

A Hindu Christian Forum has recently been set up, but as yet has no website.

St Philip's Centre for Study and Engagement in a Multi Faith Society:  
[www.stphilipscentre.dioceseofleicester.com](http://www.stphilipscentre.dioceseofleicester.com)

St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace:  
[www.stethelburgas.org](http://www.stethelburgas.org)

### Resources: guidelines

The National Union of Students (NUS) have produced a great Interfaith Toolkit which you can download at: [www.nusconnect.org.uk/asset/News/6105/NUS-Inter-Faith-Toolkit-Web-version.pdf](http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/asset/News/6105/NUS-Inter-Faith-Toolkit-Web-version.pdf)

To explore further the nature of dialogue you might find the following websites useful:

[www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/if-faithmeetingfaith-0110.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/if-faithmeetingfaith-0110.pdf)

[www.scarboromissions.ca/Interfaith\\_dialogue/guidelines\\_interfaith.php](http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Interfaith_dialogue/guidelines_interfaith.php)