

Interfaith Dialog – Rationale, Guidelines, Activities

Our Rationale – Why are we doing this?

1. Like cross-cultural dialog, interfaith dialog makes us richer. Understanding the faith of individuals and groups who are different from us helps us understand them better. This enables better communication and deeper community at the local – or even global level. Also, as we gain this perspective, we can understand ourselves better.
2. Interfaith dialog can help us prevent or stop negative attitudes and actions against people of other faiths. Much prejudice and discrimination is based on wrong or twisted information. The best way to correct (or better yet, prevent) this is to provide a way to accurately learn about the other faith AND to talk with people of that faith.
3. Good interfaith dialog necessarily develops our understanding of our own faith as well as our ability to analyze and think critically about it. These skills can go a long way in helping us, as people of faith, recognize opportunists who try to use our faith in pursuit of unwholesome ends (e.g. for political or violent purposes).
4. Some expressions of some faiths include beliefs or practices that many people find distasteful or even immoral (e.g. role of women, refusing blood transfusions). Interfaith dialog provides an excellent way to provide to others – or to make sure we have – a full and accurate understanding of this issue. After we have listened to each other, there may be an opportunity to respectfully challenge each other regarding these beliefs or practices.
5. Through interfaith dialog, we can identify areas of common interest between faiths. Through this we can discover ways that people of different faiths can work together for the common good (e.g. fighting poverty, supporting women's rights, working against human trafficking).
6. Religions or faiths are basically philosophies or worldviews – attempts to make sense of “life, the universe and everything” and, then, provide guidance on how to live. As we understand others' faith and practice, AND as we answer others' questions about ours (along with the thinking / research that requires), we may find ourselves tweaking or even changing our own faith or practice in ways that we find more valid or satisfying.

Our Understanding of / Guidelines for Interfaith Dialog¹ – How do we do this?

In order to avoid misunderstanding and confusion, and to guide our approach, attitude and conduct, we want to clearly state our understanding of the nature of interfaith dialog and the guidelines that proceed from our understanding.

1. We believe that all humans are equal and equally deserve mutual respect and basic rights². We commit ourselves to an attitude and a practice of mutual respect in our dialog.
2. We agree that one of the most basic rights people have is the “freedom of thought, conscience and religion [which] includes [the] freedom to change [one's] religion or belief”^{3, 4 5}.
3. We welcome all who want to dialog – including those who identify with an established faith tradition or religion, those who do not, but still value faith and spirituality, as well as those who are skeptical about a supernatural reality. Some may prefer the word “worldview” to faith. All

¹ We realize that there are other understandings of and guidelines for interfaith dialog (e.g. <http://www.interfaithdialoguebasics.be/guidelineses.htm>), with which we would agree in many, but not all ways.

Also, some would object to interfaith dialog because they see it as an acknowledgement of the equal truth of the faiths – which they see as logically impossible and/or as violating their belief in the rightness or exclusivity of their own faith. We disagree. The “equality” in interfaith dialog is NOT an equality of the faiths, but an equality of the faithful; not an equality of the beliefs, but an equality of the believers.

² For example, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>).

³ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18 (<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>)

⁴ However, we also agree that adopting a different faith is a decision that one should make carefully and thoughtfully, in the absence of any coercion or pressure. In addition to being a person's *own* decision, some would also want to acknowledge the role of God in a person's decision to change her/his faith.

⁵ The possibility of interfaith dialog when some involved do not accept this right / freedom is a legitimate topic of discussion, but this is not discussed here.

of us can dialog together because, although we have different answers, we all ask the same basic questions.

4. In our search for truth (natural or supernatural), we believe that it is possible to approach truth. However, because we are all finite and fallible, we can never be 100% sure we have apprehended truth.⁶ We say, “I believe this is true.” Only an omniscient being can say, “This is true.”
5. We believe that interfaith dialog should explore both similarities and differences between faiths or worldviews. While looking for common ground is a good way to start dialog, seeking *only* common ground will result in a shallow understanding of the other faith.⁷ However, we also agree that care should be taken when talking about contradictory beliefs or practices. A dialog can become a debate and a debate can become antagonistic.⁸ The focus in dialog is a presentation of one’s own (not the other’s) beliefs and practices and the reasons for them.
6. We come to the dialog to understand the other and their faith or worldview. We agree that we should not come if we are *only* interested in talking about our own faith. We should have a sincere desire to learn about the others’ faith – to really understand why they believe and practice as they do. Thus, when questioning others, we should listen and allow them to interpret their own faith. We should not try to “nail them” with our questions.⁹
7. We also come to the dialog to clearly present the beauty, reason and content of our own faith and faith journey. We want to explain how our faith works out in our lives, how it informs our views and actions in all areas (e.g. relationships, environment, science, the justice system, ethics, politics, child raising, family life, art, etc.).
8. There may be times when someone wishes to correct a dialog partner. This may involve a research related issue (e.g. factual mistake, questionable source, misquote, etc.), or a (perceived) lack of appropriate respect (e.g. an inappropriate comment). We agree that these situations (esp. the latter) should be handled carefully, and always with the assumption that the error or offence was inadvertent. It may not be possible or advisable to resolve the issue during the dialog, in which case a joint statement should be issued after those involved have further discussed the issue. In the case of significant inappropriate behavior by a speaker or participant, a leader or participant *from the same faith* should talk with the person and deal with the situation.
9. We agree that dialog partners should, as much as possible, be equals – similar age, experience in the faith, education, and position in their faith group.
10. We welcome exploration and consideration of feasible ways in which we can serve our communities together.

Our Activities – What are we doing? (tentative ideas)

1. Public, formal interfaith dialog events with speakers representing different faiths. Each speaker addresses a clearly specified topic from the perspective of his/her faith tradition, followed by responses to and dialog with each other, as well as questions from the audience.
2. Guided, informal small group conversations. Short, “priming” talks by representatives of different faiths followed by small group dialog. Each mixed-faith, small group is moderated by a trained student leader.

⁶ While there might be disagreement and discussion among dialog participants regarding theories of truth and epistemology, the important aspect here is taking seriously our limitations as human “knowers”.

⁷ It is only natural that sincere believers in different faiths will make conflicting exclusive truth-claims. (e.g. “Jesus was crucified.” vs. “Jesus was not crucified.”) While study and better understanding may eliminate some perceived differences and elucidate some underlying similarities, significant differences will remain. Studying and understanding these differences shows respect to the believers of both faiths, ignoring real differences or pretending they do not conflict does not.

⁸ We do recognize that debates may have value in interfaith relations – if they are carefully and appropriately planned, guided and controlled.

⁹ However, it is appropriate to respectfully ask questions to explore areas of the other faith that don’t make sense to us or to clarify differences between the faiths.

3. Interfaith exploration opportunities. Each faith group involved in the club is encouraged to assemble informative materials (print, AV, online) that are made available for those interested in exploring and learning.
4. Moderated online discussions.
5. Visits to each others' places of prayer/worship. Observation of a prayer/worship service. Preceded and/or followed by opportunity for explanation and Q and A.
6. Invitations to holy day celebrations or observances. Observe or participate as appropriate. Preceded and/or followed by opportunity for explanation and Q and A.
7. Guidance and training on principles and practice of good interfaith dialog. Preparation for student leaders as well as more general training. Making instructive materials available.
8. Viewing and discussing films on themes related to interfaith dialog.
9. Service. Community service together, followed by discussion of how participants' faith guides and motivates their service.