

# Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue

from The InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington (IFC)



## The Purpose of Interfaith Dialogue

The purpose of interfaith dialogue is to increase our understanding of and respect for other religious systems and institutions, thereby increasing our appreciation of their values. Dialogue should enhance our sensitivity to the feelings of all professing religious people in their relationship with God. Good dialogue should, in addition, result in the deepening of the faith of every participant.

There is valid purpose in dialogue regarding an issue which could become desirable or even mandatory for interfaith action as the result of the dialogue.

There is, however, valid purpose as well in dialogue which takes place for its own sake – for the elucidation of subjects and for the forthcoming of the persons and feelings of the participants.

Interfaith dialogue is possible only when two convictions pre-exist in the participants:

1. No participant is seeking to proselytize any other participant.
2. The participants are persuaded of the inherent validity and integrity of all the faith groups involved in the dialogue and are persuaded that no group possesses total and absolute knowledge regarding the nature and works of God and human involvement with the Divine.

## The Process of Interfaith Dialogue

Following a dialogue, it may be helpful to record areas of consensus, areas of similarity, and areas of continuing divergence as those have emerged from the discussions. Such results may be confirmed by all the participants. They can clarify learning and, in addition, suggest subjects for future dialogue activity.

It may also be helpful for the participants to evaluate each dialogue at its conclusion, discussing the ways in which it did or did not work well.

Participants in dialogue should represent their faith group views, but may also share their views as individuals. Thus the rich spectrum of conviction within any faith group can become manifest.

The process of dialogue tends to begin most fruitfully by presenting issues or topics on which there is significant commonality: e.g., varying interpretations of one or more scripture passages. Discussion of topics of mutual concern helps to build both knowledge and trust.

The range of subjects which can be discussed in dialogue is vast. It does not follow that every topic is appropriate. Some subjects involve fundamental and polarized differences which automatically bring on deeply emotional reactions without adding to understanding.

## A Valuable Resource

We recommend “Decalogue for Dialogue” by Dr. Leonard Swidler. Its guidelines have been found helpful.

## Suggested Ground Rules for Dialogue

- We are here as *individuals*, not as official spokespersons of our faith. Some views may well represent the official doctrine while others may not.
- As individuals, be mindful of the use of terms “I” and “We.” “I” refers to personal beliefs and thoughts, while “we” refers to those of a group.
- Speak when it is comfortable for you to do so; you have the right to “pass” on a question or comment.
- Please be respectful of each participant. *Anonymity* and *confidentiality* are essential tools for building an environment of trust that enables everyone to speak freely. Share what you have learned from the dialogue without identifying persons by name unless they agree.
- With this in mind, use this environment to share your heart and mind. Be honest, speaking the truth as you experience it, in love.
- Be gentle with each other’s differences. One can disagree without being disagreeable.
- Do not be afraid to ask others to clarify their comments or questions; we are all here to learn. Often we respond before understanding.
- Among this gathering of faiths and cultures, there is a wealth of knowledge and experience to be shared in a limited time. Be respectful of others and give everyone an equal chance to speak. If the facilitator has to interrupt, do not take it personally.
- Listen to really understand what the other person is saying. Listening without judgment does not mean you have to agree with what is shared.

*Remember we are all on a faith journey, evolving and growing.*

*May this dialogue help you and others along the path.*

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