

Planning an Interfaith Event? 10 Questions to Consider

The purpose of interfaith events is to facilitate meaningful encounters among people of differing religious outlooks. They enable us to discover our rich commonalities and deep disagreements, find new things to appreciate in our own and in others' traditions, and widen the circle of involvement and friendship in a diverse society.

These 10 questions aim to spark important conversations among planners and decision-makers to create an inclusive and respectful interfaith event.

1

WHAT IS THE GOAL OF THE EVENT AND WHAT KIND OF INTERFAITH EVENT WILL HELP YOU REACH THAT GOAL?

When you know your goal, you can identify the appropriate event type to meet the goal. Most interfaith events fall into one of these four broad categories:

- Prayer service or religious meal (e.g., interfaith seder or Iftar)
- Solidarity Gathering (focused on a current issue, such as climate change, immigration, or racism, or following a tragedy or natural disaster)
- Service or Social Event (community cleanup, soup kitchen volunteering, picnic)
- Educational Event (study or dialogue event)

Some events may include two purposes (e.g., an educational dialogue event followed by a community gardening activity).

2

WHO DO YOU WANT TO ATTEND THE EVENT?

At the outset, determine who will be invited to this event. Your planning, messaging, and content of the program will vary depending on your answer. For example if this is a gathering of various styles and traditions of Christians only, you should call it an ecumenical event, not "interfaith." "Interfaith" or "interreligious" events include two or more religions. Recognize that there are variations within religions in terms of theology, practice, and willingness to engage in interfaith events.

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HOW WILL YOU CREATE AN INCLUSIVE PLANNING PROCESS?

Consider how you will include representatives from each faith tradition in the planning process *from the beginning*. Gaining early input on purpose and activities at the outset will help you be prepared to address any potential issues and avoid pitfalls. Do you have relationships with the communities you hope will attend? Or will you need to first meet the leaders prior to the event?



Games are a great way to engage children and adults.

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WHERE WILL THE EVENT TAKE PLACE?

The location of an interfaith event can affect the dynamics and protocols observed. Options include:

- *In a civic location not associated with any religious group.* This might seem like a neutral space, but that is not always the case. A monument, a government building, or a public plaza could have significance that is not always evident, depending on the experience of different groups and the historical context of the space. It might be helpful to name the location and the reason for meeting in that location. If objections arise, the venue could be changed or the person or group objecting could opt not to participate.
- *In a house of worship's social hall or gymnasium.* This will mean that some participants will be hosts and some will be guests in that space. Be sure to discuss how such hospitality can be facilitated.
- *In a sacred space/worship space.* In some religious traditions, sacred spaces have special practices, dress codes, and behavior attached to them (covering heads, wearing modest clothing, removing shoes, avoiding certain areas, gender roles, etc.). Be sure all participants are aware of these practices to avoid offending either the host community or guests.

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WHEN WILL IT BE HELD?

Keep a multifaith calendar handy when planning an interfaith event to avoid scheduling conflicts that will preclude a religious group from participating. Some considerations:

- *Weekly worship:* Each religion has different ways of marking time and a different rhythm of its rituals. Jewish Shabbat (Sabbath) runs from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Muslims attend Jum'ah prayers on Friday afternoon. Christians generally worship on Sunday, although some denominations, such as the Seventh-day Adventists, observe Sabbath on Saturday.
- *Religious holidays or annual observances:* Some religions have holidays that move each year in the lunar or solar calendar (e.g., Easter for Christians, all Jewish holidays and Muslim holidays) and even different denominations or sects of religions celebrate the same holiday on different days (e.g., Eastern Orthodox vs. Roman Catholic and Protestant Easter). Try to be as aware as possible of the potential implications for whatever time you choose to do your event.
- *Marking civic holidays, such as New Year's Eve or Day, or Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday:* Consider if these holidays have previously scheduled or expected activities that will reduce participation.



Photo by Bill Hahn

It is helpful to keep in mind that some sacred spaces have special dress codes or practices.



Top: Fruitful dialogue acknowledges and respects religious differences.
Bottom: Touring a worship space can be a powerful interfaith event.

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HOW WILL YOU HANDLE RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES?

While most interfaith events seek to find common ground, there are times when religious differences come to the fore. Some may feel they can't participate if they have to moderate how they express their beliefs in an interfaith event. Yet, others may feel threatened or intimidated by strongly voiced religious beliefs with which they disagree.

A good approach is to start by acknowledging that there are religious differences, and that they will be respected. Consider establishing ground rules for what behavior and language will be appropriate.

At ICJS we seek to create events that don't create consensus, but encourage understanding. Check out our ICJS resource Denbate vs Dialogue (Written and produced by ICJS, ©2022: <https://www.icjs.org/debate-vs-dialogue>) for one example of ground rules for fruitful interfaith interaction.

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IF PRAYERS WILL BE OFFERED, HOW, AND WHO WILL OFFER THEM? HOW WILL YOU PREPARE YOUR PARTICIPANTS FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF PRAYERS?

If you plan to use only *non-sectarian prayers* that aim to be inclusive of everyone involved, be aware that not all prayers are truly neutral. Religious communities may assume that their prayers are inclusive even though they are not. For example, some religious people cannot participate in a prayer if the name of Jesus is invoked or God is called "Father." Some religious communities prefer genderless or female pronouns for God. Some Muslims prefer to refer to God with the English word God, while others feel it is more appropriate to use the Arabic word, Allah. Some Christians might object to addressing God as Allah. Some religious believers affirm that all religions pray to the same God, while others reject this idea. And atheists, humanists, and other non-theistic people may feel excluded by any prayer that addresses a deity. If you choose this option, you should strive to be as inclusive as possible, using language that takes into account the diversity of attendees and avoiding language or images connected with one particular religious tradition.

If you plan to include more particular prayers from each community's tradition (e.g., Christians pray in Jesus' name, Jews pray in Hebrew, Muslims recite the Qur'an in Arabic during their canonical prayers), consider these options with your planning group:

- Introduce each prayer with context and interpretation to the audience prior to the prayer.
- Welcome people to participate in each prayer *as they are able*, recognizing that not everyone will feel comfortable with every prayer. If each group is praying according to their own tradition, clarify whether other attendees are invited to participate and how they should do so.
- Provide translations when prayers are offered in languages that not everyone understands.

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WHO WILL SPEAK FROM OR FOR EACH RELIGIOUS TRADITION?

Different religious traditions and communities understand leadership differently and may have different ideas on who is the appropriate speaker. Discuss these options with your group:

- *Official religious leaders (i.e., imams, priests, pastors, rabbis, chaplains).* While officially recognized religious leaders often feel most comfortable representing their traditions, some communities do not have officially recognized leaders, so consideration might be given to who feels at home speaking from those communities. Because religious leadership in many traditions is often predominantly male, you might consider ways to include lay participants to ensure that women are visible in the event.
- *Everyone present will speak for their own faith tradition.* This is the practical option at events with a lot of participation and interaction, such as dialogue events. It can often be useful at such events to remind participants that everyone is speaking *from* their faith tradition, but no one speaks for their faith tradition. This could help alleviate the need for participants to somehow represent the “official” or “correct” version of their tradition (however that is defined) and instead to share their own views freely.



Religious leaders are a common option for officiating at an interfaith service.

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WILL THE EVENT MENTION OR ADDRESS ANY SOCIAL OR POLITICAL ISSUES?

Religions are internally diverse politically, and it is a good rule of thumb not to assume that everyone at an interfaith event will share the same political views. Event planners should be clear about what social or political issues will be mentioned and how they can be discussed inclusively.

Even if not on the agenda, political and social issues sometimes emerge in interfaith events. Consider coming up with a plan for how to helpfully redirect someone who wants to turn the event toward their own political or social agenda, including identifying point people in advance who can intervene if the need arises. Quietly taking the person aside and engaging in a conversation will go a long way toward defusing the situation.



If food is served, keep dietary restrictions in mind.

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IF FOOD OR BEVERAGES WILL BE SERVED, WHAT WILL BE INCLUDED?

Food can be a lovely way of sharing in interfaith settings, but it also requires careful sensitivity. Will all food be kosher and halal, or will kosher and halal options be clearly marked? Will anyone be fasting (e.g., Muslims in Ramadan, Jews on Yom Kippur, Catholics on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday)? As a general rule, vegan food is a good option at interfaith gatherings, or consider a dessert & tea reception. Also, be aware that some religious adherents abstain from alcohol or caffeine. Your planning team should discuss this prior to the event.