

Communities of Reconciliation

A Partnership For Meaningful Engagement Between Diverse Religious Communities of Faith

Sponsored By Trac5 & Peace Catalyst International

Purpose: To bring Muslims & Christians from our local community together in order to break down walls, create a culture for genuine friendship, open and honest dialogue and build bridges for peace, reconciliation and service to the community at large.

The goal is to find a group of 5 to 10 Christians and 5 to 10 Muslims (total of 10 or 20) to agree to meet together monthly for 10 months. We are looking for both younger and older adults to participate. Our intention is for these groups to be co-led by both faith communities under approval by the leadership. The groups will meet for four three-month periods with each period ending with a dialogue dinner to discuss each faith communities learning experiences and the spiritual impact of the journey for that quarterly period.

A recommended text for all participants will be *A Deadly Misunderstanding*, by Mark Siljander.

Once the group is formed and launched it is a closed group until the journey is completed. Adding people on later in the process is counter-productive as each gathering builds on the other. Group participation of those committed is crucial but we understand that not everyone will be able to make it each month due to sickness, work and other unseen events but commitment on the front end is critical.

We meet on the premise that there is much misunderstanding and distrust in both faiths about the other. Can we come together to learn about the other in an environment that is safe in order to build genuine friendships? *Our intention is not to debate or engage in polemics nor is it to proselytize*. Such actions lead to further distrust and conflict among Muslims and Christians. It is our hope as believers in One God and His Messengers that we can seek the Straight Path together. When we seek God together in an atmosphere of love, safety and respect then we are all changed by the presence and Spirit of God.

Schedule for 2012 Meetings

I. First Quarterly Period: January-March:

(Location) The first month of meetings should be held at a very neutral place (a restaurant in a private room is great) I often suggest a Middle Eastern restaurant that serves halal food to make everyone feel more comfortable.

Month 1 - January

Discussion 1 – Introductions and icebreaker games (Name Game). *What does your name mean and why did your parents give you this name? Do you like your name? Why or why not.*

Discussion 2 - Expectations and fears of the process. *What fears or concerns have you had about being a part of this multifaith small group process? What are your expectations? Do you have any concerns?*

Month 2 - February

Discussion 1 - Basis Identities (Place of birth, family, vocation, etc.) *Share what it means to be American & Muslim. How important is your identity to you as a Muslim from your country of origin? Is there any conflict between the two? Discuss your place of birth, family, vocation, etc.*

Share what it means to be an American & a Christian. How important is your identity as an American and a Christian? Is there any conflict between the two? Discuss your place of birth, family, vocation, etc.

Discussion 2 - Sharing life's passion and hobbies. *What is your life's passion? What motivates you and makes you feel alive? What causes tug at your heart? What makes you deeply happy and what troubles you at times? Do you have any hobbies or other things that you enjoy doing in your leisure time?*

By now we have started developing friendships based on commonalities of our fears and expectations, who we are as people (we work, we play, we have families) and on our common goals for life (passions and hobbies) Next we move the friendship level deeper by talking about our Identities as they relate to family and faith.

(Location) Now we move into a home or homes. We also during the next month begin to break out into small groups of 4 to 6 people that are mixed between faiths and males and females. After the group break out time we come back together to share thoughts

Month 3 - March

Discussion 1 - Bring a family photo; everyone share what you learned from your family the good and the bad.

Discussion 2 - Discussion on how our family of origin shaped our world-view.

***Dialogue Dinner** – At the end of each three-month period both faith communities are encouraged to have a dialogue dinner to discuss what the small group journey has meant up to this point. A speaker or speaker from each faith community could be utilized to discuss a topic that would be relevant and meaningful to both Muslims and Christians who want to work towards peace and reconciliation.

II. Second Quarterly Period: April-June:

Month 4 - April

Discussion 1 - Bring your Holy Book (Qur'an or Bible) and share a favorite verse from your book and why this is important to you.

Discussion 2 - Share faith journey. *Why are you a Muslim or Christian? When did you make a decision and why did you choose to be a Muslim or Christian? What were some of the key elements of faith that affected your faith journey?*

By now the group has identified similarities and some differences around family and faith. The common ground we are going for here is the common ground we have growing up and our need to connect with God to heal our hearts. We begin to see that we are all uniquely created by God and that we share a common bond as humans who are living for a better future for themselves and their children. As human beings who are unique in God's created order we are to serve Him and to serve others.

We are developing a safe place for both Muslims and Christians. As we meet in homes we begin to look at what makes us different. We look at what culture, our family, our faith leaders have told us about the other. We express our thoughts and feelings about the other. We set a few ground rules here about sharing with respect. We do this by doing a few simple exercises using pen and paper.

Month 5 - May

Discussion 1 - What does the Muslim Community think and feel about the Christian Community. In this meeting the Muslims do the talking and the Christians do the listening. We do not defend nor judge their perceptions and feelings. The Christians after the Muslims have shared look at the list to see what points they agree and what points they cannot agree with. My experience shows me that Christians agree with what Muslims think and feel about their perceptions

Discussion 2 - What do Muslims think and know (perceive they know) about Christian Theology and Doctrine? Points that we don't agree on typically are Trinity, Jesus as God and his death and resurrection, authority of Scripture. The same process and result as meeting 9. There are Muslim and Christian leaders today who believe that much of our theological conflicts are a deadly misunderstanding. This is an opportunity to explore these questions in a safe, respectful and friendly environment.

Month 6 - June

Discussion 1 - Reverse of Meeting 9 and with same results however usually the criticism (i.e. fear) of Muslims by Christians is greater since 9/11. This is a tremendous opportunity for Muslims to alleviate those fears and help Christians see that peace and understanding is on the hearts and minds of American Muslims.

Discussion 2 - Reverse of Meeting 10 with same results, however usually the understanding of Islam is minimal. Just as there are key areas of theology that Muslim will typically differ with Christians there are usually points that Christians don't agree are with Muslims such as Jesus is only prophet, the authority of Qur'an, and the role of Muhammad. It is my experience however that the gap is closing between many Muslims and Christians. They begin to see each other as friends on a journey together towards God. This provides greater spiritual space for creative theological reflection and spiritual journey sharing that is not divisive.

***Dialogue Dinner**

III. Third Quarterly Period: July-September:

By this point in the journey the group is now closer in their friendship. People have felt heard by the other. Striving toward respect- there has been no attempt to tear down the other but there has been a safe place to express themselves without defensive objections. We have heard one another and have been able to either agree or disagree maintaining mutual respect for each other

Next we move to the place of prayer based upon our religious tradition. The next month we meet at the _____ local Mosque for Islam 101 explained by a Muslim. Following Islam 101 we move to the _____ local church and do Christianity 101. Make sure that the pastor/teacher leading Christianity 101 is showing that Jesus did not come to start Christianity but came to reveal the Kingdom of God to all mankind. Christianity started under Constantine, but the goal of the follower of Jesus is not be a good Christian but to Love God and to love neighbor by following Jesus and accepting His sacrifice for our disobedience. In similar fashion Islam acknowledges that although there are many Muslims not all of them are believers. The Common Word initiative has taught us that the essence of true Islam is similar to us in that the Qur'an teaches that all must love God with all their being and love their neighbor as themselves. In this important sense God's Kingdom can speak to both faith communities.

Month 7 - July

Discussion 1 is Islam 101 and this includes observing the evening prayer. Time needs to be allotted at the end of the presentation for Q and A though this goes on throughout the presentation. Key here is to stay on target and again not for the other faith to argue but to hear about Islam from a Muslim perspective whether there is agreement or not.

Month 8 - August

Discussion 1 is Christianity 101 (see Islam 101 for format)

Month 9 - September

The next round of meetings are back in a home and the group comes up with action items.

Now we move into the action phase of our gatherings. At this point the Christians and the Muslims have had a paradigm shift. Neither side sees the other as the 'enemy' but as fellow human beings struggling to relate to God (Allah). We now come up with a list of what we have in common as well as the list of what makes us distinct (again here we see it is the main theological issues but these come as no surprise to the other, i.e. Jesus, the Qur'an, etc. etc.) A white board is very helpful for this session, or you can get the huge sticky pages at Office Depot that you can put on the wall.

Discussion 1 - What will we tell our friends about what we have learned and how will we do this? Tell each other what our new friendships mean to us.

Discussion 2 - Come up with a practical community service project that the group can participate in together. (See *Compassion in Action Facilitator Kit* on www.trac5.org) Schedule, plan and assign leadership roles for your upcoming outreach project.

Month 10 - October

This final meeting session is reserved for the group to participate in a community service project together. This is a critical culmination to the group, do not neglect to execute your service project.

***Dialogue Dinner**

After your final meeting remember:

- Get together for at least one social event
- Natural friendships do form and people call and e-mail and plan time together
- Start studies engaged around looking at the Holy Books together in the natural friendships that have been formed
- Start a new group and share this experience with others