

Learning in the Presence of Other Faiths
Final Project
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Background and Learning Outcomes

We live in a very diverse area in Orlando, Florida. Many of our neighbors are from other countries, faiths, and cultures. On my small cul-de-sac alone, we have neighbors from at least seven countries, and of at least three different faiths. Within five miles of my home, we have several Christian churches of differing faiths, two Jewish synagogues (one very conservative, Orthodox Chabad and another more typical, modern synagogue), a Buddhist temple, a Mormon temple, and a large mosque.

The mosque often opens its doors to the community, hosting community Iftar dinners, summer barbeques, and other events. The synagogue is also home to the Jewish Community Center, which includes kids' summer camps and a gym with group exercise classes, with membership open to the entire community. Our small Lutheran congregation has a relationship with the mosque and the synagogue, which consists primarily of attending events with one another and supporting one another. However, these relationships are limited, and rarely extend to deep, meaningful relationships. In fact, most of the faith leaders did not know one another and had not come together for conversation, until a few short years ago when, during my tenure as board chair of our local YMCA, we brought the faith leaders from throughout our area together to share breakfast and discussion of community issues and concerns. Given the fact that we all live together and all of our congregations are so physically near to one another, this lack of connection seems unnecessary, and easily resolved.

In addition to the lack of relationships, in speaking with Christian neighbors and members of my congregation, there is a distinct absence of knowledge and understanding of other faiths, both religiously and culturally. Christians in our community may know when Ramadan is, but few understand the religious significance. Christians may know that Passover has something to do with Easter (which it doesn't). While I find that my Muslim and Jewish friends generally have a better understanding of Christianity than my Christian friends have of the Muslim and Jewish faiths, there are still a lot of aspects of the Christian faith that are not understood, or that are understood from the lens of mass media, such as the "Christian" view on guns, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ rights. Overall, we are generally rather uneducated as to other faiths.

We are a tolerant community, but tolerance and understanding are different things. This three-session series has four primary goals:

1. Provide participants a non-judgmental, relaxed setting in which to learn about beliefs of various religious traditions;
2. Provide participants an opportunity to engage in discussions regarding the values that are embraced by various religious traditions;

3. Provide participants an opportunity to build relationships with individuals of other faiths, in hopes of encouraging inter-faith friendships and ongoing learning opportunities among neighbors; and
4. Strengthen community by engaging in activity and conversation among the faith traditions.

Overview of Learning Project

This series of gatherings will consist of periodic gatherings of people from various faiths. We will engage with the Abrahamic traditions of Christianity, Muslim and Judaism, although this could expand to additional faiths in the future. Each evening will consist of four primary aspects: (1) fellowship, (2) education, (3) story-telling and values discussion, and (4) reflection.

We will start with engaging the pastors, rabbis and imams, and discussing logistics. Ideally, the gathering will occur every other month for a period of six months, and will include opportunity for individuals to engage with those from other faiths. We want a balance of faiths, so we would seek to have ten to fifteen individuals from each faith tradition, in addition to the leading pastor, imam and rabbi. The “ideal” attendee would be someone with knowledge and understanding of their own faith tradition, so that they can participate and contribute in a meaningful and thoughtful way.

The faith leader conversation should also include a discussion of any faith-specific considerations, such as comfort with gathering in the worship space of another rather than in a fellowship space, dietary restrictions or considerations, clothing/modesty restrictions within the space of another faith, etc.

Invitations to the series should set the stage for this to be an opportunity for relational learning, and participants need to understand that this not a forum for judging the beliefs of others, or for trying to persuade others of the superiority of our faith. Prior to the first interfaith gathering, faith leaders from each tradition may wish to engage their group in advance with conversation of the concept of reflective believing and the various models of engaging in interfaith dialogue.¹ We acknowledge that there are some members of every faith who believe theirs is the only path to righteousness, that all other faiths are invalid, and that it is the obligation of a faithful Christian, Jew or Muslim to bring others to God through the applicable religion. There may be other opportunities to engage those individuals in conversation, but this is not the proper format to engage with that particular belief system.

For purposes of this learning series, it is critical that participants avoid the persuasion/ conversion mindset, and avoid judging other faiths as wrong, invalid or immoral. Depending on the community, the leaders may want to consider whether participants should be asked to enter into an agreement regarding respectful reflective believing. You may want to have the rules of respectful conversation on each table at the event, as a gracious reminder.

¹ Again, depending on the participants and their experience with inter-faith dialogue, one may wish to engage in a “pre-series” conversation to consider different theologies of religions. Paul F. Knitter’s book, *“Introducing Theologies of Religions,”* discusses four different approaches to other faiths: replacement, fulfillment, mutuality and acceptance. We recommend this book as a basis to guide congregants in reflection on their own belief system as it relates to other faiths and their relationship to the Divine.

Each gathering should include reminders of the ground rules, prior to engagement in conversation:

- The goals are learning and understanding, not conversion, judging or determining which faith is right.
- All participants are to be respectful of all beliefs of others. Just because a belief does not seem credible or meaningful to you is not a reason to be dismissive or disrespectful.
- Each faith leader and each participant speaks for themselves, acknowledging that different individuals within a faith may have different views on matters of faith.
- We can and should acknowledge and appreciate different points of view, backgrounds, and beliefs. We do not have to find common ground with respect to every belief or topic.
- Meaningful conversation is not easy, or light. Each participant should make efforts to be open to questions regarding their own faith, even those that feel challenging. For instance, Muslims may ask why Christians believe everyone outside of their faith is eternally damned; Christians may ask why Muslims kill Christians. These are legitimate questions based upon the experience of the questioner, and so long as they are asked respectfully, can lead to meaningful, albeit difficult, conversation.
- Deeper relationships and understanding will come through continued conversation and shared experiences. All participants are encouraged to continue the conversation outside of the structured evenings, to gather for social interaction, to meet one another's families and friends, etc.

Each evening will proceed generally in the following four-step format.

1. Fellowship.

Each gathering will occur at a different location – the mosque, synagogue and church. The hosting faith community will provide greeters, and as people gather, will provide small-group tours of the space. It is plausible that some participants have never been in the worship space of other faiths, and there is much to be learned from how and why the physical space is set up as it is in each community. For instance, mosques often have mezzanines or other segregated spaces, and men and women are seated in separate areas, although they worship together at the same service. This can be viewed by some as placing women in a position of “second class,” and so it is important to allow our Muslim neighbors to share their story of their space and their tradition.

Following the small group tour, people will be directed to the gathering space, for a shared meal. Ideally, the meal will include some foods that are representative of the hosting faith community's culture. Table seating will be coordinated so that each table consists of at least two people from each faith tradition. Once individuals have their meal, time will be given for introductions and casual conversation at the table, while people eat dinner. If group size allows, we suggest doing short, individual introductions in the group setting, providing an opportunity for each person to indicate their name, faith community, and their reason for attending and/or hopes for the sessions, if they are comfortable sharing.

Throughout the series, participants will be encouraged to build relationships, and welcome to share their contact information to allow continued conversation outside of the structured evenings. We will also create a directory with contact information for each participant (other than anyone who requests to be excluded), to facilitate relationships and communication among the participants.

2. Education

After sufficient time for gathering, eating and fellowship, the imam, rabbi, pastor (whichever faith is hosting), or someone else from the hosting community's faith tradition, will present a brief fifteen- to thirty-minute presentation regarding the faith tradition, the history, and the basic beliefs. This may include demographic information and cultural information in addition to faith beliefs. The speaker may also wish to address misinformation that exists regarding the faith, as well as differing beliefs within the faith (i.e., some Christians believe homosexuality is a sin, while others believe God dwells in the mystery of all human sexuality).

There should be ample time left for questions, as there are likely to be many. The hosting faith community may also wish to share information regarding their faith for the participants to take home. It is important to note that such sharing should be done with the reminder that the goal is education and learning, not conversion (since many of the materials that are used in explaining the faith, such as the *"Why Islam?"* booklet that is given away at our mosque, are, in fact, geared toward bringing people into the faith).

The presentation and question time should be followed by a short break, for people to move about and stretch, both mentally and physically. You may want to encourage people to use this opportunity to talk with someone outside of their table group.

3. Story-Telling and Values Discussion

Following the break, the imam, rabbi or pastor (the hosting community faith leader), or someone else from the hosting community's faith tradition, will engage in story-telling. The story should be related to, but not central to, the faith, and should share the values of the faith in a relatable manner.

While the content will differ with each story and each storyteller, the structure should be relatively consistent, beginning with the story telling, then small group and/or large group discussion. It is important that the discussion be entered into not with the goal of finding how "we're all the same," but rather to acknowledge that there are similarities and differences within and among the faith traditions. Depending on the group, the storyteller may wish to provide a reminder of this prior to breaking into small group discussion.

For instance, the Muslim leader would not tell the story of the Prophet Mohammed, which is central to the faith. Rather, he may choose to tell a parable from the Quran, or a story such as "A Handful of Dates," by Tayeb Salih, which provides opportunity to consider values such as love of neighbor, caring for family, contentment, trust in God, and respect. Similarly, the Christian leader would not tell the story of Jesus' birth, ministry or death and resurrection, which are central to the faith. Rather, she may

choose to share the poem “Footprints in the Sand,” which speaks to reliance on God and God’s care for each of us, or perhaps a parable from Jesus’ ministry. There are no limitations as to what may be considered for storytelling, but the most meaningful stories will be those that are meaningful to the storyteller who will be facilitating the conversation. The faith leaders may wish to discuss their choices with one another, however, to ensure a lack of redundancy. The exercise would be less meaningful by the third gathering if each story was focused on the same one or two values, so variety is key.

Each story segment should include the story itself, as well as guided contemplation, small group discussion and large group discussion. Each storyteller will need to develop their own means of telling the story, and their own structure for contemplation and discussion, based on the story they are sharing and the values that they wish to highlight in conversation.

As an example, if a Muslim leader chose to share “A Handful of Dates,” they could simply read the story aloud. However, they could instead choose to have the story acted out through a skit, or may show the short film of the story. If they chose to read the story or show the film, they could read/show it once, and then suggest a set of words, such as “greed, wealth, deception, ambition, laziness” then /show the story a second time, asking people to keep those words in mind. Allowing a few moments of silent consideration, they would then suggest a differing set of words, such as “contentment, care of family, trusting God,” and then read/show the story a third time with the second set of words in mind.

The storyteller may also wish to share any cultural components of the story that may not be evident to those from other cultures. For instance, dates have a cultural significant in many Muslim communities, including Sudan, where the film “A Handful of Dates” is based. The storyteller could share dates with the group, or read passages from the Quran that talk about dates.

This may also provide an opportunity to reinforce some prior learning about the hosting faith tradition. For instance, the educational component of the Islamic faith may have included a discussion of holidays, including the month of Ramadan. The discussion of dates could include a notation of the Prophet Mohammed’s statement that fasts should be broken with dates and water, and that Muslims break their fast each day of Ramadan with dates and water based on those passages. Similarly, the short film “A Handful of Dates” shows only men gathered outside the mosque, and mentions that the neighbor is a “much-married man,” both of which may provide an opportunity to discuss the roles of women in the Islamic faith, which is oft-misunderstood.

Before moving to group discussion, it is important to allow a time for questions, particularly since some of the stories may involve other time periods and cultures. For instance, if a Jewish leader shared the story of God calling Samuel at night, they may choose to read from the Torah, but may also choose to share a song or video that tells the story. Here’s a great version of that story, which provides a fun, light-hearted telling: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P13uIsFW7OA>. If one were to hear the story from the Torah, or watch this video, they may have questions regarding why Samuel was living in the temple instead of with his parents. While not integral to the discussion, those questions, if left unanswered, could well get in the way of broader faith-focused learning if left unanswered. Once

general questions have been answered (not those addressing values, which are the topic for the group discussions), the storyteller should then move into the group conversations.

The structure of group conversation will vary, based on the story, the values being highlighted, and the storyteller's goals, but generally should involve conversation regarding (a) values being evidenced in the story, (b) how each faith tradition shares, or does not share, those values (including consideration of scriptural passages), and (c) how those values are lived out in practice by members of each faith. For instance, returning to the example of the story *A Handful of Dates*, the storyteller could ask participants in their small table groups to agree on a list of three values that they believe are evidenced in the story, and then to consider scriptural passages from the Torah, Bible, and Quran that reflect (or oppose) those values in the faith tradition. In some instances, this may highlight shared values among the faith traditions. In other instances, it may highlight inconsistent values within a tradition (i.e., the Christian value of being content with one has and the value of trusting God's provision, and the "flip side" Christian value of hard work in the service of God, family and community). Of course, the manner in which the story was shared may influence the discussion.

After allowing time for the guided contemplation and small group discussion, the group should come back together, and each small group should share with the larger group the values and scripture that they considered in their small groups, and the larger group may then engage in conversation regarding the values of the various faith. This is likely a time where differences will be highlighted, and people may be surprised by what they learn, even about their own faith. This is also a wonderful opportunity to encourage participants to enjoy learning from each other, and the role of active learner.²

We suggest another short break here, again to allow people to visit with one another, discuss the story and their learnings, and stretch their legs.

4. Group Reflection

The final segment of the evening is an opportunity for sharing learning among the group. Hopefully, the conversations have sparked learning and curiosity, and this space should provide an opportunity to reflect on both. A white board, easel, or chalkboard is an important tool for this exercise.

First, a leader from the hosting community should start the conversation by asking participants to share something they learned. This is an intentionally open-ended question, without borders. Participants can share something they have learned about the hosting faith tradition, something about their own tradition, or something about themselves.

After a few minutes of that conversation, the leader can ask the participants to share something about which they wish to learn more. Again, this is an open-ended question, and may spark questions about other faiths, holidays, culture, food, or even paths to salvation. This is not the time to answer those

² Attachment 1 is a wonderful visual depiction of how we learn in relation to one another, as both teachers and learners in every interaction. My apologies, but while this was in the slides from March 15, I am not able to determine where credit should be given for the depiction.

questions (although, obviously, one could do so if it were a simple question, like what is the celebration at the end of Ramadan called). Rather, this is a time to simply gather questions and curiosities.

Finally, the leader can ask participants if there is anything else they would like to share with the group.

Moving to wrapping up the evening, there are three action steps to encourage participants to take between gatherings.

The first action step is that the participants from the hosting faith will either meet together or divide up the list of questions posed during the reflection, and seek to provide answers or resources prior to the next gathering. This can be done by email, at the beginning of the next gathering, or some combination of the two, as the answering group believes best. While some questions may be “answerable,” others may be topics for further consideration, and the response will not be an answer, but rather a book, a resource, a website, or even an invitation to an event at the faith community to learn more. For instance, “Why is Good Friday called good?” is a common question, and while we could provide an answer, we could also provide an invitation to our Good Friday and Easter Sunday services.

The second action step is that each participant will receive an email with a few questions about the evening, including things that worked well for them and things that did not work well for them or that made them uncomfortable, and they are asked to respond to those. The responses will be anonymous, but participants will be asked to share which faith tradition they are from, so that any issues with inclusivity, cultural distinctions, or absence of respect for beliefs can be considered and addressed in future gatherings.

Lastly, and most importantly, each participant is asked to reach out to and engage in human (non-electronic) conversation with at least one other participant from a different faith. This can be a one-on-one phone conversation, lunch, a kids’ play date, a small group gathering, or any other form. The goal is that by the end of the gatherings, each participant has at least one new friend from each other faith represented in the gatherings. This will, hopefully, provide an ongoing opportunity for conversation, learning and interfaith support. Leaders may need to provide support and encouragement in this regard, including fostering small group gatherings to bring people together.

In addition, both during and following the series of gatherings, we will ask each congregation to consider opportunities to include those of other faiths in their traditions and activities. In our area, we often invite those of other faiths for prayer services after church/mosque/synagogue shootings or other tragic events, which is meaningful and important. However, what would community look like if we didn’t wait for tragedy to come together? For instance, if your church’s Sunday School kickoff includes a church-wide barbecue, what would it mean to extend an invitation to those of other faiths to join for the barbecue? If the local mosque is hosting a prayer service, what would it look like if an invitation was extended to those of other faiths? Would we hold Passover in a different sense of awe if we attended a traditional Seder dinner with our Jewish friends, and had the opportunity to learn of the history behind the six items on the Seder plate? How would our learning be expanded if we attended a weekly service at one another’s houses of worship?

Successes and Challenges

In considering how to evaluate the success of the series, it is important to manage expectations.

One measure of success will be the return of participants. What percentage of participants return for the second and/or third gathering? Obviously things come up, and 100% is not feasible, but if you do not receive feedback from the post-gathering emails (silence is often a polite way of expressing dissatisfaction), or if you notice a significant decrease from Gathering 1 to Gathering 2, you may want to reach out to some participants for conversation about the benefits, successes and challenges of Gathering 1.

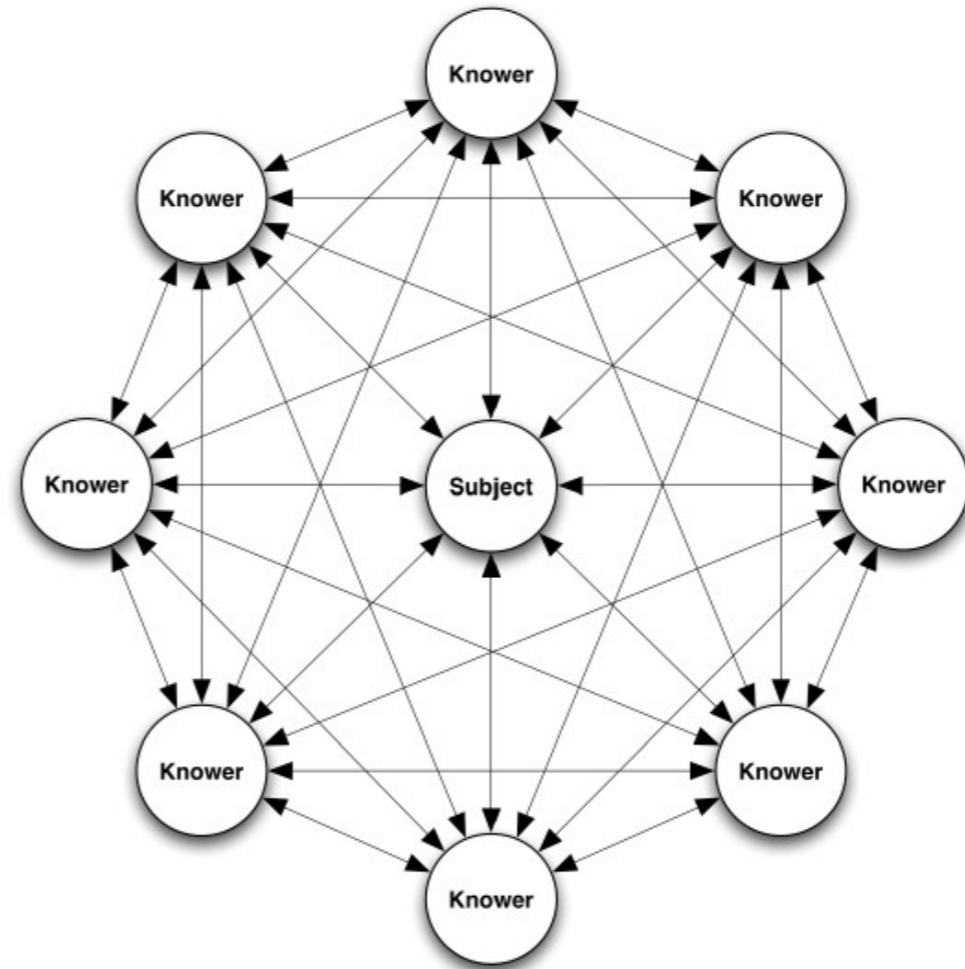
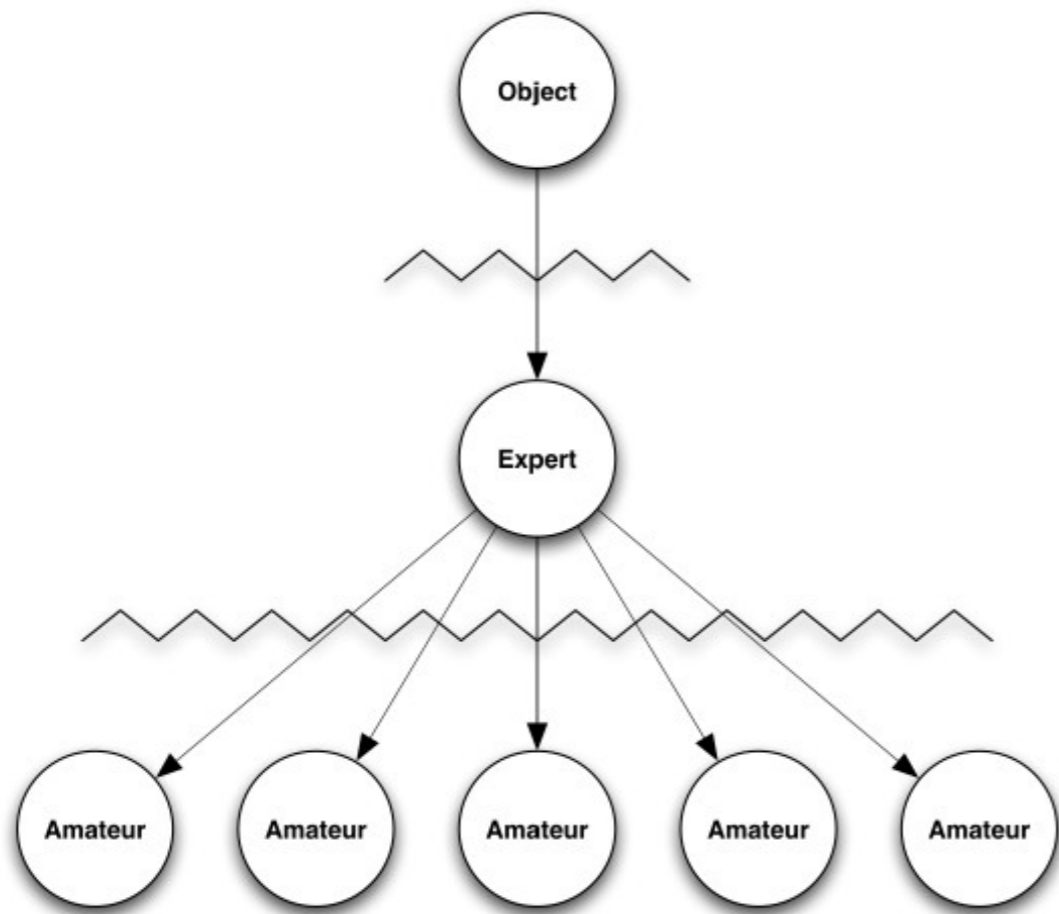
Another measure of success will be the extent of extra-curricular engagement, in the form of one-on-one, small group, or congregational connections outside of the gatherings. Some individuals will embrace the idea of building community and dedicate energy and effort toward that goal. Others will attend the gatherings and participate in little else. The ability of each participant to engage needs to be respected. It is important to celebrate each one of these connections as its own success, yet we should also pay attention to whether there are obstacles that may be impairing overall connections and relationships.

A third measure of success will be the list of learnings and the questions developed each week in reflection, as well as the survey responses. Those will provide a sense of the depth of understanding and the knowledge shared among the groups, as well as the comfort level of participants to share with one another.

In all honesty, I believe that the mere fact that we have brought the three faith leaders together, and brought the participants together with the opportunity to learn, is a success in itself. Engaging in conversation and simply providing an opportunity to know someone of a different faith matters, especially in a time when we have such divisive politics.

While there is much potential for a wonderful outcome from this series, it is also important for the leaders to acknowledge that, while we can work to make this a wonderful experience, it is quite probable that someone from among the 30-45 participants will, at some point, feel challenged, offended or unwelcome. It is important to allow the group to engage in meaningful conversation, while acknowledging that conflict is likely to occur. Unfortunately, with the encouragement of individual interaction and extra-curricular activity, it is quite possible that some of that conflict may occur in an unfacilitated environment. Accordingly, we suggest the leadership (not necessarily the pastor, imam or rabbi, but someone with ability to facilitate difficult conversation) be available to participants throughout the series, and also reach out to participants two to four weeks before each gathering, to check in, see how their conversations with other participants have been, and provide any support or encouragement that may be appropriate. This will improve the likelihood of continued engagement, as well as an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings or miscommunications, and to hopefully repair any relationships that may have been damaged along the way.

We are blessed to have an environment that allows dialogue and conversation among neighbors of different faiths and cultures.



relational, not relativist