

Guidelines
for
Interfaith
Events & Dialogue

Prepared by the Committee for
Christian Unity & the
Bishops of the Church of Ireland





Published by
Church of Ireland Publishing
Church of Ireland House
Church Avenue
Rathmines, Dublin 6

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ISBN 978-1-904884-15-6

Printed by Paceprint Trading Ltd,
Dublin, Ireland

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Preliminaries

IN THIS DOCUMENT we use the term: Interfaith to refer to the relations among different world religions, for example: Buddhism, Islam, Christianity.

The term “Interfaith” does not, and should not refer to relations across different Christian denominations. For such relations, the term “Ecumenical” is appropriate.

This document has been prepared by the Committee for Christian Unity and the Bishops of the Church of Ireland, Epiphany 2007, and is to go to all members of the Church of Ireland clergy.

Introduction

THE SOCIETY IN which the Church of Ireland is today called to mission and to ministry is increasingly marked by a plurality of religions, beliefs and spiritualities. This is in part due to the recent and accelerated migration of peoples from other countries who have brought their faiths and cultures with them to Ireland. But many of these faith communities have been here for a number of generations and, in some instances, the majority of their members has been born on this island.

The situation is constantly changing with the continuing arrival of people seeking refuge and wishing to establish a new life for themselves and their families in Ireland. Beyond the visibly and culturally identifiable communities of faith, there is also a wider plurality and fluidity of spirituality in our societies. Many seek meaning and purpose in new or alternative patterns of spirituality, and there has been a growth in conversions from one religion to another.

It is important to create positive and informed relationships with people of all faiths. This must be handled with an integrity which respects both the faiths of others and the Christian faith as received by the Church of Ireland. Any mishandling of Interfaith situations can easily lead to hurt for others and to division among members of the Church of Ireland. In light of all of this, these Guidelines are offered to clergy and laity in the Church of Ireland involved in planning or taking part in Interfaith events and encounters with people of other faiths at local and parish level.

Guiding Principles

HUMANITY IS MADE in the image and likeness of God and all people are our brothers and sisters by creation. All our encounters with people of other faiths must be based on the Christian principles of faith, hope and love. They ought also to be based on respect for human rights, tolerance of difference and openness to new experiences and fresh learning. When we welcome the stranger, we can often find we are entertaining angels (Genesis 18: 1-15) and even encountering Christ Himself (Matthew 25: 35, 38-40).

In relating to those of other faiths, it is important to create and develop relationships and understanding between people as individuals and as communities. Church of Ireland clergy and people are encouraged to take positive and proactive steps in establishing good neighbourly relationships and to foster an accurate understanding of what other people believe. Dialogue, with respect, openness and honesty all around, is of great significance and importance.

Christians in Ireland must be committed to freedom of religious expression and entitlement to worship for people of other faiths. This is what we expect of others in countries which are not predominantly Christian and what we should expect to provide in our own country. Dialogue must enhance peace and justice and respect the integrity of creation. It should never be an instrument for continuing past hurts or perpetuating injustices. Those who suffer for their faith in all lands cry out for our compassion.

True dialogue and integrity in Interfaith relations also demand a respect for our own tradition along with being committed to what we believe, if we are to be representative in a broad and comprehensive way of our own tradition and of our fellow believers. We have Good News to share with the world (Matthew 28:19-20), and the gift of the Spirit to the Church (Acts 2:1-21) sends us out to meet people of all faiths, traditions and cultures.

Interfaith Events

1. General

WHEN PEOPLE OF other faiths and their leaders are invited to Christian worship in our churches, we should respect their own beliefs, offer friendship and hospitality, and make them welcome. A discussion should take place beforehand, explaining the Christian approach to worship and the context of the service they are attending, explaining also that there is no expectation that they say anything in prayers, hymns and other parts of such worship, which is contrary to their own faith convictions. Such visitors should be treated with warm hospitality, and with the recognition that some may well feel uncomfortable in an environment unusual to them. They should not be asked to, or feel under pressure to, adopt a posture that implies worship, whether this is sitting, kneeling or standing, or be placed in a position of visible prominence in a church against their wishes. Where there are any questions or doubts about the place or role of visitors, the Canons must be followed carefully and the advice and judgment of the Ordinary sought.

It is important that visitors know that the sacramental sharing of the Eucharist is appropriate only for those who are baptised and communicant members of Christian churches.

Worship in consecrated churches of the Church of Ireland must always be in the name of the Holy Trinity. Interfaith worship in churches must be guided

by this principle. In the context of Christian worship, it is not appropriate to use prayers that are not addressed to God or are not fully consonant with Christian worship. Scriptural readings for use in the context of Christian worship are to be from the Bible. Christian worship can never be syncretistic. Where there is any question about this, the Canons must be followed carefully and the advice and judgment of the Ordinary sought.

While people of other faiths may be invited to bring greetings or to speak to a parish or congregation, it is not deemed appropriate for a person of another faith to preach in the context of Christian worship. Where someone of another faith brings a greeting to a Church of Ireland parish or congregation, it is appropriate that this should take place before the service proper begins or after the service has ended. If there are seemingly insurmountable difficulties, the exchange of greetings can take place appropriately in a venue other than the church building, such as in the context of hospitality in a church hall or community hall.

2. Occasions of Local or National Importance

When there is an occasion of major importance, whether local or national, and people of different faiths are gathered in an agreed common venue other than in Church of Ireland church building, it is appropriate to invite representatives of each faith in sequence to lead their people in prayer. This is best made clear by leaving a distinctive gap between each contribution. If there is a time of silent reflection, it

should be described and differentiated as such.

If the occasion is marked by an event held in a Church of Ireland church building, such representatives may be invited to express the heartfelt feelings of their people and to introduce silent reflection. In such a situation the advice and judgement of the Ordinary should be sought.

In the event of a tragedy, local, national or international, the advice of the Ordinary should be sought in relation to venue and content. Every encouragement should be given to all parties concerned to prepare their response quickly and collaboratively.

12 Issues for Christians in Interfaith Encounter

MEEETING PEOPLE OF other faiths can be a profoundly transforming experience for people individually, leading to a deepening, renewing and enlarging of faith. As Christians, however, we are never involved in Interfaith situations solely as individuals, but always also as members of our faith community. This representative role has a particularly high profile for those who are ordained. Yet Interfaith encounter is also an area of Christian discipleship where lay people have a vital role to play. They too speak and act on behalf of the whole Church and have many opportunities to model respect and hospitality in daily life.

1. Building trust

In Interfaith encounter, there can be no substitute for the patient, painstaking and time-consuming process of getting to know our neighbours of other faiths, earning their respect and becoming their friends. Within relationships of this kind, built up over many years, dialogue becomes authentic, the quest for truth can be honestly pursued and difficult issues can be addressed.

2. Speaking truthfully

Speaking truthfully means that we avoid simplistic language. We need to recognise the complexity and diversity of all faith communities, including our own. When we speak of the beliefs and practices of others, we must first seek good information and rely on authoritative

sources to build up our knowledge. We must talk about our neighbours in language that will enable them to recognise themselves in our descriptions of them. This involves an imaginative and sympathetic effort to think ourselves into their situation.

It is unfair to compare the ideals of our own religion with the practice of another, or *vice versa*. Christians and members of other communities need to acknowledge that we all face challenges in living by faith in our societies and that we often fall short of the ideals. Even in situations where we strongly disagree with others, we must make an effort to understand their beliefs and practices, to respect the faith which informs them, and to love them as our neighbours. If we feel there are times when we must be critical of others' positions, we cannot sidestep the need for self-criticism and the challenge of criticism by others.

3. Sharing our faith

We are called to share our faith with others in ways which are confident but sensitive. We must be ready to listen and to learn as well as to speak. The intentions of those engaged in dialogue may differ. It is, therefore, easy to suspect one another of hidden agendas. We cannot force our beliefs on others, but we should always be ready to witness to our faith by deeds as well as by words. We must never exploit the situation of vulnerable individuals and groups, nor make our service of others conditional on their accepting Christian faith.

Within our churches, we recognise that Christians differ among themselves about the relationship between Interfaith dialogue and evangelism. It is important that these differences be discussed openly and respectfully in the light of our theology and experience.

4. Coming together before God

There may be times when Christians would like to come together with people of other faiths in an attitude of prayer and worship before God. This may happen, for example, in the pastoral context of a marriage or a funeral, as part of the ongoing life of a group or organization. It may happen at times of crisis, remembrance or thanksgiving, locally or nationally. Some Christians welcome occasions like this. Others will find them difficult. Similarly, a range of attitudes will also be found among people of other faiths.

When Interfaith gatherings are organised, it is important to be clear about the purposes of the event, to consider carefully what is an appropriate venue and to ensure that all present can take part with integrity and without confusion in what is planned. Sharing silence can provide a valuable and powerful way of expressing our presence together before God. During such a coming together we are also learning from the experience of being present as honoured guests at one another's times of prayer and worship.

5. Responding to changing societies

Religious and cultural diversity has brought a new vitality to many communities. But confusion and pain can be felt by long-established communities who find their neighbourhoods transformed. It is important to maintain a vigorous and engaged Christian presence at the local level in multi-faith areas. At the same time, we need to be aware of the ethnic and religious discrimination in our societies which affect other faith groups. Both considerations require courage, courtesy and compassion.

6. Educating and nurturing in faith

Where the Church is involved in education, we can ensure that children and young people are adequately equipped for life as citizens of a religiously plural society. Christianity should be taught together with an awareness both of its international reach and of its cultural diversity in local situations. Within the church community, teaching needs to be shaped in such a way as to help Christians explore the Interfaith implications of our own faith, and to reach new understandings of how much Jews, Christians and Muslims, for example, share in common. Experiences emanating from educational opportunities can help to give us a proper confidence in our own faith and a generous openness to others.

7. Supporting family life

We need to be sensitive to the hopes and needs of those who are thinking of embarking on marriages

across the boundaries of faith communities. Clergy and others with a ministry of pastoral care should be equipped to provide appropriate advice and support for the couples involved and for their families. They also need to access suitable resources for the nurture and education of children of Interfaith couples, and to develop patterns of support for the families of those who have converted to or from other faiths. There is also a need to share good practice in the pastoral care of those who, in Interfaith relationships, experience bereavement.

8. Working for the common good

Co-operation with people in other faith groups can take place on practical projects where this is appropriate and possible. The Church has a particular role to play in encouraging government bodies and local authorities to explore and to understand the complexities of faith community organisations. People of different faiths can and ought to share a common concern for the whole of society. At the same time, we all need to be honest about the real differences we can experience when we try to interpret in practical terms values which may sound the same when expressed more widely as generalities. The Church ought to work with people of other faiths, for example, in seeking the welfare of asylum seekers and refugees, or on international issues such as human rights, world poverty and debt, global peace, the environment and the integrity of creation.

9. Involving women and men

In many Interfaith situations there is a need to strengthen the presence and active involvement of women. We ought also to note that in some contexts it may be men who are under-represented. We should strive to ensure that participation in Interfaith events has a fair gender balance and, in any case, to set a positive example by insisting on this in the involvement of members of our own Church. At the same time, we need to be aware that the strength of cultural and religious factors may inhibit the participation of women alongside men in Interfaith activities. In Interfaith dialogue, we should be ready to raise issues of women's rights as human rights.

10. Engaging with international issues

It is impossible to separate Interfaith relations in Ireland from the situations in other countries. International issues may have a serious impact on minority faith groups, and at times of crisis we should be ready to show solidarity with communities who may be feeling under threat. The situation of vulnerable minorities in other countries will often form a significant theme of dialogue, and the Church and its members often feel particular bonds of prayer and affection with Christian communities experiencing persecution. At the same time we need to make it clear that it is unfair to hold faith communities in our island to account, directly or indirectly, for the actions of their co-religionists in other parts of the world. We also need to ensure that political causes do not take over the agenda of justice.

11. Safeguarding the freedom to believe

The Christian commitment to love our neighbours as ourselves and to seek justice for all leads us to affirm the importance of religious freedom in every society. In Ireland, North and South, this is safeguarded by the European Convention on Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”

As Christians and as citizens, we have a particular concern for the rights of minority communities in our own societies. We recognise the importance of the principle of equal legal protection for all our citizens. It is important that authority based on religion should not be abused to control or repress vulnerable individuals.

12. Changing religious commitment

Where the Spirit is at work, we rejoice that conversions of people to the way of Jesus Christ may happen. They must always be the free result of God’s interaction with others. Interfaith encounters can be powerful and unpredictable in the transforming effect they have on people’s lives. People may change their religious commitment away from, as well as towards, Christianity. People of different faiths may also feel that Interfaith encounter brings them closer to God within the framework of their own religious commitment.

As Christians, we need to be aware of the difficulties new believers face. Our Churches need to be prepared to change themselves in order to welcome new members. Some converts can find the concept of Interfaith dialogue difficult, especially if it involves them in encounter with the religion they previously espoused. Other converts may have a valuable personal contribution to make to Interfaith understanding. Their place in dialogue should be affirmed and used.

Some understandings

THE AIM OF DIALOGUE among the churches is founded upon the vision of Christian unity. However, Interfaith dialogue has significantly different aims. Most of these Guidelines on Interfaith Relations share a common approach to Interfaith issues with other Anglicans and Lutherans in the Porvoo Communion. Each religious or faith tradition demands and deserves its own unique approach. There are no simplistic means or shortcuts which allow us to place all Interfaith encounters into one category. This remains clear at all times.

Jews and Christians worship the one God. At the same time, our Trinitarian faith makes us, as Christians, different and may well act as barrier on both sides to sharing in the worship of the same God. Many Muslims describe themselves as standing in the Abrahamic tradition alongside Jews and Christians. But many Christians and Muslims have differences about what is meant by Scripture, Revelation and submission to God's will. Sikhs regard themselves as monotheists. Many Hindus do not believe in one god, but some see themselves as monotheists. Many Buddhists do not believe in a god. We cannot make our own assumptions about the beliefs of others. We must allow them to define and explain themselves on their own terms and with their own vocabulary. At the same time, in our encounters with people of other faiths, those of faiths other than ours will respect our honesty and our confidence in the Christian faith when we speak openly and act in love.

Some areas for practical consideration

1. Marriage

MUSLIM MEN ARE not permitted to marry non-Muslim women, although an exception is made in the case of chaste or pious Jewish and Christian women. However, Muslim women may not marry outside the Islamic faith, and for most Muslims there are no exceptions to this. If a couple ask for a marriage in church and one of the parties is from a non-Christian faith community, extensive yet sensitive inquiries will be needed in pursuing this and the bishop and archdeacon need to be consulted from the very outset. There will be questions for both sets of families and for the local community.

Please refer also to **Part 4.7: Supporting Family Life** above.

2. Baptism

Baptism is the sacrament which admits to membership of the Church. It is not merely a rite of passage. In Interfaith families, this may be difficult to explain. It may also be difficult to explain why a family member or friend from another faith cannot be a sponsor or godparent. Good intentions can lead families to ask people to take part in readings or prayers, on occasions like this. However, such involvement may ultimately be inappropriate. It is always important to ask the non-Christian party involved what he/she really wants to do. To offer a polite way of saying: “No thank you,” may often be welcomed.

The baptism of adults of other faiths who become Christian needs to be handled sensitively and carefully. Often proceeding with baptism will be perceived as the rejection of a cultural background as well as the fresh definition of religious identity and may even put a person's life in danger.

3. Communion

Holy Communion is the sacramental food which nourishes us as Christians in our faith. While it is appropriate to invite other Christians who are communicant members of their churches and who share our Trinitarian faith to the table, it is not appropriate to open the invitation to non-Christians. Such clarity will be self-explanatory to many but it may cause offence to some, including some Hindus and Bahais, to some converts to other religions who have been born into Christian families and to some who regard themselves as Christians but do not share our Trinitarian faith or who are not baptized. Careful preparation beforehand can help to avoid causing offence. In light of the above, the onus is on us always to seek other effective opportunities to express our welcome and hospitality.

4. Funerals

A Church funeral is appropriate for Christian people. But Christians increasingly do not always have exclusively Christian families. During a funeral service there must be a sensitive approach to where people are seated, how they are asked to pray, when they are being asked to stand or kneel.

5. Church festivals and special services

Sensitivity is needed when inviting people of other faiths to Carol Services, anniversary services, dedications, Remembrance Day services and other similar events.

6. Festivals of other faiths

We have long accepted that it is appropriate to have Christmas trees in our villages, towns and cities and nativity scenes in shop windows in the weeks before Christmas. The following question also needs to be asked: How and when do our neighbours need their faith traditions to be affirmed and given public recognition? During Ramadan, for example, Christians may be invited to take part in meals marking the end of the day's fast or feasts marking the end of the fasting season. The question arises: Can we participate? If the local community has sponsored a local Muslim dignitary in making the pilgrimage to Mecca, the hajj, members of that community may invite Christians to the welcome-home party. The question arises: Can we accept? In all of this we need to make a judgement based on our own conscience along with the imperative not to cause offence.

7. Community events

The organisers of community events in Ireland often feel it is culturally appropriate to have an opening or closing period of prayer, or to mark major events in the community with a service of worship. Even when we do not think these occasions of prayer and worship are

wholly appropriate theologically, pastoral sensitivity means we can never dismiss outright requests for such time of prayer. Those planning Interfaith gatherings must do so in ways which enable all present to feel included to the extent to which this is possible without compromising their consciences.

8. Schools

Carol services, nativity plays, music classes, history lessons, school uniforms, and sports clothing and events all raise questions about sensitivity to the needs and traditions of people of other faiths. At the same time, the cultural and religious traditions of other pupils are due respect, and schools are an appropriate place to share experiences and to learn about mutual respect and trust. What is done in this regard in our schools flows from our commitment to Christianity as having a characteristic, specific spirit and a distinctive ethos. The use of Christian symbols should not be assumed to cause offence to those of other faiths. They help us to express honestly who we are and their use should be sensitive but unashamed. Christianity has been part of the fabric of Irish society for millennia. It is appropriate that in schools and workplaces there be a proper but sensitive expression of this reality.

9. Hospital chaplaincy

Hospital chaplains should recognize that there may be a greater number of members of non-Christian communities in a hospital than there are members of the Church of Ireland. These frequently include a significant proportion of medical and ancillary staff as well

as patients. Often, they are without their own chaplains or equivalent. Their human needs are similar to those of everyone else. Their cultural and religious needs include the provision of appropriate places to pray, places to prepare before prayer, attention to food, and ritual purity. These need to be catered for by the institution in question. Hospital authorities also need to be aware that there will be varying rules relating to ritual and purification across faith traditions about contact with dead bodies and body parts.

10. Hospitality

●Visiting other places of worship

Points for practical consideration before even visiting other places of worship include, among others, appropriate dress. Visitors should be careful to ask where and when they should stand or sit. For example, it may be offensive to sit when others are standing in prayer. It is not appropriate for Christians to kneel in prayer in a mosque as this symbolises to Muslims that one has submitted to Islam.

●Welcoming visitors to our churches

It is important to do everything practicable to ensure that guests are treated with respect. Visitors should be asked where they would like to sit. Clergy and churchwardens should remember that providing a kneeler in a prominent position may not be appropriate for a visitor who may want to attend without participating and may in fact not wish to give the impression that he or she is joining in prayer. Visitors should not be asked to pray

or to read without discreet inquiries beforehand. Members of our congregations may find it difficult to accept a non-Christian offering prayer in church, even if it is a prayer which Christians can use. There may be problems if others are asked to read from the Bible, and indeed the visitor may feel uncomfortable about this.

● **Visiting the homes of others and welcoming visitors to one's own home**

Visiting the homes of others is an opportunity to experience hospitality and to learn about the beliefs and practices of others. But visitors need to be sensitive about religious rules relating to food and drink, about invitations to pray before a meal, about how food may be served, about where to sit, and about the possible segregation of sexes at meal time.

11. Dealing with objections

As a parish, school, diocese or community develops its own framework for Interfaith relations, difficulties and problems may arise. We need to be aware that objections to decisions and practices may come from different traditions within the Church and for very different reasons. We must model hospitality and challenge ignorance. In this way we will respond in love and, as well as bearing in mind our responsibilities to our own faith community, remain courteous in our understanding and presentation of others.

Postscript

WITHOUT DIALOGUE BETWEEN people of faith, the vacuum in communication and understanding can quickly and easily be filled by gossip, mistrust, prejudice, bigotry and racism. Bigotry is fed by fear and ignorance. Without dialogue and mutual respect, extremism and hatred can grow.

A proper approach will embrace learning about what adherents of particular world faiths say about their own faith rather than relying on what is alleged by others on their behalf. When Interfaith co-operation works well, all of our lives are enriched. The knowledge and understanding of others enhances our lives, helps us to understand difference, gives substance to our belief, and points us towards lives rooted and grounded in love.