

11 Tips for Healthy Interreligious Engagement

*"My humanity is bound up in yours for we can only be human together."
—Archbishop Desmond Tutu*

Our world is diverse in many different ways, including interreligiously. Learning to appropriately engage our neighbors of different religious traditions in ways that respect them and honor our differences is part of our Christian witness in our shared world. Here are 11 tips to help us engage in healthy interreligious dialogue.

1. **Put people first.** In all our interreligious work, we encounter people first. Build relationships of mutual respect through acknowledging your assumptions about other religions and listening attentively to those who are practicing the religion.
2. **Acknowledge that we all have assumptions about other religions.** The first step to dismantling damaging assumptions and stereotypes of religious traditions and people is to acknowledge we have them. Once we understand our own assumptions, we can work on putting them aside.
3. **Accept that how we see and experience race, ethnicity, and religion are interwoven,** particularly in the North American context. Seeing race, ethnicity, and religion as completely separate prevents engagement with the whole human experience. Vibrant interreligious work holds all three together.
4. **Recognize that, in the United States, Christianity historically has been dominant.** The advantage of being Christian in a dominant Christian culture is called "Christian privilege." It is not the job of our interreligious partners or friends to teach us how privilege works. It is our responsibility as those who benefit from religious privilege to work at recognizing it and dismantling it.
5. **Educate yourself on the history of Christian mission's colonization.** Much of Christian mission's colonial history lingers painfully in the communal memories of both our interreligious and Christian partners. We are not allowed to forget just because we were not there. Many of us still benefit from those oppressions without realizing it.

6. **Choose and use terminology carefully.** Some terms used to describe engagement with people across religious traditions are *interfaith*, *interreligious*, *multifaith*, and *multireligious*. Not everyone is comfortable with all or any of those terms. Work together with those around the table to choose a term that works for all. Remember, some religious traditions (such as Buddhism) are practice-based, not faith-based.
7. **Listen to many people's journeys.** Asking one person to speak for an entire religious tradition is a practice known as *tokenism*. Individual people represent their personal religious narratives and experiences, not the whole range of their religious tradition. It is impossible for one person to represent the diversity of beliefs and practices that all religions have within them.
8. **Set aside assumptions based on extremist groups' actions.** All religious traditions, including Christianity, have extremist groups. As we reject tokenism, we reject the view that entire populations of religious people are responsible for the actions of a few.
9. **Acknowledge the hurt.** If someone of another religious tradition says, "What you did or said hurt me. Please stop," then stop and acknowledge the injury. Dialogue can open up only if we first work at acknowledging the hurt we have caused the other person.
10. **Seek to build lasting, mutual relationships.** The goal of interreligious engagement, dialogue, and relationship is to live and work together in spite of our disagreements and differences. "I will walk away from you if . . ." is a threat, not a move toward furthering relationships that are being tested.
11. **Connect to the interfaith work of the PC(USA).** Reach out to the Office of Interfaith Relations. Help us add to this list, or invite us to help you with interfaith work in your church's community.