

Religious and Cultural Sensitivity

Demonstrating appropriate sensitivity for cultures different from our own is arguably the topic which creates the most anxiety in those new to interfaith dialog. In the past, we have simply avoided discussions which might bring up uncomfortable differences, hoping to prevent possible misunderstandings. And yet, it is these very discussions which build our new friendships as well as community-wide networks of engagement. Again, much has been published on the subject of cultural sensitivity; we offer some basic guidelines which will help your group get started.

- Always approach others with caring and respect. Even a misstep may be forgiven when you show a sincere respect for others.
- Take time to learn about the religion and culture of others. They will appreciate your effort.
- Don't be afraid to ask. Most of us love to share with others about the things most important in our lives and are pleased when someone else shows an interest.
- Be an active listener. This bears repeating – listen, listen, listen to those you wish to better understand.
- Be aware of your own privilege. Some of us have grown up in and live in a predominant culture, e.g., being white, American-born, Protestant-Christian, etc. Sometimes we are unaware of habits which may seem off-putting to others not in one of these groups. Go out of your way to treat others as equals.
- When serving food, keep in mind that many people are vegetarian (most Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs). Many more have prohibitions against specific foods like pork or shellfish (most Muslims and Jews).
- Don't initially assume that you understand ways that you do not share. For example, gender-specific roles which may be viewed as discriminatory in American culture, may for others be a valued way of maintaining community structure. Animal sacrifice may be offensive to some who buy their meat from a store, but a natural way of honoring deity for an indigenous culture who raise their own livestock.
- Interfaith occasions are never the place to proselytize for one's own religion. It's perfectly appropriate to invite others to visit your services and events, but advancing your religion as a preferred alternative is highly disrespectful.
- Allow others to express their beliefs and practices in the terms that they choose, not attempting to reframe their beliefs in a way that makes us more comfortable.
- When we hear any religion disparaged or misrepresented, not just our own, we speak up for the rights of members of that religion to believe and practice in freedom.
- Accept that at times people disagree. This does not imply a personal slight, or even conflict.
- Practice the art of inclusive language. For example, when discussing spiritual matters, we often frame our statements with phrases such as, "in my tradition," or "as I understand it," or "in my opinion," as a way of indicating that we do not claim to speak for others when expressing beliefs or feelings.