

# Threads of Compassion

GUIDELINES FOR MULTIFAITH AND INTERFAITH EVENTS



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### Baha'i

Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah:

"Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship."

## Foreword

For more than 20 years the Interfaith Forum in Northern Ireland has been an advocate and advisor for better cross community, multifaith and interfaith engagement. It has a track record of tackling difficult issues and pushing boundaries - to help those from all faith backgrounds and those of no faith better understand each other and live well together.

The Interfaith Forum is to be commended for producing these guidelines; just as it should be for the work it has led to date. The role of the Interfaith Forum in helping Northern Ireland come to terms positively with its changing demography should not be under-estimated.

These guidelines for organising multi- and interfaith events will help organisations embrace diversity when planning, delivering and reviewing events.

They will help organisations ensure events better meet the needs of the wider community beyond an individual faith perspective. They will improve accessibility and participation both in the type and in the quality of events that take place.

It is healthy for an organisation to challenge itself, and challenge the people within it. As a result it improves practice both in reaching out to other faiths and in understanding one's own faith. So, while these guidelines will help organisations deliver more inclusive events they will also help the individual members of host faith organisations.



**They will assist their own members and volunteers in not just understanding the meaning of teachings from their own faith but also in better understanding the common threads of compassion that exist in all faiths .**



As the guidelines state, all religions have teachings that indicate respect for others. None promote the exclusion of others from civil society. I hope people, whether from a faith organisation or a secular organisation, as an individual or as part of a group, learn from these guidelines by using them openly and sincerely.

In doing so, these guidelines mark another contribution to recognising and understanding the increasing diversity of Northern Ireland. There is nothing to fear from diversity; diversity enriches everyone.

### Peter Osborne

Chairman  
Community Relations Council

# Introduction

These guidelines have been written to help raise awareness of the importance, when organising a public event, of being inclusive of all people (whether of any faith or none) and are offered to assist those designing and organising public events. They are intended primarily for voluntary organisations and faith communities.

The guidelines have been developed by the Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum with the assistance of other organisations that have an interest in the area of community relations and interfaith relations in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum was formed in 1993. It has the principal aims of promoting understanding between people from Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh Faiths and of promoting understanding between people of these Faiths and those of other faiths and belief systems, including those of no faith.

The document highlights some of the key points to be considered in organising a multifaith event and suggests ways in which some of the challenges can be overcome. It is not intended to be prescriptive - each event will be organised in a unique manner - rather it is offered as an aid to assist people who are organising such events.

## Sikhism

**Bhai Gurdas Var 1, 24**

"In this Dark Age, Guru Nanak revealed: God the Supreme Being is One and no other; He initiated his disciplines with charnamrit: Water sanctified by the touch of his lotusfeet, And gave a new code of conduct, As the High Way of spiritual life. Thus, Guru Nanak gave to dharma, its lost legs; He blended various faiths and creeds into one: the Sikhs. He gave the lowliest, social equality with kings. He taught humility to all the world."



In this document the terms "Single faith", "Multifaith" and "Interfaith" are used with specific meanings:

## Single Faith events

Full participation is limited to those of a particular faith. People from other faiths may be welcomed, and perhaps be specially seated as 'honoured guests', but they are observers rather than participants.

## Multifaith events

People from two or more different faith communities participate in a programme that may have been developed by them or by a secular body which wishes to have a multifaith event with engagement by a range of faiths. There is a deliberate intention to bring people of different faiths together but the primary purpose is the issue or topic of shared focus and there is little intention to use the opportunity to develop understanding between those present.

## Interfaith events

Participants are drawn from two or more different faith communities. Organisation is on a multifaith basis involving all faiths participating.

There is a shared sense of ownership. The event is organised with the specific intention of developing understanding of different faith perspectives in relation to social, cultural or faith issues.



## Context

The life and culture of Ireland, north and south, has been moulded by the Christian Faith from the 5th century onwards, although there has always been diversity in relation to religious life and practice. For well over a century people of faiths other than Christianity have been living in the north of Ireland and throughout the last century there have been small but significant numbers of people from different cultures and faiths coming to live in Northern Ireland to the extent that our society can now be described as multicultural and multifaith.

At the same time, church attendance is declining and there is a growth in secularisation amongst many who would have traditionally identified themselves as Christian. However our society continues to be strongly influenced by Christianity, for example, most of our holidays are organised around Christian festivals and much civic life is celebrated by Christian services.

Northern Ireland is greatly enriched by the presence of communities of people from diverse faith traditions. Beyond these different religious identities there is a common civic identity. It is important that civic services and events, and civil society events in general, respect not only the diversity to be found in our society but also reflect the stated commitment of the Northern Ireland Assembly to a just and inclusive society.

All religions have teachings or sayings which indicate respect for others which can be used in promoting the necessity of inclusive events.



## Christianity

### **The Gospel According to Matthew, Chapter 22, verses 36-40**

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."



## Types of Events

These guidelines are intended to assist in the organisation of a variety of events held in different locations, organised by differing types of organisations and aimed at diverse audiences. It is important, at the outset, that the organisers are clear about the type of event they are organising. Below is a description of some of the principal types of events, along with some key considerations for each type of event. It begins with events with a religious dimension, such as services and then goes on to consider ordinary meetings with no liturgical or ritual aspect.



### Type of event

### Key considerations

#### Single faith religious celebrations

Most people of faith celebrate their religious observance within their own faith culture and follow their own traditions. However many religious observances are open to the public and on occasion people may attend who do not subscribe to the particular creed and who may be of a different religion or of non-religious beliefs.

For example most churches welcome people of different faiths to join them for services such as baptism, marriage or a funeral or at a service for an occasion such as the consecration of a bishop. Despite the fact that others may be present at such an event it is still accurate to refer to it as a single faith event because it is organised according to the traditional practice of a specific community and full participation is limited to those of a particular faith or denomination.

Guests are likely to understand that the observance is intended specifically for those who are of that faith tradition.

Although single faith events are intended for members of a particular faith community the organisers should, nevertheless, be aware that there may be others present and should introduce the event in a way that is welcoming to all.

If people from other faith communities or belief systems (e.g. Buddhist, Muslim, Humanist etc.) have been invited to be present the organisers should give special consideration to how to introduce components of the event that belong exclusively to one faith community. For example in a Christian service if the Nicene Creed is being recited those from other faiths who are present could be invited to stand in silence.

#### Ecumenical single faith - Christians from different denominational communities

These are events where Catholics, Protestants and perhaps other Christians come together to take part in an event that is being conducted in a specifically Christian manner. There may also be similar ecumenical occasions within other faith groups.

The organisers should be aware that there may be others present and should introduce the event in a way that is welcoming to all. Some of the same considerations outlined above for single faith events are likely to apply.

#### Multifaith events with a liturgical element

These are events which involve different religions - Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Baha'i, Sikh and others including those who subscribe to a non-religious belief such as Humanism and those who are atheist or agnostic. They are sometimes organised by secular bodies (such as government or voluntary sector bodies); at other times, they may be organised by religion and belief groups, either jointly or with one community or an interfaith body may be asked to take a lead. The event may reflect the culture and practice of the host community.

It is important to be aware of any concerns that particular faith participants may have about coming together in an event with a liturgical element. Some, for example, will be comfortable with shared prayer; others may not – and that may be affected by the nature of the prayer(s). Be sure to allow time during the planning stage for careful consultation. Likewise, careful consideration needs to be given to the choice of readings that are to be used.

Sometimes a passage that may be meaningful for some may be inappropriate for others - even within the same religion. A way to minimise this is to invite those participating to select a reading from the scriptures of their faith community and to ask them to choose a reading on a particular theme.

## Type of event

### Interfaith events with a worship element

These are events involving people from two or more different religions or beliefs coming together and sharing readings from their scriptures or other sources.

The organisation of an interfaith event is normally done jointly by a number of people from differing faith communities. In this situation the content of the programme is less likely to be sensitive but care needs to be given to the way the event is introduced and the initial words of welcome at the beginning.

## Key considerations

It is important to be clear in advance about the nature of the interfaith worship element. Normally this involves people sitting in silence while readings are shared. It should not be presented in a way that implies assent by all present. When readings are being shared those present should not be asked to read from a tradition other than their own (though of course they are welcome to do so if they so wish).

### Multifaith events without a worship element

There are events that bring people together from different faith communities. They could have the purpose of discussing a particular social issue or of joining together on a service project.

In this situation the content of the programme is less likely to be sensitive but care needs to be given to the way the event is introduced and the initial words of welcome at the beginning.

### Interfaith events without a worship element

These are events that involve people from two or more faiths or beliefs coming together for a specific purpose and with the intention to improve understanding and cooperation between them as a primary purpose or one very much to the fore.

Particular attention should be given to the arrangements for chairing and the initial words of welcome. Care also needs to be given to the language that is used to avoid overuse of words that are very Christian specific e.g. church, congregation, clergy etc. Often in such situations there may be over- representation from a particular faith community (most often Christianity). In these situations the chairperson needs to ensure that the minority voices are being heard. It is also important to consider the choice of venue - if it is a one-off event it should be in a "neutral" venue. If there are a series of meetings they could be rotated around venues associated with differing faith communities.

### Civic alone

These are events with no religious input

The content of the programme is less likely to be sensitive but careful consideration should be given to the words of welcome and introduction to seek to ensure that everybody feels that they are full participants.



## Hinduism

Swami Vivekananda 1895

"Through the vistas of the past the voice of the centuries is coming down to us ... and the first message it brings us is: Peace be unto you and to all religions. It is not a message of antagonism, but of one united religion."

# Establishing clarity of purpose

**It is important to be as clear as possible about the purpose of the event**

Why is it being done?

Who is it for?

What is to be achieved?



**The answers to these questions will then influence decisions in relation to**

When it should be done

Where it should be held

How it should be conducted

Who should be invited to participate



## Humanism

**A J Ayer, The Humanist Outlook, 1968**

"The only possible basis for a sound morality is mutual tolerance and respect: tolerance of one another's customs and opinions; respect for one another's rights and feelings; awareness of one another's needs."



So, for example, if there is an event being organised to mark the life of a key public figure who has passed away it is to be expected that the nature of the event may reflect his or her faith to a large extent. It may be appropriate in this context that the event is not a multifaith event even though there may be people from many different faiths present. In such a situation it is important that the event is described in a way that accurately reflects the nature of the event. It is also important that if there is a confessional component to the event (for example the recitation of a creed) that this is explained in the opening comments and those attending are given an option for how they should participate at that time, for example they could be invited to stand in silence.

If an event is being held to mark an occasion that has had widespread significance for all members of society such as a historical anniversary or a large tragic incident it would be appropriate to organise it in a different manner. In such a situation people from many diverse backgrounds are likely to feel an equal sense of wishing to participate. For this reason the event will need to be conducted in a way that is open to all and provides an opportunity for everybody to participate on an equal basis.

The choice of an appropriate description of the event is a very important way of signalling to people the intended nature of the event and how far they may expect to participate: is it a service, a prayer meeting, a commemoration, a common witness, a gathering or something else? The accurate naming of the event is very important. If it is a 'service' or a 'gathering' is it a multifaith service or gathering? The title of the event and a short description of the way the event will be conducted can be helpful in allowing people to participate who otherwise might have reservations about engaging with people of other faiths.



## Islam

**Verse from the Holy Quran**

Allah says in Qur'an: O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you "INTO NATIONS AND TRIBES" that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the "MOST RIGHTEOUS OF YOU". And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). [Chapter 49, verse 13]

Hadith – Saying of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) Beware! Whosoever oppresses a Non-Muslim or snatches (any of) his rights or causes him pain which he cannot bear, or takes anything from him without his permission, Then I will fight against such (a Muslim) on the Day of Judgement. [Abu Dawud, Volume No. 3, Page No. 170, Hadith No. 3052]



## Judaism

### Micah Chapter 6, verse 8

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

## Planning the event

Including representatives of different faith communities very early in the planning process of an event is always worthwhile and enables a sense of shared ownership. It is also important to recognise that some people are explicitly agnostic or atheist or have no formal religious faith or belief. However, this does not mean that agnostics or atheists do not want to participate in public events that include a religious dimension.

Consultations, therefore, should always seek to invite input from representatives from outside the main faith communities. Whatever the context, it is important to ensure that no person or group in the community is in any way made to feel excluded from civil society by the way it is organised or the content of the event.

Finding representatives to be part of a planning group or to take part in civic services or events is no simple matter. Not every faith community has a representative institution or an individual who has been formally agreed to represent it in the context in question. While the Christian churches have recognisable representatives and the Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Baha'i communities have institutions that can represent them, this is not always the case for some faiths and beliefs. It is also important to be aware that faith communities are complex and multifaceted. Just as, in Christianity, there are multiple representative structures so too in the other faith communities there may be multiple organisations representing a particular faith or belief. A public event may be an ideal opportunity to include various branches of a faith community.

Most people who are non-religious will hold personal views and may not adhere to a codified set of values. This should be acknowledged as a minimum at any inter-faith event. Humanism, as a world-wide non-religious system, does, however, have a coherent set of values set out in the Amsterdam Declaration 2002 which emphasize compassion and tolerance. The International Humanist and Ethical Union and its affiliated groups, including the British Humanist Association ([www.humanist.org.uk](http://www.humanist.org.uk)) and the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland ([humanistni@btinternet.com](mailto:humanistni@btinternet.com)), are able to offer well-established guidance on how non-religious people can be respected within interfaith events. The non-religious should be represented at the event on the same basis as non-Christian religions, for example as an 'official guest' or 'representative', and also invited to speak if representatives of non-Christian religions do so. If the service includes religious readings and/or prayer, an appropriate non-religious/humanist representative should be invited to say a few words and/or read an appropriate poem or other reading. Books of condolence should be accessible to all those who might wish to contribute. If such books are only placed in a church, for example, some people will effectively be excluded.

If civic services and ceremonies are to be inclusive of people of all faiths it will be helpful to have accurate up-to-date information about local faith communities and organisations and their places of worship. It will also be useful to have local contacts for each faith community. The website of the Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum has a page with contact details for all of the main faith communities and non-religious belief groups in Northern Ireland. (See <http://niinterfaithforum.org/>).

Because of time constraints, some events may be organised by one person or by a group of people from one faith community. When the proceedings are in the hands of one particular faith community it is important – if the event is a multifaith one - that the person or community concerned is aware of the need to make the event inclusive of all. Where time allows, the first step in planning will be to bring together a small group, which is broadly representative of the diversity of the faiths and cultures to be found in the locality.

Early decisions will need to be made as to how religious or non-religious an event will be, who will host the event, where it will be held, who will participate and who will be invited. For multifaith services or events the venue is of particular importance and it may be that a neutral space rather than a place of worship of a particular faith community would be best. Timing may also be important and it is important, where possible, to avoid events clashing with a major festival of any faith community. Any tentative dates should be checked with faith communities to avoid such clashes. Faith festival dates are easily available online or from the Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum. Early consultation on these matters can help minimise the likelihood of unwitting, unforeseen and unnecessary discomfort and offence.

It is important to emphasise that during multifaith events each faith is offering its own contribution and will express its thoughts and reflections according to its own beliefs. No one should be expected to assent to beliefs they do not hold; participants are invited to join in an occasion which respects the beliefs and sincerity of all and which allows everyone to participate in the way that they feel most comfortable. It might be that a central idea could be chosen as a unifying theme which gives coherence to the whole. Use of symbols, like the lighting of candles and the use of the visual arts could be an effective way of going beyond words, as could a time of shared silence, uniting those of different beliefs.

An important part of any event is the welcome at the beginning. This is a valuable opportunity to explain the nature and context of the event and to invite the full participation of everybody. The closing remarks at the end are also important as an opportunity to thank everybody for their participation and to invite participants to give feedback after the event to help future planning.

Alcohol is forbidden in many religions so it is essential that non-alcoholic drinks be available without anyone having to specifically ask for them and that alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks are served separately.

Hospitality is an important consideration. If food is being provided it is important to have options to cater for a range of dietary requirements. Participants should be asked in advance, if possible, to indicate any special dietary requirements. The UK Inter Faith Network (IFN) has developed detailed guidance on catering for multifaith events. This is available in a briefing note on the IFN web site. It is entitled "Catering and Faith Based Dietary Practice" and is available at <http://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/briefing-notes>.

If catering is being provided there can be a question as to whether or not it is appropriate to say "Grace" before the food is served. This should be discussed at the planning stage. Depending on the particular event it may be appropriate to ask a particular religious leader to say "Grace". However if this is being done it should be done in a way that avoids religion-specific language such as "...in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen" but rather chooses more universally acceptable language. Another approach is to invite those present to share a minute in silence to give thanks for the food.

In most religions there are times of fasting for example the month of Ramadan in Islam, the month of Baha in the Baha'i Faith or Yom Kippur in Judaism. Care needs to be taken to ensure that if a meal is being planned at which guests from different faiths are to be invited that, if at all possible, the date and time of the meal does not clash with a fast time for an invited guest. If this is not feasible, then there should be sensitivity shown to guests who are fasting.

At many events there are "collections" or "offerings". On such occasions a plate may be passed around and those present invited to contribute. If such a practice is being used at a multifaith event it is important that the beneficiary of the contributions is clear to all so that those present can make an informed choice about whether or not they wish to contribute. At multifaith events it is preferable that such collections are for a common cause that all present can support.

# Dos and Don'ts

◆  
**We recognise that these can be difficult conversations to start and here are some pointers to help**  
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## Things to do

Ask people about their personal belief

Ask people respectfully about their faith background and practice

Check a calendar of faith celebrations to avoid clashes and ask people who are attending to ensure that planned meetings do not clash with key festivals

Be aware of fast times when planning to invite guests to a meal

When catering ensure that there is a good variety of options available that are clearly labelled to enable everybody to have something to eat that is consistent with their faith and morals.

Ensure that there is a variety of non-alcoholic drinks and beverages available

## Things to avoid

Avoid generalisations e.g. not all adherents of a religion share the same views in relation to social or political issues

Don't confuse religious identity with national identity e.g. not all Iranians are Muslim

Avoid arranging meetings on dates that are significant religious festivals.

Do not invite guests to a meal at a time that clashes with their fasting period

Avoid menu selections that provide little scope for choice, for example menus should have a good vegetarian option. Avoid using the same utensils to serve a variety of foods that may cause cross-contamination.

Avoid serving alcohol if there is no other option available

## Buddhism

### **His Holiness the Dalai Lama speaking at an Interfaith Meeting at The House of Lords 2015:**

"It is a great honour to sit with Spiritual brothers and sisters of various traditions. Inter Faith Meetings are opportunities to build and nurture friendships and trust amongst us. Love and Compassion are what bring people together while anger and suspicion push them apart. Religious people have their own different paths, each worthy of respect."



## **Some Closing Remarks**

These guidelines are intended to assist those who are organising multifaith events to make the events as inclusive and hospitable as possible to people of all faiths and cultures. They are intended to be of assistance primarily to voluntary groups and faith communities.

There are some additional issues that may arise if statutory bodies are organising an event that has a religious dimension, or when such bodies are contributing to such an event. In particular it is inappropriate in most cases for public funding to be used in a way that could be perceived as promoting a particular religion.

This is a preliminary and brief consideration of the subject and does not claim to be exhaustive. We would welcome your feedback to assist in developing these guidelines further in the future. Many other resources are available and we are including some references to assist.



## Resources

Methodist Church in Britain: Guidelines on interfaith activity:  
<http://methodist.org.uk/search-results?q=Interfaith>

Church of Ireland guidelines for interfaith events and dialogue:  
<http://ireland.anglican.org/cmsfiles/pdf/Information/Resources/CCU/interfaith.pdf>

Catholic Church statement on the relationship of the Church with other religions  
 from the Second Vatican Council Nostisra Aetate  
[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html)

EMBRACE guidelines on interfaith understanding:  
<https://www.embraceni.org/category/interfaith-understanding/>

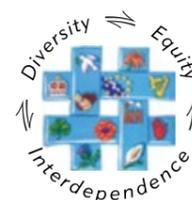
Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders  
<http://www.unhcr.org/51b6de419.html>

"Building Good Relations with People of Other Faiths and Beliefs:" Inter Faith Network  
 for the UK:  
<http://www.interfaith.org.uk/about-ifn/values-of-ifn>

A summary of the census statistics relating to religious affiliation is available on the  
 web site of the Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum at:  
<http://niinterfaithforum.org/index.php/news/98-world-religion-and-denominational-statistics-for-n-i-2013>



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