

Approaching Other Faiths

When planning a multi-faith event, especially for the first time, it is quite common to be anxious about how to engage with people who are different to you, or about unintentionally offending others of a different faith or culture.

It is important to remember that religious practices and cultural norms vary hugely within faiths and between individuals, across countries and between communities. It is not possible to say, for example, that “All Buddhists believe ...” or “All Jewish people eat...”. For that reason, there are not set rules for multi-faith etiquette.

What we have provided here are a few considerations that you might find useful when planning a multi-faith event. If you are inviting people of another faith to an event, you can ask them respectfully and politely how they feel about these topics. More often than not, they will feel honoured that you have taken the time to accommodate their needs.

Meeting times

Certain times of the day and days of the week are important in some faiths, especially among Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities. For example, holding events during Shabbat, which runs from late Friday afternoons to sunset on Saturday, can be difficult for some observant Jews who are unable to travel or work. Many Muslims meet together on Friday early afternoons and many Christians meet together on Sundays. Many Muslims pray five times a day; you may want to avoid these times, or if not, offer provision of a clean, quiet room for those who wish to pray during the event. Other faith communities also have times that are significant but it's a good idea to check with those you are planning to invite.

Festivals and important dates

Almost all religions have festivals or other dates of religious significance. You might want to avoid holding an event on these days, or you could structure an event around an important religious date in your own faith community and invite others to learn about that significance and share the experience. Again, you can always check with a friend who is coming to the event.

Food and drink

Some religions have specific dietary requirements and needs. For example, many Buddhists are vegetarian, many Jews eat only Kosher food (prepared correctly according to Jewish law) and most Muslims only eat food that is Halal ('permitted'). If you are planning on sharing food, it is a good idea to ask invitees what food they can and cannot eat, and/or ask everyone to bring a dish that they would like to share.

Visiting places of worship

For many people, matters of etiquette and conduct are often more important in places of worship such as temples, gurdwaras, mosques, churches and synagogues, than in neutral spaces such as the workplace or the campus. If you are inviting people to your place of worship, it is important to make people feel welcome by explaining the customs of your faith community. For example, letting people know whether they need to dress modestly, cover their heads or take off their shoes. If you are visiting someone else's place of worship, you can ask them whether there are any customs you need to be aware of. Talking openly about this will help put everyone at ease.

Remember, there are no set rules, and these ideas are for consideration only. You know your own faith communities and your friends best. We are sure you will be able to proceed in the most appropriate and respectful way.