

How to Develop an Interfaith Group: The Experience of Daughters of Abraham (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women)

Be patient.

It takes time to build trust, even among sub-groups of one faith or among members of any one group. No matter how open-minded you are, you (yes, even you) have some stereotypical ideas.

Begin with a small group of representatives of the three faiths. In starting the original Daughters of Abraham, the wife of a Christian minister asked her husband to approach a rabbi and an imam he knew to see if they would invite 5 or 6 women their faiths to meet with 5 or 6 Christian women to explore starting a group. This step may not be necessary if a handful of women from the three faiths are already friends.

These women do not need to be faith leaders, but should be interested in improving inter-faith relationships and be comfortable sharing their own faith pilgrimage without feeling a need to proselytize others. This initial group will need to meet for several months to move beyond tolerance to mutual respect and appreciation of each other before attempting to reach out to the larger community. Early meetings might offer the opportunity for the women to share basic information about their faith, correct myths or misunderstandings, and identify common themes. We have found that it works best just to announce a discussion topic and invite everyone to share. At the end of each gathering, a discussion topic can be chosen for the next gathering. Prepared “presentations” are not very successful because not enough time is generally available for relationship building and discussion.

Decide what you want to accomplish.

Our goal was not to develop a short-term educational dialogue but to provide a warm and inviting setting for the building of long-term, enduring relationships. In other words, we wanted to grow in respect and love for each other. While women may come and go from the group when they choose, we aim to be a welcoming family where many of us remain together for years. From time to time, we have to actively seek out women from a particular faith to keep the balance at our meetings fairly even, but generally the attitude is “come as long as you find it meaningful.”

When you are ready to formalize your group, you may want to develop a statement of purpose or mission statement. The one we chose is:

Daughters of Abraham is a group formed by women of three faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – to enhance understanding of our spiritual and cultural similarities. At our monthly meetings, we share ideas and values to promote good welfare among the communities.

Remember that an interfaith program is not a melting pot program.

A Daughters of Abraham group is more like a mosaic than a melting pot. It is not realistic to seek to reduce each faith to a common denominator. However, it is reasonable to focus on multiple manifestations and expressions of a common theme such as peace or anti-violence. Never expect all groups to pray the same way. A successful group acknowledges differences but seeks to identify commonalities.

It is important that differences of opinion be shared honestly but respectfully. Secrets or gossip outside the group has rarely been a problem, but when it has been we have tried to address the concern with the whole group as soon as possible.

Identify a strong communicator, but diversify leadership.

One person must be willing to maintain a current and accurate e-mail, phone/text and snail mail list of all those who want to be informed of gatherings of the group. This roster of this contact information should be passed around at each gathering to assure that all the information is current, and that new group members can sign up. Remember that not everyone prefers to be notified the same way.

This great communicator, however, is not necessarily the group meeting facilitator. We have found it best to rotate facilitators, depending on the meeting site. We have intentionally NOT elected officers because we want the feel to be circular and democratic rather than vertical and structured.

Meet at different places.

The sites of meetings should rotate among the faiths, perhaps at a church one time and a synagogue, temple, or mosque the next. The host "site" may select a discussion facilitator from their own membership. We enjoy having food at our gatherings, and the host site prepares refreshments. That way, each faith group only furnishes refreshments 3 times a year, excluding Ramadan month when we join our Muslim sisters in fasting.

Some groups have regular monthly gatherings from September through May with a couple of special activities in the summer. One is a pot-luck supper where spouses join in for a wonderful meal. Another is a book review retreat day each summer. All four groups in the Dallas/Fort Worth area have a one-day Spring Retreat together.

Make the setting symbolic of your intent.

We have our gatherings in a circular setting, usually with tables so notes can be taken by those who enjoy that. The host site sometimes uses colorful table cloths or table decorations representing their own faith symbols or holidays./

Sometimes the tables are plain. The circular setting assures that no one is “up front” and that the discussion facilitator is on equal plane with everyone else. If your group is large enough, consider sitting in round tables of 6 or 8 women with the opportunity for small group discussion and then reporting out to the whole group. You will need enough women to assure that all tables include at least one representative of each faith.

Be considerate of holy days and times.

Muslims pray on Fridays at noon. The Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday. Some Christian denominations worship on Saturday. Jewish Rosh Hashana initiates a 10-day period of reflection in the fall that ends on the Highest Jewish Holy Day, Yom Kippur. Muslims fast during Ramadan, which may mean that no refreshments are served that month. Plan meetings and events that do not conflict with these sacred times.

Discuss whatever you want to.

Prayer styles

Holy Books

Holidays

Common Heroes of the Faith

Basic Beliefs

Death and Dying Rituals

Marriage Rituals (We brought our wedding pictures for this discussion.)

Forgiveness (This meeting discussion followed a meeting in which a Holocaust survivor shared her concentration camp experiences.)

Modesty

Concerns about the Next Generation

Stereotypes and Biases (This gathering included distributing 3 X 5 cards in which each woman filled in the blank for “Before joining Daughters of Abraham, I thought Jews.....” This statement was given for Christianity and Islam also. The 4th statement was, “Now I believe that.....” In order to avoid embarrassing anyone, the cards were shuffled and redistributed. Each woman read aloud the card she drew and then shared what she wanted to about whether her experiences was similar to or different from the author of the card.)

We have found that a discussion topic for the next meeting often develops out of the current discussion.

For More Information about Daughters of Abraham including a full list of discussion topics or books reviewed, reach us from the Contact page.