

GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING COFFEEHOUR CONVERSATIONS

Houses of Worship

INTRODUCTION TO COFFEEHOUR CONVERSATIONS

The Prepare NY CoffeeHour Conversations are intended to be open community dialogues that help people understand one another and to live more in accordance with the Golden Rule, a foundational principle across religious traditions. Further, these dialogues are an opportunity for people to explore the First Amendment's guarantee of religious freedom for all of us. They can be conducted through a range of activities within and between houses of worship including community dialogues, auxiliary meetings, congregational meetings and interfaith exchanges involving two or more houses of worship within a community.

To assist in preparing for these CoffeeHours, Tanenbaum, as one of the founding partners of Prepare NY, created a series of materials including: these Guidelines; Questions that can be used to conduct the conversation; and a series of Fact Sheets with information and data so that people who facilitate the conversations and participants have easily accessible resources for checking information and ideas.

All we ask is that, when you schedule your CoffeeHour Conversation, you send an email to prepareny.com/CHCregistration so we can list it on the Prepare NY website. When you complete it, you can send us a short evaluation and/or submit your stories and comments about what happened.

These Guidelines are divided into 5 Sections. They are:

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FIRST THINGS FIRST: PRELIMINARY PREPARATION

CoffeeHour Conversations often involve issues about which people have strong and differing perspectives. Often these perspectives are driven by deep beliefs rooted in the personal experience of religious identity. It is best when there is someone responsible for leading (or facilitating) the conversation and when the facilitator(s) and those organizing the conversation are prepared. Below are a few points that we encourage you to consider, before your CoffeeHour Conversation takes place:

1. IDENTIFY WHO WILL PARTICIPATE: SUGGESTED AUDIENCES FOR COFFEEHOUR CONVERSATIONS

- A. Clergy within a congregation
- B. Clergy with the members of a congregation
- C. Clergy from interfaith alliances
- D. Youth Clergy with young people
- E. Club or Auxiliary Leaders
- F. Religious Educators

2. THE TEAM

- A. Your team consists of all the people with whom you are working to produce the CoffeeHour Conversation. You may want to have a brief meeting to outline each person's responsibilities.
- B. If two of you are co-facilitating your conversation, you may want to schedule some time before the conversation to clarify your mutual objective(s) for the session and how the session relates to overall goals for building interreligious understanding.
- C. If you are conducting a CoffeeHour Conversation in collaboration with another house(s) of worship, consider having a facilitator from each tradition. You might also consider having a facilitator from a tradition not participating in the conversation.

3. TIME

- A. How long do you want your CoffeeHour Conversation to run? We recommend that you have at least one hour scheduled, though they can be planned for longer as well. If there's interest, you can *always* schedule another one!

4. PREPARE AN AGENDA: SAMPLE AGENDA

Here is a suggested agenda for conducting your CoffeeHour Conversation:

- A. Welcome
- B. Prayer/Invocation/Acknowledgement of all traditions present (and, if you like, those that are not included)
- C. Introductions/Icebreaker

- D. Create Ground Rules
- E. Show a Video like “*We the People*” (found on the Prepare New York website, www.prepareny.com)
- F. Review Selected Fact Sheet(s)
- G. Offer First Question and Conduct the Conversation
- H. Debrief the Conversation/Evaluation:
 - Did participants have any insights into their beliefs about people of other religious traditions? Any insights into their own biases?
 - What actions will they take?
 - What additional information do they want?
 - And remember, please send Prepare NY your evaluations!

5. ASSESSING YOUR SUCCESS: OUTPUTS AND EVALUATIONS

Before you conduct your CoffeeHour Conversation, consider how you would like to evaluate your session. We've included a sample evaluation form for your use. You can also consider the following:

- A. Are there similar topics participants would like to explore in a future session?
- B. Are there other houses of worship (not represented during the session) with which they would like to work regarding their findings?
- C. Are there other houses of worship with whom they would like to conduct a CoffeeHour Conversation?
- D. Ask participants to share their insights on how the CoffeeHour conversation offered new avenues for helping them fulfill their religious obligations according to their beliefs.

Another evaluation tool might be to ask the participants in your CoffeeHour Conversation the following questions:

- A. What are three things you learned today?
- B. What are two things you want to know more about?
- C. What is one action you can commit to taking to foster respect across differences in our religious community?

GETTING YOUR CONTENT READY

1. PLANNING FOR THE PARTICIPANTS

When planning, anticipate potential challenges. One way to do this is to think through some questions and challenging issues you may encounter, such as:

- A. Why is our house of worship hosting a conversation?
- B. Have any incidents of bias, harassment or discrimination been reported in the community?
- C. Who might you expect to participate? (Age, background, number of attendees)?ⁱ
- D. What are some challenges or particular issues that might come up in your conversation? (Especially those that relate to the specific climate in which it is being held.)
 - 1. Are there excerpts from sacred texts that have been inflammatory?
 - 2. Are there excerpts from sacred texts that have been misused/misquoted?
 - 3. Are there any participants who are survivors, or family members of survivors of the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001?
 - 4. Are there any participants who have been targeted and/or unfairly treated because they are Muslim or perceived to be Muslim?
 - 5. Are there any participants who have expressed concern about Muslims and/or those they perceive to be Muslim?
- E. How diverse is the participant group?

2. REVIEW YOUR RESOURCES

Make sure you've made time to personally review all of the resources you are planning to use (i.e, videos, Fact Sheets, and questions).

- A. Plan/brainstorm how you plan to run the conversation beforehand, but don't plan so rigidly that there is no room for the conversation to flow naturally.
- B. Does your house of worship have a guiding credo (i.e., "*A place where everyone is welcome*") or an excerpt from a sacred text which frames your vision? Make clear connections between these thoughts and the focus of your CoffeeHour conversation.
- C. Review the Questions for your audience (and others, if they seem appropriate) and select the question(s) on which you want to focus.

- D. Review the Fact Sheets that provide information and background that informs thinking on the question(s) you plan to cover. Some things to consider when planning:
1. How will you begin?
 2. What exercises and questions will you include that get participants engaging with one another directly?
 3. Will you call on people to participate and how will you manage time?
 4. How will you end the conversation?

3. MATERIALS

Among the materials you may find useful for your conversation are:

- A. Suggested Questions
- B. Fact Sheets
- C. Quotations from sacred texts that affirm community and/or understanding one another
- D. Name Tags
- E. An Agenda
- F. Different Colored Markers
- G. Flip Chart Paper and Easel
- H. Pens
- I. Note Paper
- J. Index Cards

4. PREPARING THE ICEBREAKER

To open a CoffeeHour Conversation, it is useful to start with an icebreaker to get people engaged. We offer the following as possible conversation starters. You can also design one of your own. (After all, you know your community members best!)

- A. Ask participants to define some or all of the following terms on index cards. Then, in pairs, have them share their definitions and discuss them. You can debrief some of what they learned with the whole group before moving on.
 1. Islamophobia
 2. Anti-Muslim sentiment
 3. Prejudice
 4. Phobia
 5. Anti-Semitism
 6. The Golden Rule
- B. Divide the group into pairs or groups of four, and ask people to answer the question – “Where were you on 9/11?”
 1. Show the film clip “*We the People*,” which is available on the Prepare New York website. Ask participants to share their immediate reactions.

5. SUGGESTED USES FOR FACT SHEETS

The Fact Sheets have been designed to provide factual information on some of today's most pressing issues. The Fact Sheets have also been designed to provide background information for the CoffeeHour Conversation. They can be used in a variety of ways for your CoffeeHour Conversation and beyond:

With Clergy:

- A. Background for liturgical messages
- B. Subject of study for groups within the worship community
- C. Context for letters to the editor
- D. Brainstorm community outreach plans

With Religious Educators:

- A. Create lessons on understanding "the other" (for this, we recommend that educators review the Guidelines for Educators and the questions created for schools and for CoffeeHour Conversations among educators)
- B. Comparative study of familiar and unfamiliar religious traditions
- C. Create outreach opportunities and community projects with learning communities from neighboring houses of worship

6. GROUND RULES FOR ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING A RESPECTFUL ENVIRONMENT

No matter your level of experience as a trainer/facilitator, there are a few items that are important to remember about leading a conversation with members of spiritual communities. The topics you will engage in can be deeply personal for all those involved. For many people, talking about September 11, Islam, people of other faith traditions or American identity can be very challenging; depending on the person, it can even be painful. Creating and maintaining a safe space throughout the conversation allows each person to express his or her thoughts while respecting the thoughts of others. Everyone may not come to agreement at the end of the conversation. Your job as the facilitator of the CoffeeHour Conversation is to create and maintain an environment where everyone can talk about what's important to them on these topics – even if you strongly disagree with someone's perspective.

Below are a few steps to help you establish a safe environment for your CoffeeHour Conversation:

Create Ground Rules

- A. It's important that the creation of the Ground Rules involve the participants. You can start by saying, "We're going to create Ground Rules for the conversation we're going to have about _____. We want everyone to feel comfortable/safe to share what's important to them about the topic. What are some of the actions or behaviors that let *you* know that it's safe to share your thoughts?"

- B. Solicit answers from the group and note them on chart paper. Ask questions about anything that seems unclear to you. Use reframing to make sure that each person is understood (i.e., What I hear you saying is _____?).
- C. We recommend that the following be included as part of your Ground Rules. If a participant does not offer one of the following, or another that you think is important to the success of the conversation, offer it as a suggestion:
1. Listen when others speak (i.e., not busy planning your response)
 2. Participate fully
 3. Keep an open mind (i.e., assume you can learn from everyone in the room)
 4. Consider different points of view
 5. Listen/Participate from what's important to you
 6. Use "I" language (we can only speak for ourselves, not for our group)
 7. "One mic" – One person speaks at a time
 8. Confidentiality – It may be very important for participants to know their opinions will not be shared broadly
 9. Everyone has a chance to speak
 10. Use positive language (no cursing, slurs, or accusatory language)
 11. Be respectful toward one another
- A. Note to facilitator: We all have very different ideas of what conduct actually connotes respect. Keep in mind that the people participating in your CoffeeHour conversation may have divergent ideas about respect. A tool that may be worthwhile is to ask participants to consider the following questions as you go through the conversation:
1. What does respect look like?
 2. What does it sound like?
 3. What does it feel like?
- D. Ask for and make sure there is verbal agreement to the Ground Rules before you proceed with the conversation.

7. "THE THREE RULES OF RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING"

As your CoffeeHour conversation is likely to directly address religion, the religious beliefs of community members, and the religiosity of neighbors and friends, you may consider including these guidelines. At the very least, the facilitator(s) can familiarize themselves with these rules in preparing for the CoffeeHour conversation.

At a press conference in 1985, Dr. Krister Stendahl, a Bishop of Stockholm, responded to vocal opposition to the building of a temple there by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He laid down three rules, which have been used across the globe to guide dialogues involving religion and topics that address faith. They can prove useful in creating and maintaining context for respectful conversations as part of your Ground Rules:

- A. *When you are trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies.*

1. Note: No one can speak for an entire faith tradition. It is important for each person to speak from his/her own perspective about the practices or beliefs of his/her tradition. Encourage participants to speak from the first person and use "I" language as described above.

B. Don't compare your best to their worst.

C. Leave room for "holy envy."

1. By this, Stendahl meant that you should be willing to recognize elements in the other religious tradition or faith that you admire and that you wish could, in some way, be reflected in your own religious tradition or faith.

ANTICIPATE: ISSUES TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOUR CONVERSATION

CoffeeHour Conversations may be difficult for colleagues for a host of reasons. Some include:

- A. Their own cultural and religious beliefs about others.
- B. The participant is a veteran or has a family member who is a veteran.
- C. The participant is misinformed about Muslims, Islam or other religious groups.
- D. The participant had a work colleague who lost his/her life on 9/11.
- E. The participant had a family or community member, who lost his/her life on 9/11.
- F. The participant was personally and deeply impacted by the events of 9/11.

1. HERE ARE SOME STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU MANAGE THE RANGE OF EMOTIONS THAT MAY ARISE ON ANY OF THE TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

- A. Refer back to and remind everyone of the Ground Rules that they all accepted for interacting with each other and maintaining a safe space. If necessary, ask them to abide by them.
- B. Periodically remind the group of the objectives and hopes for the conversation (see the *Introductions/Icebreaker section* below in *Conducting Your CoffeeHour Conversations*); ask everyone to offer ideas and comments toward meeting that goal/purpose.
- C. Acknowledge all expressions with “Thank you.” You don’t have to agree with everyone. Your role is to maintain the environment of respect.

2. NUMBER OF QUESTIONS

In our experience, these issues generate a lot of interest and people often have a lot to contribute. However, you want to have a focused conversation with your community members. We recommend that you choose three questions that you would really like to discuss. Of those three questions, choose the one that you feel would provide the most value as an initial conversation in your house of worship. If you’re not able to get to the other two questions, you might consider conducting another conversation.

3. DIFFICULT PARTICIPANTS

It is important to maintain the safety of the experience for everyone participating (i.e., everyone should feel free to participate, even when they hold a minority or unpopular position and should be treated with the same respect as people who hold majority or popular positions). If a participant becomes unwilling to follow the Ground Rules and participate in the conversation in a constructive manner, consider the following actions:

- A. Directly ask the participant if s/he will follow the Ground Rules from that point forward. If the participant cannot or will not agree, ask the individual to stop participating. You can invite him/her to participate at another time.

- B. Ask the members of the group how they would like to handle the situation. Are there any requests the group can make of the person?
- C. Say to the participants, “We had an agreement of how this conversation was going to go. It does not seem to be going in that direction any longer. What would you like to do?”
- D. As a last resort, you can end the session.

Here are some additional helpful tips:

- A. When someone shares an emotional and/or personal experience, quickly redirect his or her comments back to the shared ideas of the group, to information on Fact Sheets or to the established hopes and goals of the conversation.
- B. Respectfully redirect someone who is dominating the conversation. Ex: “I know a lot of people think about it the way you do. Does anyone see it differently?” OR “You’re contributing a lot to our discussion. There are a few people we haven’t yet heard from. What questions do others have? What do others make of [this question]?”
- C. Acknowledge and name the tension: if someone makes an offensive or aggressive comment, don’t ignore it. Acknowledge that the topic can be/is emotionally-charged for many reasons and we each come to it with different perspectives — all the more reason to talk about it as a community.
- D. Be direct and genuine. When you ask a participant a question, be sure it reflects authentic curiosity and isn’t a challenge in disguise.ⁱⁱ

4. RESPONDING TO HARD QUESTIONS ABOUT ISLAM OR RELIGION

The topics for the CoffeeHour Conversations can begin with people talking about stereotypes and misconceptions about events and/or people. The Fact Sheets provide useful, vetted information on a range of topics. Familiarize yourself with the Fact Sheets you’ve chosen that are related to the question for discussion. They will provide data for your responses. Below are some immediate answers you can use, if tensions arise around Islam or Muslims:

- A. “Here at (name of house of worship), our mission, core values and goals are clear around respecting all people.”
- B. “There is diversity within Islam – just as there is diversity within many traditions. Is there a particular belief system within Islam you are speaking about?”
- C. “These things (abuse of women, etc.) happen in places where Islam is practiced and are based on particular interpretations...there are different practices across and within religions and within Islam.”
- D. Name specific instances of current anti-Muslim sentiment and its impact on individuals.
- E. Give examples of similar “hard” issues from your religious tradition (women not allowed to be ordained as clergy).

CONDUCTING YOUR COFFEEHOUR CONVERSATION

1. PHYSICAL SPACE

- A. It is preferable to conduct the conversation in a circle or around a table where everyone can see each other.
- B. Remind people to put their phones and pagers on vibrate or to turn them off.

2. WELCOME

- A. Thank everyone for participating in this conversation.

3. PRAYER / INVOCATION / ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF TRADITIONS PRESENT

- A. There are a number of ways for people to share their religious tradition with each other to set the environment for the conversation:
 1. Everyone can participate in one opening prayer led by a volunteer from the host house of worship.
 2. You can ask for volunteers to share words of greeting from each house of worship represented.
 3. You can have an interreligious prayer that is created before the conversation reflecting each of the traditions present.
 4. You can have an interreligious prayer that is created before the conversation reflecting all of the traditions present and acknowledging those that are not present but equally honored.

4. INTRODUCTIONS/ICEBREAKER

While members of the same house of worship, and community members, may know each other, it is useful for all the people participating in the conversation to share why they are participating in the conversation and/or why it is important to them. By taking the time to do this, you can create shared goals for participating in the CoffeeHour Conversation. This is a great time for an icebreaker (see above). You can also ask people to break into pairs or groups of no more than four people and answer one of the following questions:

- *I think this conversation is important because...*
- *I'm glad that we are having this conversation because...*
- *My name is _____ and my interest in participating in this conversation is...*
- *One thing I hope can happen as a result of this conversation is...*
- *My goal in participating in this conversation is...*

After the small groups have discussed their answers, it can be useful to ask each group to share one or two of the things they heard (i.e., ask people to share what they heard someone else say: “In Group 1, can someone tell me something they heard from one of the other participants about being here today?”).

4. GROUND RULES

After welcoming all participants, open the CoffeeHour by establishing agreed upon Ground Rules for the discussion (see above).

5. VIDEO

You can show a video like “*We the People*” as a way to introduce the conversation. You can ask participants to share their reactions and if they saw something new or unexpected.

6. OFFER THE FIRST QUESTION

If you do not use the video to start your conversation, you can use the questions provided and the Fact Sheets to start your conversation. (See above.) If you start with the video, then you can move the conversation forward using those resources after the discussion about the video is complete.

- A. Discussion Groups
 - a. You may consider dividing the group into smaller groups to discuss their reactions to the video or to engage with the first question. Smaller groups can contribute to participants feeling safe to share their opinions.
- B. Distribute the Fact Sheet(s) you’ve chosen for this conversation and give participants a few minutes to review and reference in the conversation.
- C. Ask your first (or second) question.

7. ENGAGE YOUR GROUP

It is important that each person participating in the group have the experience of being included and heard. You can model this with Active Listening. The organization *20,000 Dialogues* (www.20000dialogues.org) offers the following helpful reminders for facilitators:

- A. Listen actively, look at the person speaking and “reflect back the most important thing that you heard the person say, or repeat the question they are asking but in your own words to be clear and to clarify.”
- B. Make sure everyone has an opportunity to participate; invite all to share thoughts/opinions/questions, whether similar or different to what’s already been said.
- C. Avoid finger-pointing or broad group generalizations

- a. “Reassure” – This is an exchange of ideas, beliefs and feelings that involve a range of issues including faith, different faiths and cultures, so we do want people to talk about their faith and culture.
- b. As we do so, remember:
 - i. Diversity exists among members within faith groups, not just among people of different faith groups.
 - ii. Remind everyone that no one is expected to be the ‘expert’ or ‘spokesperson’ representing all people from their own faith.
 - iii. Each person is a representative of him/herself and of his/her personal experience, and is encouraged to speak from his/her own personal understanding, experience and practice.
 - iv. Remind everyone that this is *not* the place for proselytizing, attempts at conversion, or pushing one’s beliefs on anyone else.
- D. “Do the best you can” — it’s okay to say “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure” (better than presenting false/uncertain information as fact).

Here are some helpful suggestions and reminders for managing the conversation:

- A. Start simple — consider posing basic, concrete questions to start, as they can serve as the foundation to step up to deeper, more complex questions. Be sure subsequent questions encourage open-ended inquiry and allow participants to speak from their own perspectives rather than representing a group.
- B. Be organized but flexible in facilitation — let discussion widen out to include participants’ own questions, but bring it back to the main topic of inquiry.
- C. Be aware of your own ideas/assumptions/opinions/agenda — Remember that you are there not only to help the group draw from the Fact Sheets and to remind them to follow the Ground Rules, but also to help them reflect together. You are *not* there to push a particular point of view.
- D. Always ask, never tell — avoid contributing perspectives as if you were just another participant.
- E. Don’t answer participants’ questions about whether their thinking is ‘right’ on an issue — encourage open thinking and discussion.
 - i. Don’t speak after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond to each other.
- F. Be deliberate about how you invite comments — Raising hands might be easiest in a larger group, but allow for a more informal flow in smaller groups.

- G. Pause occasionally if necessary and say “before we proceed, I want to make sure everyone has had a chance to speak” and solicit a comment from a quieter participant.ⁱⁱⁱ

DEBRIEF THE CONVERSATION/EVALUATION

You can access the Evaluation Form on the Prepare NY website at prepareny.com/evaluation. We've included the questions here as well to give you a head start in creating your responses. You can also use the questions you created to allow participants to reflect on what they've gained from the experience of the CoffeeHour conversation. If you took any pictures or have a video excerpt you would like to share, you can send those to prepareny.com/CHCregistration.

Please include the following information in your evaluation:

1. School/Workplace/House of Worship: _____
2. Host/Location: _____
3. Date of CoffeeHour Conversation: _____
4. Name of facilitator(s): _____
5. Number of attendees: _____
6. Questions used:
 - A. _____
 - B. _____
 - C. _____
7. Fact Sheets used:
 - A. _____
 - B. _____
 - C. _____
8. What did participants say they learned from the CoffeeHour Conversation experience?
9. What did participants want to know more about?
10. Did the participants share anything about changes in their thinking about people of other religious backgrounds?
11. Did participants share any actions they plan to take to increase understanding of others based on their experience in the CoffeeHour Conversation?

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- ⁱ <http://www.nyhumanities.org/programs/cb/documents/TipsandGuidelines.pdf>
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