

A Seat At The Table: Hosting An Interfaith Dinner

Idea:

The idea to host an interfaith dinner group for lay people in our community of Melrose, MA came about after learning about the “circle groups” at IARF (International Association for Religious Freedom) Congresses. These groups are comprised of individuals of different religions, who meet together during the Congress. The purpose is: for participants to talk about their faith traditions, to share that which is meaningful to them, and to establish relationships with people of different faiths.

Purpose:

The purpose of the interfaith dinner group is: to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding, and to deepen personal connections among lay people of different religions. The group is small, 8-10 people, and participants agree to meet 4-5 times throughout the year. Dinners are held in members’ homes, which provides educational as well as interpersonal benefits. A facilitator helps structure the first meetings, providing guidelines for small group discussion and introductory topics for dialogue. Subsequent topics for discussion may be developed as a group at the first dinner.

First Steps and Planning:

Our first step in Melrose, MA was to talk to two community groups: the Human Rights Commission and the Clergy Association. Because our dinner group was to be sponsored by IARF, we wanted these two groups to know about the project and to endorse our efforts. We prepared a written letter to each of the groups and asked to join a meeting, where we presented our plan.

Next we began thinking about the people we knew of different faiths, people we could possibly invite. A woman on the Human Rights Commission was interested in joining. She knew a number of people in the community of various faiths. We asked clergy to recommend someone from their congregations who might be interested in the dinner project. Once we had a list of potential participants, we met with them to talk about the project and to discuss their participation.

To Do:

- *Speak with local groups and religious leaders who may have an interest in supporting your project;
- *Think about people you know of different faith traditions;
- *Talk with religious leaders, ask them to recommend potential participants;
- *Talk with prospective participants (about the expectations of becoming a member of an interfaith group).

Participants Agreement:

- *Talk with prospective participants about making a commitment to attend 4-5 interfaith potluck dinners during the year (September-June); potluck dinners are vegetarian and no alcohol is served;
- *Talk with participants about the importance of bringing an open mind, and ask them to adhere to expectations of respectful listening and sharing;
- *Knowing the expectations is paramount to having a successful interfaith dinner.

The First Dinner:

We set a date, time and location for the first dinner, asked people to bring something to contribute to the meal, and said a few words about what to expect, that our topic for our first get-together would be to share about our respective faiths. At our first gathering, our group was made up of: 1 Buddhist, 1 Catholic, 2 Hindus, 2 Jews., 3 Muslims, and 2 UUs.

We had a structure for the meeting with a beginning, middle and end. At the very start, we spoke to the expectation of how we would be together, in respectful relationship, listening and sharing. We agreed that no one of us was a spokesperson for our faith, but that we would speak of our own experience, from our own hearts.

Statement About How Participants Will Be Together (Covenant):

It is so important that everyone in the group feel safe, comfortable and respected. Talking about one's faith or beliefs is deeply personal. Therefore, it is vital to talk explicitly about how group members will be together. The facilitator may say something along the lines such as: We come together in an intentional way to be respectful of each other, our different beliefs and practices, and to listen and learn from each other.

Structure of the Dinner

- 1. Welcome and Introduction to the Dinner:** It is very important that participants know who is facilitating at the first dinner;
- 2. Brief Introductions of Participants:** (Use name tags.) Ask people to introduce themselves, tell where they are from, what their faith tradition is, and why they chose to attend the dinner;
- 3. Opening Words:** (Chosen in advance to speak to the interfaith aspect of the gathering);
- 4. Topic for Discussion with Questions:** (It is helpful to email the discussion topic to participants in advance to give them time to think about the subject); the facilitator should choose the first topic and be prepared with opening and closing words. Beyond the first dinner, people may choose to offer a topic, including opening/closing words, or ask for assistance from the facilitator for any part of the meeting. In our group, we give the person who is hosting the dinner the option of choosing a topic. Sometimes people choose to do this, and sometimes they don't. Whoever is organizing the dinners in your community should be ready to offer support and ideas for topics, opening and closing words, and to assume ultimate responsibility for the health and well-being of the group
- 5. Closing Words:** (Chosen in advance to speak to the interfaith aspect of the gathering);
- 6. Date/Location of Next Dinner**

Plan for Interfaith Dinner (example)

***Welcome**

***Hand Out Name Tags**

***Introduction**

***Purpose of Dinner**

***How We Will Be Together**

***Serve Food**

***Blessing/Opening Words:**

We gather today as a diverse body of people from many faiths and traditions.

We do not speak the same language of worship.

We follow different teachings, made known to us by sacred voices and scriptures through the ages.

Nevertheless, we gather.

.....In our gathering, we honor and celebrate our diversity.

--Kathleen McTigue

Discussion: How does your faith tradition promote social justice? What does it teach about neighbor helping neighbor?

Plans For the Future: Topics, Date/Location for Next Dinner

Closing Words:

May the Love which overcomes

all differences,

which heals all wounds,

which puts to flight all fears,
which reconciles all who are
separated,
be in us and among us
now and always.
--Frederick E. Gillis

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