

Sharing our faith with people of other faiths



**May
I call you
friend?**

A resource for individuals and groups

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Introduction



What do dialogue and evangelism have in common? Are they poles apart or ends of a spectrum with most people occupying a place somewhere in the middle? Would dialoguers and evangelists say similar things to people who seek to relate to members of other faith communities or completely different things? The Inter Faith Relations Reference Group and the Evangelism Strategy Group of the Methodist Church have spent two years exploring these issues together. The result is the set of studies that follows.

Those of us on the working group have listened hard to one another and have agreed a set of studies, which we believe asks awkward questions of all of us. We have not set out to find a 'middle of the road fudge' but rather to identify some principles on which we all agreed, and some questions which members of the group would answer differently.

We found we had much more in common than we first thought. For instance, there was total agreement that to share faith with someone of a different culture or faith, it is imperative to spend a lot of time listening, until we understand the new culture well enough to know how to talk about

Christianity in ways that make sense. We agreed that we must always treat people with courtesy and respect, and not look down on others or patronise them or their faith.

We found evidence of a huge number of people who have committed a great deal of time and energy getting to know people of other faiths. We also found evidence that a number of people from other faith communities have become Christians and are following Jesus in all sorts of ways – often paying a much higher price for their faith than those of us with a Christian heritage would. We have restricted ourselves to exploring relations in a British context. We appreciate that there are considerable differences when Christianity is a minority faith but have not sought to explore that issue in this set of studies.

Although we have concentrated on the major world religions, readers will find many of the questions and challenges apply equally well to people who have a 'New Age' spirituality or who are members of groups like the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses. We hope that you will find the studies stimulating and that they might encourage you to engage at a deeper level with people of other faiths.

In addition to the six sessions, we have included projects, resources for further exploration of the subject and two papers written by members of the working group; the first about evangelism and the second about inter faith dialogue. Together, they set out some of the theological principles against which the studies were written.

Leader's Notes

Experienced group leaders will already be familiar with much of the following. It is offered in the hope that it will help groups to have a more fulfilling experience in using this study.

Before the meeting

The studies have been designed to be freestanding, but there are suggestions for further reading in the resources section. After carefully reading the material for the session, you may find it helpful to refer to the other Methodist resources mentioned in the footnotes, most particularly *Faith Meeting Faith: ways forward in inter faith relations*, a publication that encourages discussion of 30 frequently asked questions on inter faith relations (see resources section).

The Bible passages read very differently in different translations, and paraphrased versions such as 'The Message' can give a helpful perspective on a well known passage. It is worth taking the time to read the passages in a number of versions and to make them available for the group meeting. If the group are using this material in the context of a fellowship meeting, thought will need to be given to appropriate acts of worship.

During the meeting

If the group has come together especially for these studies, take time at the first meeting to introduce yourselves and get to know one another. This will make the conversation flow much more easily when you begin the formal studies. It's also good to agree a finishing time at the beginning of the meeting (and stick to it!).

As you look at the Bible studies and case studies, you will find that there are a lot of questions. The intention is not that every question should be answered,

but rather that the variety of questions will help everyone to find a way into the discussion. The role of the leader is to help everyone into the discussion by asking good questions rather than by offering 'the answers'. Because many of the questions ask group members to share their experiences and opinions, it's important to create an atmosphere in which people feel free to share, without fearing that they will be criticised or contradicted by other members of the group.

The questions should evoke discussion about some contentious theological issues, which are covered in more depth by books highlighted in the resources section. It may be that group members will become sufficiently engaged with these issues to go away and do some more reading about them. If the materials are available at the meeting, they are more likely to be taken away by group members and read.

It may well be the case that the group will not agree on the answer to each question (the group who prepared the materials didn't!). It's more important to wrestle with the issues than to reach a quick agreement.

Towards the end of the meeting, it may be worthwhile looking at some of the projects in the resource as 'homework' before the next meeting.

What next

Wrestling with the studies is valuable for its own sake. However, the group may like to consider how the lessons they've learnt can be communicated to their church(es) and inform their mission strategy. The projects in the book may help with this.

Session 1



Turning Points

Introduction

Sharing faith is often a long process because it can only effectively happen where there is trust, and building this takes time. As a result, ‘turning points’ happen, when all that a person has heard leads to a life-changing decision. This section looks at the experiences of people who decide to become followers of Jesus. It will explore how such ‘turning points’ occur and the part played by Christians who share their faith. It also raises the issue of evangelism and culture, and how evangelism can cross cultures.

It should be remembered that becoming a Christian is often a much more radical step for someone of a different faith culture than it is for someone from a nominal Christian background, involving huge sacrifices.

A new congregation of converts

A Yorkshire Methodist Church has seen the dramatic emergence of a Farsi speaking congregation over the last four years. All the members come from Muslim backgrounds, though some were much stronger adherents to Islam than others. It all began when two Iranian asylum seekers were offered practical help by the church. They began to attend church services and after six months asked to be baptised. They then invited friends to come along and eventually a Farsi congregation began. The current members are mostly Iranian, though there are now a number of Afghanis. They came to England for a variety of reasons, political, personal and religious. The congregation now has regular contact with over a hundred Farsi speakers. Most of them have become Christians and many have been baptised.

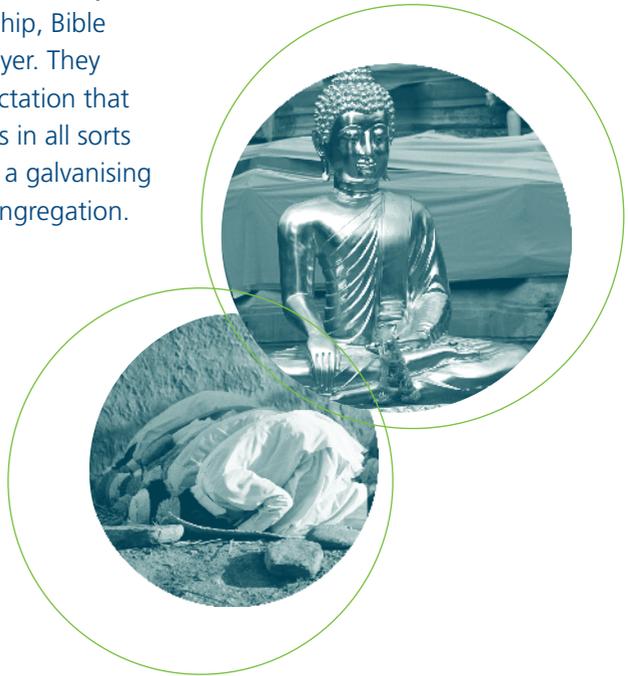
These converts are experiencing remarkable works of God in their lives. About a third of them speak of dreams and visions from God. They experience supernatural healing and other answers to prayer. For most of them, their conversion stories are about experiencing the supernatural power of God in life-changing ways. As a result, they are fervent evangelists, sometimes in the face of persecution, beatings and death threats from members of the faith community they have left. If deported, many of them face the very real possibility of death.

Members of the English congregation have provided a lot of practical support (especially with asylum

applications and court appearances), pastoral support (though the Farsi congregation is developing very strong pastoral care) and Christian teaching. They have had to learn how to talk about Jesus in ways that make sense to people from a very different culture. For instance, they try never to use the word 'Christian' because the historical connotations of the word makes it unhelpful – instead, they talk about followers of Jesus.



The worship of the Farsi speaking congregation is heavily influenced by Iranian culture and is quite different from that of the English congregation. They are incredibly enthusiastic about worship, Bible study and especially prayer. They have an infectious expectation that God will act in their lives in all sorts of ways, which has had a galvanising effect on the English congregation.



Questions for Discussion



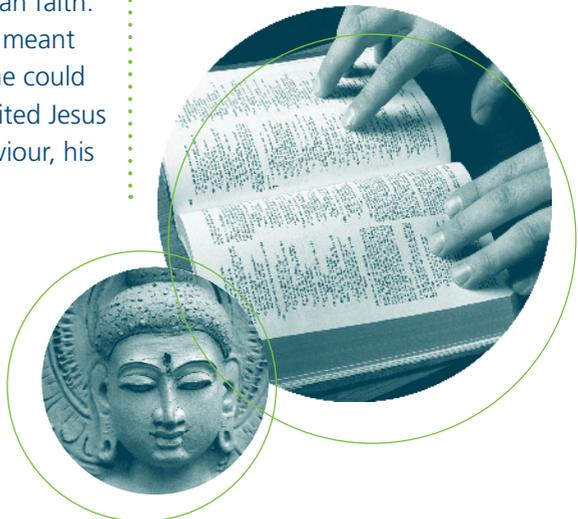
1. What are your reactions to this story? What are the points at which it challenges you or your church?
2. In your experience, what sorts of experiences bring turning points in people's lives? What part does faith play? What might have contributed to the turning points in the Farsi community? What lessons are there for your church situation?
3. The case study points to religious experience as a key influence in people deciding to become followers of Jesus – how much is experience shared and celebrated in your local church?
4. In what situations, if any, might it be inappropriate to long for people of another faith to become followers of Jesus?
5. How do you think we should respond when converts face the possibility of persecution from family or home community? How should we respond to faith communities that are responsible for persecution? How should this affect our understanding of evangelism or sharing faith?

The conversion of Ming

Ming is Chinese. He had a difficult childhood and as an adult was led to what he now describes as idol worship and a heavy dependency on gambling. He met a Christian at work. They became friends and his new friend tried to share the gospel with him. Ming resisted this, but his friend persisted with the friendship.

Some time later Ming became unwell, worn down by the burdens of his lifestyle. During this time, he watched a Chinese Christian television programme called 'Shower of Blessings', in which someone told the story of how Jesus Christ had transformed his life. Before his conversion, this person had led a life very similar to Ming's. This prompted Ming to contact his friend again to hear more about the Christian faith. His friend explained what it meant to be a Christian and how he could become one. Ming then invited Jesus Christ to be his Lord and saviour, his friend praying with him.

Ming's friend reflected afterwards that though he may have pushed too hard in sharing the gospel early in the friendship, the friendship was real. God in his grace had brought Ming to Christianity both through the friendship and a television programme that had spoken to Ming through his Chinese culture.



Questions for Discussion

6. Can you think of a time when you began discussing your experience of Jesus Christ with someone who wasn't a Christian? What happened?
7. Have you had a conversation with someone of another faith about their spiritual experiences? What happened?
8. It was the combination of an impersonal television programme and personal friendship that led Ming to faith – what lessons can we learn from this? What are the key events in your journey to faith?
9. In what situations may friendship and evangelism conflict with each other? What's the relationship between offering friendship and sharing faith?
10. In your opinion, how far is it possible, or even desirable, to attempt to evangelise those of another culture? What are the dangers likely to be? What might be the possible advantages?
11. Evangelism across cultures has taken place and probably needs to – what would you suggest are necessary safeguards to ensure that it is done responsibly?

Bible Study Acts 8:26-40



This story begins with an angel – one of a number of ‘turning points’ in the passage! New Age followers and people of other faiths are often more open to angelic visitations and guidance than many Christians (type angel into an internet search engine and test it for yourself!). Philip is brought by the angel and the prompting of the Holy Spirit (v.29) to a complete stranger.

Philip is very direct in the way that he talks to the Ethiopian official. Chance encounters often provide an opportunity for frankness that would be unwise in a relationship with someone we know well. The better we know someone, the more important it is to let our lives speak until people ask questions. Even in chance encounters a simple rule of behaviour is to make it easier for the next Christian who comes along, to share faith.

The Ethiopian is reading the book of Isaiah (v.30). Philip begins with the person of Jesus. It is usually more helpful to share our experience of Jesus than our experience of church. This makes us more vulnerable because it is so personal, but it is more effective. The Ethiopian responds by asking for baptism. Philip has no more involvement in the Ethiopian’s life. Tradition tells us though that this official returned to Ethiopia and began the Church in Ethiopia. Perhaps the absence of Philip made it possible for the Ethiopian Church to take on an appropriate cultural form.

Questions for Discussion



12. Where do you think there are turning points in the story?
13. How comfortable do you think Christians are when given the opportunity to talk about spiritual experience or challenged to answer questions about faith? What support do you think they need when faced with such situations?
14. Can you think of a time when God prompted you to do something unusual (like Philip going to the desert road)? What happened?
15. What experiences do you have of conversations that have helped to make understanding faith and calling clearer for you? How far have they been with people of other faiths, of no faith or of different approaches to faith?
16. How much of what you do as a Christian is actually shaped by western culture rather than faith?
17. How would you react if a person of another faith said, 'But I've had an experience just like that!' when you were sharing your own experience of Jesus Christ?
18. Think about any evangelistic programmes your church has done. Would they be appropriate to invite someone of another faith to? If not, why not?
19. A Christian convert from a Muslim background said that he had given up his family, his friends and his community to follow Jesus but in exchange had received only two Sunday services and a prayer meeting. What does this say about our church life? And how can we show solidarity with those who have converted at great cost?

Session 2



Listening, Understanding and Talking of God

Introduction

This section explores what happens when a member of one faith explores another faith in depth. The first case study is about a Christian's journey into Sikhism and the second about a Sikh woman's encounter with Christianity.¹

¹ If you wish to do further theological work on the questions this section raises, look at Questions 8 and 15 in *Faith Meeting Faith* (see resources section): Are we compromising our faith through having dialogue with people of other faiths? Should we be willing to be changed in inter faith dialogue?

May's story

"My study of Sikhism has made me a better Christian."

These words were spoken by May, a Methodist local preacher, when discussing how her Christian faith had been enriched by her study of Sikhism and her active involvement with Sikhs. Her first teaching post was in a secondary school, whose pupils were predominantly from Sikh families. She had to teach world religions. This led her to become a member of a local inter faith group and to visit the places of worship of her Sikh, Muslim and Hindu pupils. Everyone she met was incredibly welcoming and helpful. "Often I was having to ask religious leaders to explain beliefs and practices to me the week before I taught them in school", she said.

Sikhs have a reputation for hospitality. Anyone visiting a gurdwara, the Sikh place of worship, will be offered a meal, free of charge. It was the Sikh emphasis on meditation, however, that made a special impact on May. Music had always been important to her. In her teens she had been a member of a Christian guitar group. When she visited the gurdwara and heard

the meditative singing of passages from the Sikh scriptures, it created a spiritual response in her. "Though I couldn't understand all the words they were singing, I felt the vibration of the sound in the innermost part of my being and it made me feel closer to God", she said.

Sikhism also taught May a heightened respect for sacred scripture. When she saw the way Sikhs treat their holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, she remembered an incident when she was a student at Bible College. During a late night prayer meeting she had put her Bible on the floor. An Indian Christian immediately picked it up and said, "If you're tired I'll hold your Bible for you." At the time, May hadn't understood why her fellow student had said this, but as she saw the deep respect Sikhs show to the holy book, she was ashamed at the way in which she and other Christians can sometimes treat the Bible.

May was also drawn to the Sikh belief in and practice of the equality of humanity. Remembering the way

she had been treated as a woman and young person in some churches, she compared it to Sikh practice where any person, regardless of age or gender, may read the Guru Granth Sahib or accompany the singing if they have the necessary ability. Many gurdwaras also have monthly meetings on a Saturday evening, which are organised by and for young people - but people of all ages are present to encourage them.

“It’s interesting”, May concluded, “I sometimes have Christians ask if I have ever thought of becoming a Sikh, but I don’t have Sikhs asking me the same question. My answer is always that I am secure in my Christian faith, but I also have the privilege of being spiritually blessed by my study of and involvement in Sikhism”.

Questions for Discussion

1. Think of a faith other than Christianity that you have had some contact with. How great was the contact, and how much impact did it have on you?
2. Were there any lessons that you felt you learnt from that faith?
3. May claimed that Sikhism had ‘spiritually blessed’ her. How far do you think a Christian can join in the life of another faith and remain a Christian?

A Sikh woman's story

"Although today I have many close friends who are Christians and have spent much of my life promoting trust and dialogue between people of different faiths, my first contact with Christians was not positive. Often people forget incidents in their lives, and that the behaviour of Christians in history may lead to fear and distrust of them."

I was born in the Punjab, when the British Raj ruled a united Punjab and missionaries had arrived in India together with the British army. At independence my family was on the 'wrong' side of the border. So, as Sikhs, we had to leave our homes and possessions, and run for our lives into the Indian side of the divided Punjab. Before that, my family and community history had been one of imprisonment, lack of freedom, Sikhs being blown up by canon fire by the British army and our spiritual leader sent into exile because Sikhs wanted liberation from British rule. Consequently, the feeling of 'us and them' became and remained paramount. Dealing with such emotions needed a great leap of faith.

Fortunately, when I came to Britain I met some Christians who lived their faith compassionately, lovingly and passionately, yet were open to other points of view, willing both to share and to learn. Over the years mutual

friendship has grown and, although we may not meet for months or years, whenever we do, it feels as if we parted only yesterday.

In both formal conferences and informal discussions, we have developed an atmosphere of trust and respect, where we can share scripture readings and talk about our faith. This has given me a new perspective. It has broadened my understanding of my own faith, as well as my understanding of how Christians interpret their own scripture and seek meaning.

I have also attended ceremonies and services of different Christian denominations, which have helped me to learn about the diversity within the Christian tradition. What I value enormously is the preparation made for each service, the welcome given to all and the provisions made so that everybody can join in the hymn singing and prayers. I feel not only

enriched but blessed by being able to participate in this way.

I also admire how Christians have made their facilities much more inclusive for people of all ethnic origins and languages, though I find approaches to gender in the hierarchy of some Christian communities a bit archaic when the rest of society is becoming more inclusive. I respect the devotion of Christians to Jesus Christ and can understand why some are evangelical

and work to convert people to their kind of Christianity. Occasionally I joke with my Christian friends saying, “You have made Jesus to be the doorkeeper, a bouncer. I wish you could see him more as the opener of doors, because of the way he lived his life!”

All in all, I am enriched because of Jesus’ message of peace and love. If we acted on it, this world would be literally a heaven on earth”.

Questions for Discussion



4. How much does it surprise you that a Sikh might approach you with distrust and caution because you’re a Christian? How can we break down such barriers and build an atmosphere of trust? What other examples do you know of where there have been barriers between those of different faiths and Christianity? How have you seen them overcome?
5. The Sikh woman wrote that she was fortunate to come into contact with ‘some Christians who lived their faith compassionately, lovingly and passionately, yet were open to other points of view, willing to both share and learn.’ Consider the ways in which you live your Christian life. What words do you think your friends outside the church would use to describe the way you live your life?
6. “You have made Jesus to be the doorkeeper, a bouncer. I wish you could see him more as the opener of doors, because of the way he lived his life!” How do we do this: in our personal lives? In our corporate life?

Bible Study John 3:1–21



Some of life's deepest conversations take place at night! This wonderful passage describes the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. They obviously shared the same religious tradition, but both came at it in sincerely held but radically different ways. This difference explains Nicodemus' persistent questions as he struggled to understand what Jesus meant. These questions not only give Jesus the opportunity to share his understanding of his faith, but it is almost as if they push him to a deeper expression of his mission as he works to put it in terms that make sense to Nicodemus. In turn, the conversation with Nicodemus makes Jesus' message clear in new ways for us. The respect Nicodemus had for Jesus is reflected in John 7:50 and 19:39.

Questions for Discussion



7. What is it about Jesus that appears to Nicodemus to make the risks of conversation worthwhile?
8. What do you think we can we learn from Jesus about the way he handles questions?
9. What can we learn from this passage of the value of conversation about faith with someone who is of a different faith or of different views?

NOTE: Nicodemus belonged to the Pharisees, who get a bad press in some of the Gospels, where they are subject to Jesus' fierce criticism. They originated among groups opposing any attempt to compromise faithfulness to God and they were committed to obedience to God's law, convinced that it could be kept in ordinary life and not just by priests. According to some reports, this made them close to and admired by the ordinary people. Jesus too gave his life to revealing God's will for his people and saving them from the consequences of sin. Often those closest to us are the ones we argue with the most – because we both care so deeply about the same things.

Session 3



Community Action

Introduction

People of different faiths are often brought together because they share common concerns about their local community. The case studies in this section offer two projects that bring people together across faith boundaries to work for a common goal. They invite reflection on how Christian involvement in such projects can be a form of faith sharing.²

² If you wish to do further work on the questions this section raises, look at Questions 27 and 28 in *Faith Meeting Faith* (see resources section): Can different faith communities work together?; What should we do if there is no response when we try to relate to other faiths in our neighbourhood?

'A Rocha'

A Muslim woman, many of whose family had been killed by Christians in Bosnia, came to the UK as an asylum seeker. As a refugee, her legal status meant that she couldn't have paid work but, with a background in financial administration, she volunteered to work for a local charitable organisation, 'A Rocha'. She later learned that it was a Christian organisation but she had made many friends and felt a part of it, so she continued. When she later visited Bosnia, she sent postcards to 'A Rocha' members, and cooked a meal for them on her return.

With a dual carriageway along one side and aeroplanes flying overhead to land at nearby Heathrow Airport, the 'A Rocha' project provides a spiritual space among the noise and bustle of West London. Today, a visitor to the country park that 'A Rocha' has created will see people walking their dogs, or with binoculars to their eyes watching the variety of birds and other wildlife that can be found there. Other people will simply be taking a stroll, enjoying the park's peace and tranquillity.

'A Rocha' was born when local residents of the urban and multi faith community of Southall identified improving the environment as one of its greatest needs, at a time when local Christians wanted to provide a witness in the area. Building on long-standing relationships that had developed between the leaders

of the local faith communities, local politicians and schools, the project was established in 2001. Its main focus was to turn 90 acres of derelict, formerly council owned land in West London into a country park and nature area. It also provided a way in which local Christians - a minority in Southall - could make a positive contribution, expressing a care for the environment motivated by a biblical understanding of the earth as the Lord's and people as the stewards of God's creation.

Since it opened, 'A Rocha' has developed a variety of activities to meet the needs of local people, especially the young. It has two environmental officers, who deliver lessons to school pupils. Jointly with the World Wildlife Trust and local teachers, they also organise summer play schemes, a one-week trip to

Cornwall and three, weekly, after school environmental clubs. There is also ongoing conservation work in the park and monthly community events.

Because of 'A Rocha's' geographic location, a significant minority of asylum seekers and other vulnerable people who are unable to obtain paid employment live nearby. 'A Rocha' makes a positive effort to

support them, regardless of their religious faith, by giving them the opportunity to use their skills at the project. The result? People of different faiths work together, eat their food together at lunchtime, and find their place in the wider society through their voluntary work there.

The 'A Rocha UK' website is:
www.en.arocha.org/uk

Questions for Discussion

1. 'A Rocha' identified and met a need that was strongly felt by the whole community. What might the felt needs of those outside the Christian Church in your area be? How might Christians work with others to meet those needs?
2. 'A Rocha' is perceived as an environmental agency. This enabled the Bosnian Muslim woman to be involved. Later she discovered that the ethos was Christian, but since she had made friends, she chose to stay. What does this teach us about approaches to mission?
3. In your opinion, what made possible the co-operation that is demonstrated by this story?
4. Within a project such as 'A Rocha', could there be a tension between evangelism and the call to build human community together with people of other faiths? What might this tension be? How should we respond to it?

Liverpool Community Spirit

Are electronic games the only option for young people who want recreation? Do games exist that are enjoyable and social? Generation Games, a Liverpool project, sent young people into community centres of five faiths to find out, by interviewing elders about the childhood games they remembered. Workshops introducing the games were then held in local primary schools. A Generation Games web page was designed in conjunction with the Museum of Liverpool Life and Family Fun Days held at the Museum and in Toxteth - all inspired by the young people.

The young people were also involved in a Reading Partnership in three local primary schools where there were many disadvantaged and underachieving children. Their task was to help the children with reading and other related activities in half-hour sessions, as volunteers. The children were not only helped to read by people far closer to their own age than teachers but were offered positive role models.

Generation Games and the Reading Partnership are two of the projects connected with Liverpool Community Spirit (LCS), a community education partnership in inner city Liverpool that brings together grassroots faith and cultural communities. LCS seeks to recognise and celebrate the unique diversity of Britain's oldest multi cultural city. It draws on the city's rich heritage of religious

and spiritual insight to inspire an inclusive and caring community ethic, grounded in mutual understanding and respect. It also hopes to be an inspiration to communities around the world who are seeking to live in harmony with their neighbours.

At the core of LCS's work are community education programmes that encourage people of different generations, faiths and cultures to work together, and so explore the values and wisdoms they share. Generation Games and the Reading Partnership grew from the Liverpool Community Spirit Youth Council, which brings together 14-19 year olds from different faith backgrounds to develop and deliver active citizenship programmes.

LCS programmes are always two-pronged. They encourage mutual

understanding and respect, but also address practical community needs. In addition, the Youth Council develops skills, confidence and self-esteem in

its young people, equipping them to make a difference in their own and others' lives.

Questions for Discussion



5. How can meeting points on such common human experience as children's games provide resources for building community? What lessons might we learn for the sharing of faith?
6. This project not only works across cultures and faiths, but also across generations. What implications might this approach have for your church?
7. What, in your opinion, might be the distinctive features of being a citizen in a community like Liverpool? What are the similarities and differences from your experience of being a citizen in your own community?
8. Both the projects in this study benefited from working with a number of statutory bodies, particularly those connected with education. What opportunities are there for you to work in this way?

Bible Study Matthew 5: 1-12



These verses introduce what is known as the Sermon on the Mount, which sets out how we should live. Each verse names people whose action or way of being draws them close to God in a special way. All of them are blessed because they are doing the will of God. All are richly rewarded.

The only verse in which the action blessed is linked with following Jesus is verse 11. All the other verses are universal in what they say; they apply to anyone, anywhere. Through the centuries, people of other faiths have been attracted to them, finding in them much that touches their own convictions.

Questions for Discussion



9. Which of these 'Beatitudes' do you feel most attracted to? Why?
10. Which of the qualities named in these verses do you think the world is most in need of? Why?
11. Have you met a person of another faith who has lived out one or more of the Beatitudes? Share your experience. What have you learned from that person? How have you been challenged?
12. Most religions condemn greed and selfishness - what Christians would call mammon - and encourage mercy and service. Most religions also contain what has come to be known as the golden rule: do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you. How far can common ethical values, such as these, bring people of different religions together to work for the common good?
13. Would you be happy to share in a community project with other faith groups? Have you ever tried to do this? What happened?
14. Is there a point at which common ethical values are not enough?

Session 4



Presence

Introduction

When Christians talk about mission, they usually focus on ‘doing’ but this section encourages us to look also at ‘being’ as a way of celebrating God’s presence in our daily lives. It offers two case studies that look at the practical experiences of Christians who have chosen to be present among people of other faiths and turns to how we can enhance our presence in our neighbourhood.³

³ If you wish to do further theological work on the questions this section raises, look at Questions 18 and 19 in *Faith Meeting Faith* (see resources section): How should we respond to texts like John 14.6?; Should I be trying to convert people of other faiths to Christianity?

Living and working alongside Muslims

A Christian woman, Joanne, and her family live and work in a multi cultural, multi faith area of a city. When they moved into the area, they thought carefully about ways to witness through their church, jobs and daily living. "What should they do?" "How might they meet people?" "When should they talk about Jesus Christ?" and "What should they say?"

Through their church, Joanne is now involved in a homework club and a craft club for local young people of all faiths. These clubs are held on church premises and are openly linked to the life of the church and its worship. Through them she has been pleased to find opportunities to talk about Jesus Christ and what it means to her to be a Christian. She has found that people have responded positively to invitations to church events such as carol singing or summer fairs. For Joanne, the most exciting part of this is that the church is seen as blessing people; and if someone wants to find out more about Jesus, 'that's great'.

During the week, Joanne also works at the local community centre, teaching English as a Second Language to newly arrived Somali Muslim women. Many of them are single parents, managing to live on a small amount of money, often in poor housing. When she began

this work, Joanne sought to build friendship links with the women in order to share her faith, in the hope that some might convert to Christianity. But she eventually decided not to use this situation to speak about her faith, because she was wary of abusing the power structure in her relationship with the students. Joanne continues to enjoy the teaching though and feels that she is making a useful contribution to women living in difficult situations.

In addition, through everyday conversations with her colleagues, Joanne finds opportunities to talk about what it means to be a Christian in real life – not just in theory or in stereotypes. When one Muslim colleague saw Joanne's wedding photos, she was surprised that her family included Asians, who were all Christians. Like many people, this colleague assumed 'Pakistani meant Muslim and Christian meant English'.

In these different ways, Joanne finds that it is the everyday living and working among people of other faiths that is the basis for her Christian witness. She sometimes

struggles with a feeling of not being very good at 'the talking about faith bit' but believes the most important thing she can do is to be amongst people and share people's lives.

Questions for Discussion



1. If you moved into the same multi religious neighbourhood as Joanne, what questions would you ask about your Christian witness?
2. Joanne chose not to speak openly about her faith to the Muslim women she was teaching. How far do you agree with her decision and the reason for it?
3. What other situations can you think of where it might not be appropriate to talk openly about your faith?
4. What do you think are the implications of the whole case study for our call to evangelise or to share our faith?

Living and working among asylum seekers

David is a Christian who works at an advice centre for refugees and asylum seekers in Leeds. At university a course about issues in the developing world had opened his eyes to the challenges many people face in their daily lives. Having grown up in suburban England, he was unsure what exactly he could offer to these situations. He had a passion for justice and God's love for all but not huge expertise. Then the job at the advice centre came along.

The centre is not a Christian project. David works alongside other staff and volunteers, many of whom are Muslims. A lot of the volunteers are refugees and are vital to the organization and its spirit. It is a joyful, friendly place, a place where everyone who turns up is made welcome. The centre's main work is education, employment and retraining but a key underlying aim is much broader than this - to make refugees and asylum seekers feel welcome, cared for and supported.

For people who attend the centre, the benefit goes beyond what can be assessed on forms or paper. The receptionist, a refugee who is a Muslim, said that before she came to the centre, she felt misunderstood about her nationality and Muslim identity. Now she feels accepted for who she is and wants to find out about and reach out to people from other cultures, British, African

and East European ones. Similarly an atheist refugee pointed out how warm and loving the atmosphere was.

David is keen to involve as many people as possible in the hospitality and friendship side of things, and works with a city-wide movement called 'Welcome to Leeds'. This draws in people who have a heart for welcoming refugees and asylum seekers to the city. Many are Christians. Some are Muslim. Others don't belong to any faith. Once a month they meet to share food, music and friendship, usually in a church hall. There are offshoot events that are Christian, like healing services, Bible study groups and prayer meetings, to which all are invited.

The Christian staff members of the advice centre are motivated in their work by their faith. They believe that

they witness to this faith through offering hospitality, friendship, love and, when appropriate, prayer.

For David, the most important part of this is to represent God's love to the people he meets on a daily basis and

to receive back from them. He says "It is amazing to work with these people. I learn so much and receive more than I give. Many of my own prejudices have been removed. These people bring so much of God to us and to this nation."

Questions for Discussion

5. On the evidence of this case study, what qualities do Christians need to develop if they are committed to a mission of 'presence' among those of other faiths?
6. What results are to be expected from a ministry of presence?

Bible Study Luke 17: 11-19



Jesus' gift to each of the ten was indiscriminate, spontaneous, an act of grace, possible because he was 'present' on the border between Samaria and Galilee. Only one, though, came back in thanks and he - a Samaritan - was not the one expected to return. The words of Jesus to him suggest that there was a second healing, perhaps a spiritual healing.

Questions for Discussion

7. This passage encourages us to spend time amongst people in the community, so that we might all experience Jesus' grace and mercy. What proportion of your time is spent among Christians, and what proportion among people of different faiths? When and how do you meet people of other faiths?
8. How does his story challenge some of our existing patterns of relationships, of giving and receiving: within our Christian congregation? within the wider community? How does it feel to offer such an indiscriminate approach to others? How can we follow Jesus' example in our multi faith communities?
9. Do you find that you pass judgement on the grounds of 'most likely to...' For example, have you ever thought, "Muslims are most likely to pray frequently" or, "Muslims are most likely to deride Christian beliefs". How can we get beyond our preconceptions, to live and love graciously among our neighbours of different faiths?
10. The Samaritan was blessed with physical and spiritual healing. What do you hope our neighbours of other faiths will find through their encounters with Christians?

Session 5



Sharing Jesus through Prayer and Worship

Introduction

Prayer is central to most religions and can draw people together across religions. The case studies in this section focus on using prayer to promote inter faith understanding and evangelism. The first explores what can happen when Christians offer to pray with people of other faiths. The second describes an act of worship that is distinctively Christian yet accessible to people of other faiths.⁴

⁴ If you wish to do further theological work on the questions this section raises, look at Questions 9 and 25 in *Faith Meeting Faith* (see resources section): Do people of different faiths worship the same God?; Can Christians pray and worship together with people of other faiths?

Prayer in Bradford

“But what if Muslims ask us to pray for them? We would want to pray in the name of Jesus and this may cause offence! Should we refuse to pray with them?”

It was a planning meeting in a church in Bradford. Each church in the area was being encouraged to focus on evangelism and explore what forms of outreach into their local community would be right for them. This particular church had decided to focus on the ministry of prayer. They planned to set up a stall in the centre of their community and ask people if they had concerns for which they would appreciate prayer. But one major question had to be discussed before they could go forward.

Bradford is a multi faith city with one of the highest percentages of Muslims in the country. What would it mean to pray with Muslims about their concerns? Would they have to avoid using the name of Jesus? Would they have to refuse to pray with some people? And, if so, wouldn't this be discriminatory?

The Church decided that there would be no refusals. On the days set aside for prayer, they would speak to all, and pray with all who asked. After all, Jesus did not turn away those who came to him for help. They would do their best to be sensitive to people of other faiths but would not hide that they prayed in the name of Jesus.

They found that Muslims did not avoid them. In fact, the reverse happened. Muslims responded to the offer of prayer positively. They were happy to speak about their concerns and to receive prayer from Christians.



Questions for Discussion ?

1. Would you be willing to pray with or on behalf of a person of another faith? Give reasons for this.
2. Would you be happy for a person of another faith to pray for you? If your responses are different for these two questions, why is that?
3. What benefit do ventures such as this have for (1) evangelism and (2) community cohesion?



Fresh expressions of church: a Christ-centred satsang

A satsang is a Gujarati Hindu religious gathering. Satsang comes from two words: sat meaning truth or reality and sang meaning together. It's 'a gathering around truth' where songs of devotion (bhajan) are sung, prayers (arti) said, food shared and friendship enjoyed.

Christians in Croydon have developed a *satsang* that draws on this tradition but is distinctive in that the words used are Christ-centred. And Bible readings are included as well as song. Christians and Hindus come to it. All participate and all learn Jesus *bhajans*. Being family, friends or co-workers is more important than religious identity.

The inclusivity of Hindu belief means that some Hindus do not have a problem with singing Jesus *bhajans*. As they praise Jesus, singing of his life, death and resurrection, they also begin to learn who Christians believe he is, what he has done and how this may be relevant to them. A turning point may then come, usually a number of months after joining the *satsang*. Some begin taking the weekly praise into their daily lives. Some drop out of the group. Participants are free to make either response.

Satsang is both 'worship in spirit and truth' and 'loving one another'. It is worship and it is evangelism. In a Gujarati setting, it allows people freedom to worship God and to learn more about how Christians see God in ways that are culturally appropriate.



Questions for Discussion

4. This *satsang* takes place within a Gujarati setting. Have you had experience of similar initiatives in other settings, with other faiths? What were the results?
5. The *satsang* appropriates worship forms from Hinduism and makes them Christian. Is there a downside to this? What would you feel, for instance, if Hindus took Christian prayers/hymns and made them Hindu?
6. What would be your motives for initiating or participating in a *satsang*? Do you think you should explain these motives to the other participants?

Bible Study **Matthew 15:21-28**



Jesus is in Tyre and Sidon, Gentile territory, probably preparing for the end of his ministry on earth. He had deliberately withdrawn there, needing space and time with his disciples, away from the demands of the crowds. A Canaanite woman came to him, begging him to help her sick daughter. Jesus does not respond and the disciples urge him to send her away, evidently considering this non-Jew a nuisance.

The woman gets on her knees before Jesus, only to be met with insult, when Jesus implies that she is on the same level as a dog (dogs were the unclean scavengers of the street). We don't know how he said the words. If it was with compassion and humour, they would lose their sting. If it was with indifference or even hostility, they would not. Whichever was the case, the woman comes back to Jesus in quick-witted response and he grants her request.

Questions for Discussion

7. Do you find this passage problematic? If so, why?
8. Do you think Jesus would have healed the woman's daughter if she hadn't worshipped him and called him Lord? How important do you think it was to Jesus that she was a Gentile?
9. What parallels can you draw between the Bible passage and the case study about prayer in Bradford?
10. Can we draw any guidelines from this passage about Christian witness in a multi faith society?

Bible Study **Romans 15:7-13**

This passage is the last part of a section in Romans that is mainly about how the strong should regard the weak. Paul has been writing about strength and weakness of faith (Romans 14:1-2) and has now moved to urging unity between Jews and Gentiles in worship, using words from the Hebrew Bible (Psalm 117:1; Isaiah 11:10.) He evokes a picture of those outside the Jewish faith praising God for God's mercy and finding hope in Jesus.

11. Paul is urging the Romans to accept one another as Christ has accepted them because this glorifies God (v.7). Is this relevant to how we accept (or reject) those of other faiths? Give reasons.
12. What do you think Paul has in mind when he urges the Gentiles to rejoice and praise the Lord? (v.10-11).

Session 6



Sharing Stories

Introduction

Some people of other faiths have misconceptions about Christianity that have been built up over many years. This section explores how these can be changed through sensitive faith sharing. Both case studies show that we need to know where people of other religions are coming from if we are to help them understand what Christians believe.⁵

⁵ If you wish to do further theological work on the questions this section raises, look at Questions 9 and 25 in *Faith Meeting Faith* (see resources section): Do people of different faiths worship the same God?; Can Christians pray and worship together with people of other faiths?

Addressing misconceptions: a conversation with a Buddhist

“But how can you remain a Christian after learning all that the Buddha taught? Christians only believe in a god!”

The setting was a lunch party in Sri Lanka. Beth, a British Christian, was talking to Ramani, a young Sri Lankan Buddhist woman. Beth had shared with Ramani that she was just about to return to England after studying Buddhism in Sri Lanka for over seven years. Ramani had looked puzzled. Then out came this sentence.

Beth wasn't surprised at Ramani's response. Many Sri Lankan Buddhists might have said, or at least thought, the same. The form of Buddhism found in Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand is Theravada Buddhism, literally the way or school of the elders. Beth was well aware that Theravada Buddhists are non-theistic; they do not believe in a creating and sustaining God. But she also knew that most Buddhist temples have a small shrine to the 'gods' tucked away in a corner. Sri Lankan Buddhists do not believe that the gods worshipped there have much power. They can help humans with worldly matters such as passing an exam or finding a new house but

that is about all. Only the teaching of the Buddha can lead people to Truth. And the gods need this too. Although they live in the heavens, they are not enlightened and can be reborn again. So the Buddha is called 'teacher of gods and humans' in the holy texts of Theravada Buddhism.

Knowing all this, Beth realized that Ramani thought that Christians worshipped a 'god' in the Theravada Buddhist sense - a being below the Buddha, able to help humans in mundane ways but powerless to show the way to liberation. So she tried to explain that the God in Christianity was different from the gods of Buddhism and told some biblical stories to illustrate this. She also stressed that Christianity was not just about 'belief' in God but also about a selfless 'way' of life.

She stressed this because she knew some Buddhists thought Christianity was only about 'blind faith'. She also shared that she had learnt much from Buddhism. It had enriched and

complemented her Christian faith. Beth had been particularly struck by the importance of compassion in Buddhism. Words such as these, attributed to the Buddha, had challenged her greatly:

Bhikkhus (monks), even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb with a two-handled saw, he

... who gave rise to a mind of hatred
... towards them would not be carrying
... out my teaching. Herein, *bhikkhus*,
... you should train thus: 'our minds
... will remain unaffected, and we shall
... utter no evil words; we shall abide
... compassionate for their welfare, with
... a mind of loving kindness, without
... inner hate'.⁶
...

Questions for Discussion

1. What are your reactions to this story? What might have happened in the conversation if Beth had not understood Ramani's comment?
2. What biblical stories would you choose to put across the Christian view of God in this situation?
3. What Bible stories could you suggest that have links with the passage from the Buddhist texts quoted at the end?

⁶ (From The Simile of the Saw, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*, translated by Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Kandy (Sri Lanka): Buddhist Publication Society, 1995, p. 223)

The art of listening: a conversation between two young people - a Muslim and a Christian

"Christians believe in three Gods, don't they? And Jesus is one of them."

"No, that's not right, we believe in one God. Jesus is the Son of God."

"But how can God have a son? The Qur'an tells us Jesus was a holy prophet."

"To Christians, Jesus is more than a prophet. He died on a cross so we can be saved."

"That's not what the Qur'an says. Jesus was not really crucified. A prophet like him couldn't be."

"So don't you believe that Jesus was raised from the dead?"

"No we don't. Jesus died a natural death and went to Paradise."

"Tell me more. Then I'll tell you more about Jesus in the Bible. Let's see where we really agree and disagree."

Many Muslims believe that Christians have simply got Jesus and the nature of God wrong. Jesus, or 'Isa' in the Qur'an, is a prophet, loved by God, born of Mary. As a child, he could make a real bird out of clay. As a man, he called people to submit to God's peaceful and merciful will. And he was not crucified or resurrected. According to the Qur'an, a crucifixion happened but it was only a likeness of Jesus that died (Chapter 4 verse 157 of the Qur'an). Many Muslims believe that all they need to know about Jesus is in the Qur'an.



Questions for Discussion



4. How would you feel, taking part in a conversation like this? How far, in your opinion, is such a conversation part of evangelism ... or not?
5. What do you think Christians and Muslims can learn from each other's views of God or Jesus? What do you find are the best ways of dealing with views that you may strongly feel are mistaken?
6. What is needed on both sides of a conversation like this if Muslims are to understand how Christians see Jesus?

Bible Study | Peter 3: 8-17



The early Christians were respected in some parts of the Roman Empire. But the writer of this letter is speaking to Christians who are facing abuse and misunderstanding. The first part outlines what will bind the Christian community together in hardship. The advice is similar to that given in Romans 12: 15-19 or Matthew 5: 44. The second part of the letter turns to relationships with people outside the Christian community.

Questions for Discussion



7. Have you faced abuse or hostile questioning because you are a Christian?
8. Compare the advice given here with Colossians 4: 5-6. What are the similarities and differences?
9. What kinds of faith sharing are ruled out in this passage?
10. The term 'reverence' (I Peter 3: 16) is usually used in the context of reverence towards God. How is it being used here and what does it mean? Should we have reverence for the beliefs expressed by the people in the case studies?
11. The passage stresses purity of intention and thought. What does this mean for our faith sharing now in situations similar to those in the case studies?

Turning Words into Action

Projects: Presence

Nurturing a Christian 'presence' among people of other faiths is about doing things differently where we are. To start, try one of these:

- Add a couple of minutes to your daily prayer to focus on the need for peace in your workplace or neighbourhood. Take time to name people, situations and places before God.
- Keep an eye on notice-boards at your community centre, school or doctor's surgery. If there is a multi cultural local event happening, make every effort to turn up, even if it is only for part of it.
- Take special food to work to share when there is a religious festival. Talk about the reasons for the celebration.
- When someone shares a concern or problem with you, offer to pray for them or with them. People of all faiths can appreciate this offer.

After you have tried any of these for a month, reflect on how things went. Did it make you feel you were doing anything differently? What struck you as worthwhile? What encouragement did you receive? When did you experience God's presence most strongly?

Projects

Projects: Learning and Listening

If we are to learn from and listen to people of other faiths, we need openness, courtesy and friendliness. These are possible ways to begin:

- If you have neighbours or work colleagues of another faith, start a conversation about religion with one of them and see where it leads. You could ask about a festival or ceremony, for example, how family members celebrate the birth of a child or a marriage.
- Invite members of another faith to come to a church service and ask whether it would be possible to visit their place of worship.
- Invite a member of another faith to speak about his or her beliefs at a church meeting or cell group.
- Choose one faith that you find difficult to understand and try to gain an insider's perspective of it, through reading, visits to places of worship, speaking with people of that faith.

Discuss afterwards, with your group or with Christian friends, what surprised or disturbed you, what seemed similar to Christianity and what differed from Christianity. Have you been enriched? Have you been challenged?

Projects: Sharing your experience of God

Sharing our experiences of God demands creativity, sensitivity and a willingness to meet people where they are. Below are three possible ways to prepare yourself:

- Think about a time when God was very close. It may be the moment you decided to become a Christian. It may be a 'mountain top' experience when you were filled with joy and delight by something God did. It may be a moment when God helped you through a very difficult time. Practise telling the story of what happened in just a minute (two at the absolute most). Try to avoid religious jargon and concentrate on describing the experience.

If you are using this study in a group, divide into pairs and share stories with one another. Over the next week, seek opportunities to share the story you have practised with someone outside the church. Pray for a 'divine appointment' like the one Philip experienced. (Acts 8: 26-40)

- Visit a Christian church that is trying to remain faithful to Jesus and to a non-western culture. Find out how the members are sharing their faith with others.
- Practise the art of respectful conversation - sharing what you believe with a person of another faith and answering questions about it, but also listening carefully to what the other believes and asking questions.

After you have done any of these, share your experiences with your church group or with Christian friends.

Projects: Joint action with people of other faiths

Joint action between people of different faiths grows where there is trust and common concerns. To prepare the ground, start with the following:

- Map what kinds of community action are already happening in your own neighbourhood. Find out if any of these bring people of different faiths together.
- Walk your own neighbourhood. Ask yourself what its needs are and whether community action might be able to do something about them.
- Talk to people within your neighbourhood. Ask them what needs they have or how they would like to see their neighbourhood improved.

Then, discuss your findings with your church or group. Reflect on whether your church could work ecumenically and with people of other faiths (liaising with any local inter faith bodies that you might have) to address any of the needs or common concerns identified.

Resources

From the Evangelism Strategy Group

1. **Friendship First - the manual:
Ordinary Christians discussing good news with ordinary Muslims**
Steve Bell, Friendship First Publications, 2003
£10.00, ISBN 0954406303

Obtainable from: Tim Leffler, Advance Bookshop, 17 Monks Road, Lincoln LN2 5HL; mail@advancebookshop.co.uk www.advancebookshop.co.uk

This manual shows how to make fewer mistakes when discussing the gospel with Muslims. It is as jargon-free and non-technical as possible. Published in a colourful A4 magazine format (84 pages), it is a lively user-friendly tool, designed to get the reader to the 'first base' of friendship with a Muslim.

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2. **Proclaiming Christ in a Pluralistic Context**
Ken Gnanakan, Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 2002
www.tbfindia.com

This is a revised edition of *The Pluralist Predicament*. The author writes in his introduction: 'Religious fundamentalism is on the rise and we cannot deny this. I am not concerned about analyzing this uprising; my main intention is to call the Church to a self-examination: Is it our fundamentalist actions that have provoked these fundamentalist reactions? Fundamentalism gives rise to fundamentalism. We are not against fundamentals as we need them to stand upon. But fundamentalism is something we can live without.' Chapter themes include: exclusivism; inclusivism; pluralism; towards a theology of religions; and facing our context today. *This is a good book but difficult to get hold of.*

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3. **Lost for Words**
James Lawrence, Oxford: CPAS/Bible Reading Fellowship, 1999
£6.99, ISBN 1841010960

This is both a book and a course on how to share faith naturally. It is not specifically about sharing faith with people of other faiths, but contains useful principles. More details of the course can be found on www.cpas.org.uk

4. **Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam**
Timothy C. Tennent, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002
\$25.00, ISBN 0801026024

While evangelical Christians have extensive experience with other religions through missionary outreach, in today's postmodern, pluralistic context, the nature of this experience is changing. Christianity is faced with a different apologetic task than in the past. Rather than being at the head of the table, Christianity now finds itself at a roundtable, dialoging with other religions. Keenly aware of these shifts, Tennent's book encourages and facilitates serious dialogue. Engaging in doctrinal challenges to Christianity from Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, the author's goal is to increase evangelical awareness of the need to think more critically about Christianity's encounter with competing world faiths.

5. **Ambiguous Evangelism**
Bob Mayo, London: SPCK, 2004
£9.99, ISBN 0281056374

This book contends that evangelism today needs to elicit people's interest and curiosity before presenting them with the claims of Christianity. Evangelism as information communication will not make sense to people who do not have the necessary framework to interpret what they are hearing. Ambiguous evangelism as an 'interest arouser' can provide the trigger points that will encourage people to enquire for themselves about the Christian faith.

6. **Prophetic Evangelism**
Mark Stibbe, Authentic, 2004
£7.99, ISBN 1860244572

The 'Turning Points' case study features the role of the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in conversion. This book explores how we can be sensitive to the way that God through the Holy Spirit is speaking to those of other faiths (and none).

Resources

From the Inter Faith Relations Reference Group

1. **Faith Meeting Faith: ways forward in inter-faith relations (a resource for individuals and groups)**

The Methodist Church, 2004, available from mph, 4 John Wesley Road, Werrington, Peterborough PE4 6ZP, £8.99, Reference No: PA218.

This takes 30 questions asked by Christians about inter faith relations, for example 'Do people of different faiths worship the same God?' It does not give all the answers. Its aim is to encourage conversation and action, recognizing that Christians come to inter faith relations with different approaches. See cross-references to relevant questions on pages 16, 22, 28, 34, 40.

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2. **The Life We Share: a study pack on inter faith relations**

The Methodist Church and USPG (an Anglican mission agency), 2003, available from mph (address above), £10.00, Reference No: PE117.

The audio CDs in this pack feature 15 people from five faiths speaking about 'the life we share'. The themes include Loving and Being Loved, Suffering, and Hospitality. Group reflection sheets, Bible studies and worship material accompany the CDs. The pack offers a window on five major world faiths and encourages Christians to reflect on what it means to live as a Christian in a multi faith world.

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3. **Paths of Faith**

Elizabeth Harris (Ed.), Christians Aware, 2003, £8.00, available from: Christians Aware, 2 Saxby Street, Leicester LE2 0ND www.christiansaware.co.uk or mph, Reference No: PA310.

This book contains nine chapters, covering eight faiths and the New Age Movement. In less than 3,000 words, each contributor surveys the faith's beliefs and practices, its presence in Britain and important issues for Christians. Questions for discussion are suggested, making it suitable for individual or group use. Christians Aware also publish a 'Meeting' series. 'Meeting Sikhs', 'Meeting Hindus' and 'Meeting Buddhists' are out. 'Meeting Muslims' is being prepared.

4. **In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism**

Kenneth Cracknell, Peterborough: Epworth, 2005, £17.99, ISBN 0716205963.

This is a book for people who fear that building good relations between different faiths means compromising Christianity. It has five sections. The first surveys what the Bible says about people of other faiths. The second looks at Jesus as the Word, the Logos. Here Cracknell suggests four ways of understanding John 14: 6. None of them condemns people of other religions to darkness. Sections on ethics, spirituality and mission follow.

5. **Listening to People of Other Faiths**

Claire Disbrey, Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2004, £7.99, ISBN 1841011843.

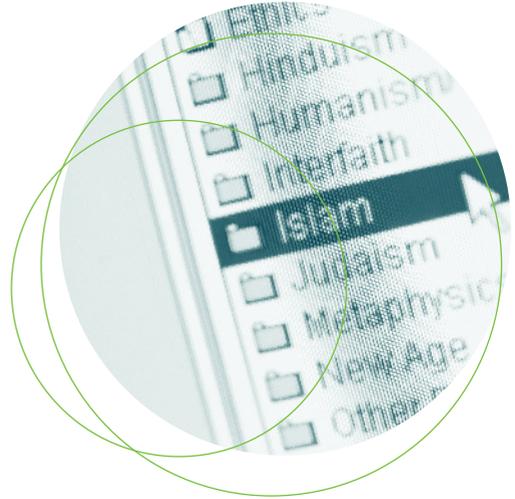
If you are not yet convinced of the need to listen to people of other faiths, you should read this. At the heart of the book are conversations with Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims and Sikhs. The questions they are asked range from “When and how did you become committed to your faith?” to “How certain are you that your religious tradition represents the truth?” In the last section, Claire reflects theologically on the conversations, convinced that Christians have much to give to the world.

6. **Living with Faith: Journeys towards Trust, Friendship and Justice**

Barbara Butler, Peterborough: Inspire £6.99, available from mph, Reference No: PC406 or ISBN 1858523060

Barbara brings to this book her rich experience of working with people of other faiths across the world. She shows how people can both be true to their own faith and committed to building trust between faiths.

Useful Websites



www.bbc.co.uk/religion

(Religion on the BBC website - a mine of information about all the major world religions)

www.diversiton.com

(the website of Diversiton, a provider of Diversity training; contains information about faith festivals etc.)

www.interfaith-center.org

(the website of the International Interfaith Centre in Oxford)

www.interfaith.org.uk

(the website of the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom, founded in 1987; contains links to the websites of several faith communities)

www.multifaithnet.org

(the website of the Multifaith Centre at the University of Derby - contains information about the major world faiths)

www.rejesus.co.uk

(to help people find out more about the Christian faith)

Evangelism in the 21st century⁷

Underlying Assumptions

1. There is an assumption in all the New Testament literature that all people will benefit from accepting Jesus Christ as their Lord, whatever their faith (the New Testament doesn't entertain the possibility of no faith!). There are, therefore, no no-go areas for evangelism. This is not the same as saying there are no unacceptable forms of evangelism!
2. The Methodist doctrine of prevenient grace reminds us that God is at work in all sorts of ways. To assume that every religious experience outside orthodox Christianity is counterfeit denies this doctrine. One of the hardest tasks of the evangelist is continually searching for signs of the Holy Spirit at work in the strangest places and most unexpected people, and joining in appropriately. People who have religious experiences (which may well be the work of the Holy Spirit) will use whatever language they are familiar with to explain those experiences. Increasingly, the language they use is not Christian but tends to draw on the language of their culture, be that New Age, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist.
3. One of the reasons why so many Christians today (and especially Methodist Christians) have difficulty with the practice of evangelism is because they have rejected what they perceive to be unhelpful models of evangelism but have not been able to replace those models with ones that they do find acceptable.

⁷ For a fuller exploration of these ideas see 'How to be evangelistic without being religious', Graham Horsley, Moorley's Print & Publishing 2005

4. Our practice of evangelism continually challenges our understanding of church. If evangelism is 'initiation into the Kingdom of God',⁸ and one of the visible signs of that initiation is joining a community of Christians, then the appropriateness of the Christian community for those who are seeking faith and being nurtured in the early stages of faith is crucial. Sometimes we unwittingly reject the linkage of faith-sharing and church membership because we intuitively realise that our particular Christian community is inappropriate to their spiritual development, but do not go far enough and ask the question, "What Christian community will help these people to enter truly into the Kingdom of God?" This is closely linked to the question, "Which of my cultural values do I have to abandon if I become a Christian?" We often call values and practices 'religious' when in actual fact they are 'cultural'.

A helpful model of evangelism?

Andrew Jones⁹ has developed a model of evangelism based on the sending of the 72 in Luke 10. He analyses the principal verbs in the passage to shape his model:

- Go (v.3)
- Enter (v.5)
- Stay (v.7)
- Eat and Drink (v.7)
- Heal (v.9)
- Tell (v.9)

Go

Mission is not concerned with attracting people to us but going out to meet with them. Many churches base their evangelistic strategy on a 'come' rather than a 'go' model.

⁸ William Abraham's definition in 'The Logic of Evangelism'

⁹ Otherwise known as the 'tallskinnykiwi' – unpublished excerpt on the web see <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com>

Enter

Enter the homes and lives of those who are receptive. In the New Testament, they were often the 'God-fearers' in the synagogues of the diaspora. They were the first to respond positively to the Good News of Jesus. Who are these people today? They are probably the spiritual seekers. Some will belong to the great world religions. Some will be spiritual without being religious in the orthodox sense.

Stay

Sharing is a long process that involves entering into another culture and staying long enough to understand it. It means listening for a long time before speaking.

Eat and Drink

Hospitality in the New Testament sense is more readily understood by the other great world religions than it is by contemporary Christians. It certainly has elements of welcome and acceptance. There is an implicit acceptance of other ways of living and not an imposition of one's own culture.

Heal

Two elements interweave in this one theme: compassion and the power of God. Compassion is a longing for the person in whose life we are sharing, to be whole. Healing involves body, mind and spirit. Praying for someone's healing often involves becoming part of the answer to one's own prayer. It is also about expecting that the Holy Spirit will meet people's felt needs in a way that will make them look to God in a new way. It's important that both elements are present. Compassion without power is noble but not particularly helpful. Power without compassion is arrogant. When the two come together, people often (though not always) begin to ask the 'why' questions that naturally lead into faith sharing.

Tell

This is the last element in the progression – not the first as many evangelistic programmes suggest. Telling happens in a cultural context that the evangelist

has taken time to understand. It is also worth noting that the Jesus way of telling is usually more provocative than proclamatory. Jesus spoke in parables, which were largely unexplained and capable of more than one interpretation. Explanations were for those who took time to seek them out and ask detailed questions. Jesus was unafraid to let people walk away and was happy to work with the small number who sought him out. Even then, Jesus' normal way of answering questions was to ask another question that assumed real spiritual significance in the first question.

A twenty first century approach to evangelism will take on these sorts of characteristics. Faith sharing will always seek to provoke questions by loving actions and sharing experiences of the power of God. Many people today are curious about religious experience, but totally unmoved by Christian doctrine. The beginnings of 'telling' will normally be the sharing of my experience of the love of Christ and the difference it has made to my life. We do not need to tell people that they can have the same experience. They can work that out for themselves and will either choose to talk to us about it or to walk away. Even those who walk away may go thinking about what we have said and may well be more open to the next Christian they meet.

If we begin to evangelise in this way, it may well require us to look quite hard at the church context that we operate from:

- Do we have evangelistic events in our programme, which work in this way?
- In our worship, do we wrestle with the cultural context of our worshippers?
- How do we incorporate both the expectation and the sharing of religious experience in our worship life?
- How do we equip Christians to be effective disciples of Jesus Christ at home, at work and in every area of living?

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Speaking of Faith in a World of Many Faiths

In 1994, the Methodist Conference adopted eight principles for dialogue and evangelism. One of them was, 'Methodists must be encouraged to share the stories of their faith'. The text alongside stressed the need to create trust through friendship before such sharing and added, 'Sometimes there are real opportunities for Christians to explain to a person of another faith why their Christian faith means so much to them. It is a privilege to seize that opportunity which is not seen by the other person as a threat, but as a natural part of friendship'.

The more recent Methodist publication, *Faith Meeting Faith*, looks at 30 questions frequently asked about inter faith relations. One is, 'How do we witness to what we believe in a multi faith society?' One of the points offered for discussion is that we should not condemn the faith of others when we witness. It continues, 'For if we condemn the faith commitment of others, stereotype them or misrepresent them, it is unlikely that our listeners will detect that we are actually speaking about a God of love. This kind of witness is "false" in the sense of the ninth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour" (Exodus 20:16)'.

These are strong starting points for reflection on how we should share our faith with people of other faiths. To them could be added the Code of Conduct drawn up by the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom. This stresses respect, courtesy, sensitivity, honesty, self-restraint, and a concern for the other's freedom and dignity. It includes the following principles:

- Learning to understand what others actually believe and value, and letting them express this in their own terms;
- Being straightforward about our intentions;
- Avoiding violent action or language, threats, manipulation, improper inducements, or the misuse of any kind of power;
- Respecting the right of others to disagree with us.

People of other faiths are quick to pick up if we are interested only in a monologue or if our friendship has a hidden agenda. Most important to remember is that we don't start with a clean slate in our conversations. Mistrust from a previous century can be present, especially if we're speaking to people who know how negative many nineteenth century Christian missionaries were about other religions. It is not impossible for a Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim today to quote from nineteenth century missionary writings and ask, "Is this what you still think?"

Michael Barnes, a Roman Catholic theologian, wrote in the introduction to a selection of readings from different faiths, 'To read the texts of another tradition with the faith of one's own is to recognise that all people of faith stand within a religious tradition which can be spoken of as "inspired" - at least in the sense that it generates and goes on generating meaning'. Most people of other faiths believe that their faith answers all their questions about life. It is a complete system. No 'gaps' are seen. They do not feel the need for 'fulfilment' through something outside their faith. It is vital to recognize this in our conversations. If

we imply that there are 'gaps' in another's understanding of reality, the conversation may well close down with hurt on both sides, unless the person we are talking to is already dissatisfied by his or her own faith. So listening as well as talking is important when we are speaking about what we believe with those of another faith. When we listen without a hidden agenda and in complete openness, what we hear can usually be divided into three:

- Things that resonate because they are similar to Christian beliefs and practices;
- Things that seem alien because they are very different from anything within Christianity;
- Things that surprise and intrigue us because they point to what Christians often overlook or offer a complementary or challenging viewpoint.

In conversation, it is important that similarities should be affirmed. As for the differences, where trust exists, it should be possible to speak honestly about these. For it is here that misrepresentations on both sides can abound. Dispelling these is important - whether it is our distorted views of another faith or the distorted views others have of Christianity.

When talking about faith with another, we should be ready for change in ourselves as well as in the other. We may find that our own Christianity is deepened or that our theology is broadened. We may have to question some of our preconceptions or review how we express our faith. Distinctions between faith-sharing, evangelism, dialogue and conversation break down in such encounters. In all of them, change can happen - to all of those taking part.

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¹⁰ From the Introduction to *Transcendence: Prayer of People of Faith*, Daniel Favre (Ed.), London: Westminster Interfaith, 1994.



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