



London Inter Faith Centre

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<http://londoninterfaith.org.uk/>

Guidelines for Christians involved in Inter Faith Visits

This Guide is designed to help individuals or groups planning a visit to a place of worship (or home) of another world faith, or inviting an individual or group from another world faith to your church or school. There is a useful general introduction in Malcolm Torry and Sarah Thorley: Together and Different pp 154-9

Introduction

Increasingly living in the pluralistic, multi faith context of London, Christians are coming into contact and engaging with people of other faiths, and learning about their beliefs and practices. Groups from churches and Christian schools are making visits to the places of worship of other faiths whilst at the same inviting people of other faiths, young and old into their own churches, schools and homes. This guide is designed to help individuals and groups planning such visits. It is a practical guide which covers some of the areas of cultural and religious difference.

Representatives of Our Faith Community

It is worth reflecting that we will be seen on these visits as representatives of the Christian faith. Interaction with people of other faiths often brings our own beliefs into sharp relief. The people we meet will often be confident in their own beliefs and values. The challenge for us is to be confident in our own Christianity whilst at the same time respectful and genuinely interested in how we might find God at work in the Other. We go both to learn and to share; our visits will enable us to identify both our common values and our differences. Our hosts and guests will expect us to hold our own religious beliefs and convictions, and will respect us for that. It is important for us not to feel afraid of talking about them, whilst at the same time entering the engagement with an open heart. Such engagement can only be enriching and potentially lead to new friendships and to the possibility of a sharing of community engagement. At the same time it may well as a consequence bring us to deepen our own understanding of faith and lead us to want to find out more about our own Christian identity.

Guidelines

In general it is worth saying:-

- Don't be afraid to ask questions;
- Don't be afraid to make mistakes (but be ready to acknowledge the misunderstanding);
- Be conscious of the language we use and of the fact that religious terms do not necessarily describe the same in one religion as in another;

- Don't necessarily assume that the person you are speaking to is wholly representative of all sects or groupings in that particular faith;
- Be clear what you are comfortable with in terms of any participation or joining in in terms of the area of worship. Be aware of the difference between observation and practice.
- Try to be sensitive and not cause offence when speaking about your Christian faith. Other Faith Groups and individuals are very sensitive to any hint of evangelism. (That said when you have built up a friendship and trust each other, it is right and proper to engage with the more difficult issues!)

Christian – Muslim Engagement

Visiting a mosque

Men and women will be expected to take shoes off (Be aware if you have holes in your socks!).

Women are expected to cover their heads with a headscarf.

Modest dress is in order.

Be aware that it is normally not acceptable to shake hands across the gender divide.

When a woman meets a man from a Muslim background, do not insist on eye contact.

Be conscious that men and women will worship in a separate place within a mosque; this may cause some emotional discomfort for Christian women visitors, so be ready for this.

There is a strong emphasis on cleanliness.

If you have an official invitation, be prepared to make a short address even if you have not been forewarned.

Food is a major aspect of the welcome you will receive. Be ready to accept this gift!

Be aware who you are speaking to; Is it the Imam or a member of the management committee or a special representative? Try to use the correct formal title as a matter of respect.

Timekeeping is often imprecise, so be aware that the programme will not necessarily run according to schedule.

Welcoming an Islamic group to your church or school

If it is a long event, you may need to find a neutral space where a Muslim might pray. For most Christian denominations the guidance is that it should not be the church or chapel.

Certain foods will be unacceptable (i.e. pork); fruit, most biscuits and vegetable food will normally be acceptable. Be aware that gelatine contains animal proteins.

If it is a Christmas event check that the mince pies etc. do not contain alcohol!

Do not offer alcohol; this will cause offence.

If this is a shared enterprise, be aware that for many Muslims the use of music is a sensitive issue.

The use of church space for any shared event will need to be discussed especially if there are images of the Cross/Saints there. It is best for any dialogue/engagement to try and use neutral space. Of course this will be different if the group is coming to learn about the church or to witness Christian worship.

If this is a school visit ensure that the teachers accompany the students to the toilets.

If a school group is visiting from a Muslim school, it is good to explain that the altar/sanctuary/font etc. are regarded as “sacred” and therefore need respect. Sometimes students might do things unintentionally, which might be regarded as sacrilegious.

Again if a school visit is being made, use the formal titles for the teachers in front of the students and expect them to do the same with you. The students will be used to using formal titles for clergy, so you can expect this of them.

Jewish - Christian engagement

Visiting a synagogue

Expectations will depend on circumstances; i.e. whether you are observing worship or visiting an empty synagogue.

You will not be expected to take your shoes off.

Men and women may be expected to sit separately in formal worship, depending on the practice of the synagogue.

Men may be expected to wear a Kippur (skull cap). The synagogue will normally provide this.

Modest dress is expected.

If you are in an Orthodox synagogue, handshakes across the gender divide are unacceptable.

It is good to be conscious of the negative aspects of Jewish Christian engagement including anti-semitism and the holocaust

All Jewish liturgical books/orders of service are read from right to left.

The following advice about behaviour during worship is taken from *Judaism 101*

“During services, non-Jews can follow along with the English, which is normally printed side-by-side with the Hebrew in the Prayer Book. You may join in with as much or as little of the prayer service as you feel comfortable participating in. You may wish to review Jewish Liturgy before attending the service, to gain a better understanding of what is going on. Non-Jews should stand whenever the Ark is open and when the Torah is carried to or from the Ark, as a sign of respect for the Torah and for G-d. At any other time where worshippers stand, non-Jews may stand or sit.”

After the service, Kiddush (sanctification by blessings) may be said over wine and bread and this is then shared. You may be invited to receive Kiddush.

Welcoming a Jewish group to your church or school

There may be sensitivities about holding any shared activity in a church space because of sacred images. It is important to check with the Rabbi what will be acceptable.

Security will be an issue; school groups will often bring a security guard with them

Check beforehand whether your visitors will accept food or bring their own. If you are providing food it is advisable to provide only light refreshments (because of kosher rules) and if providing biscuits/cakes again to ensure they are kosher.

If you are welcoming visitors from different synagogues be aware that there may be internal differences between Liberals and Orthodox traditions over what is acceptable.

Christian - Hindu Engagement

Visiting a Hindu temple

Make sure you are clear about who is meeting or welcoming you, where to meet etc.

Be prepared to take off shoes. It is the norm to sit on a carpet for worship, but if you are elderly/or disabled the hosts will find a seat for you at the side or back.

Men and women may be asked to enter at different entrances and to sit in different places.

Women may be asked to cover their heads

It is usual to sit during the ceremony with legs crossed or to the side. It is considered to be disrespectful to sit with feet pointing towards the sacred area at the front of the temple. Sometimes it is appropriate to stand during the 'Arti' (ceremony).

Be aware that you are likely to see lots of "idols", statues of the gods and goddesses. Idol is not an offensive term and is used by Hindus to describe their statues which they believe are living containers of the spirit of the deities. That is why Hindus will bow before statues, sometimes touch them and make offerings. They are literally "the living gods, manifest on earth".

If you are a special guest and Puja is being offered you might be asked to "offer the holy fire". You need to be prepared for this invitation and to be aware that a refusal might cause offence.

You will also probably be offered Prashad (sweets or food blessed by the deity) as you leave. Again you might want to consider whether you politely refuse, or accept the offering, but not consume inside, but rather, consume it outside, later.

It should be remembered that Hindus do not usually shake hands as a form of greeting. Instead, the hands should be raised (palm to palm) as if in prayer, with the head slightly bowed.

Hindus visiting a church and school

Hindus will view the church as a holy place, and may well be comfortable receiving a blessing from a Christian priest.

Hindus do not have a problem praying to the Lord Jesus (as an avatar).

Hindus are vegetarian (including no eggs), so food offered should be clearly marked as such. There are other food restrictions for some Hindus and Jains. Some may also prefer not to eat onions and garlic.

Drinks offered should be fruit juices.

Hindus respond to worship which is colourful, musical and sensuous (using all the senses) as in their temple worship, so a good time to invite Hindus to visit is during Christian festivals.

Christian-Sikh engagement

Guidance is as for visits to Hindu places of worship and vice versa, with additional points below

Visiting a Sikh gurdwara

When visiting a gurdwara and before entering the worship room, you will be expected to cover your head, remove your shoes and wash your hands.

The focus of the worship will be the Guru Granth Sahib or Holy Book. It is treated with the greatest respect, and Sikhs will bow before it.

Chairs are available for the elderly or infirm but it is rude to sit on them if you are neither.

You will be invited to share a meal after the worship; this is an essential part of the Sikh religion, known as the Langar meal. This meal is offered free to all.

When you eat, your head must remain covered. Cigarettes, alcohol or other intoxicants (other than medicines) should not be taken on to the premises, as this would cause offence.

Christian- Buddhist engagement

Visiting a Buddhist vihara

The common greeting gesture is for Buddhists, as for Hindus, is to place palms together, and bowing gently. However, some sects have their hands folded over their heart in greeting. Hand shaking with lay people is permitted.

Eye contact or lack of it is significant. In some Asian Buddhist cultures, direct eye contact means confrontation.

For religious reasons, monks and nuns from Cambodia, Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam may not look directly at a member of the opposite sex.

You should remove your shoes.

The style of the temple will depend on ethnicity and denomination

If you are visiting a Chinese vihara, you may be shown the "ancestors' room", a room with the ashes of the deceased in urns behind a shrine.

In a vihara you are generally expected to sit on the floor with feet pointed away from the Buddha and quietness is appropriate. The shrine room is used for meditation, teaching and devotion ('puja'). Visitors are not expected to join in but may do so if they wish.

There are likely to be several statues of the Buddha with offerings of flowers, fruit and oil lamps.

Monks have special status within Buddhism and are treated with special respect

Buddhists visiting a Church or school

Buddhists are usually vegetarian.

Buddhists who are not fully vegetarian may eat fish or eggs. Strict vegetarian Buddhists do not eat anything that is produced from animals; many also prefer to refrain from onions and garlic. Salt-free salads, vegetables, rice and fruit are generally acceptable