

Confident Engagement



Diocese of
Leicester



Background to “Confident Engagement” document

Bishop Martyn convened a meeting of clergy and lay people in March 2018 to begin talking about how we as Christians engage with other faith communities.

Following those initial discussions, a group, chaired by Bishop Guli, met in May and September to take the conversation further. These discussions have led to the “Confident Engagement” leaflets, which are designed to stimulate conversation in churches across the Diocese of Leicester. You might use it in a PCC meeting, a standing committee, as part of a church vision day or in a housegroup. The intention is not to provide answers but to help you ask questions about how God is at work in your context amongst people of other faiths, and what he is calling you to join in with.

This leaflet sits alongside some wider strategic work currently being undertaken by the Bishop’s Leadership Team to map the connections between interfaith engagement and other areas of Diocesan life. It is the experience of many who live and work in interfaith contexts that many of the questions about mission, vision, and engagement are common to other aspects of church life. This helps show why these questions are relevant to everyone.

The St Philip’s Centre is well placed to help you think further about these issues. The staff have considerable experience in facilitating first steps in interfaith encounter, as well as encouraging those who want to take things deeper. They can offer advice and support, in the form of specific bespoke engagements as well as their regular courses such as a “Taste of Faith,” “Festivals and Faith” or even a Deanery interfaith Roadshow.



Confident Engagement

For many people living in Leicestershire, interfaith engagement is simply a normal part of the daily life, whether at work or school or where they live. This may be because of where they live, where they work or their particular interest or passions. Our city and county have a long, and proud, history of living well together with people of all faiths and none. Celebrated as the most diverse small city on the planet, Leicester sets an internationally recognised standard for friendship across faiths. But we cannot presume this will continue; as people have invested time and energy in interfaith engagement in previous generations, so we have to continue that today.

As we engage we can be confident in our Christian identity. We want to distinguish confidence from cockiness or arrogance; recognising that we do not know all the answers or have all the skills or resources. Confidence in Jesus Christ is marked by humility, by gentle and courteous sharing of life and faith, building trust and co-operation with people of all faiths and none.



Engagement with those of other faith communities can take many different forms, and there are various suggestions below. You might talk about the points of connection and difference between your different faiths, you might talk about the joys and struggles of living out your faith in a complicated and confusing world. You might work together to solve a common challenge, share a hobby, or simply have a cup of tea together. This short leaflet is intended to stimulate discussion and suggest actions for vibrant, exciting interfaith relations.

Interfaith Engagement and the Three Key Questions

The Three Key Questions are used by churches across the Diocese of Leicester to ask themselves

1. What's the connection between growing in depth of discipleship and interfaith engagement?

There are three points of contact. First, interfaith engagement is a valid route to deepened discipleship. Conversations with those of other faiths can be one of the easiest routes to deeper discipleship as people who are spiritually alive love to talk about faith. Second, as you engage with people from other faith communities you will learn more about what it means to be both host and guest, modelling your life after Jesus who was himself both guest and host. Third, there are tough questions that must be asked about being a disciple of Jesus in twenty-first century Britain.

The contexts linked with interfaith engagement are a great place to ask them and provide a rich resource for reflection and learning in a small group explorer or discipleship course.

2. What's the connection between growth in number of disciples of Jesus and interfaith engagement?

First, we recognise that it is the Holy Spirit who brings people to faith, and there are some surprising situations where considerable numbers of people of other faiths are becoming followers of Jesus. However, the Church is not always ready to receive them. It is noticeable, for example, that although there are many Persian speaking followers of Jesus in Leicester, very few of them are in Anglican churches, which forces us to ask hard questions about our welcome, our ability to provide loving community and pastoral support to those with complex needs. Generally, these people have simply walked into a church looking to belong and have stayed where they have been made welcome. Many others engage with Christianity as part of their own faith practices, and would not identify themselves as Christian.

The most important thing is to be sensitive to the context and behave appropriately. A civic service is a very different context from sitting at home with a neighbour reading a story from the Gospels together. When in doubt, Jesus' teaching of the "Golden rule" is probably the simplest test to apply: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12).



3. What's the connection between serving your community and interfaith engagement?

Loving service of those around us is often the place interfaith engagement starts, and it is rarely recognised as formal interfaith engagement. This unconscious engagement has the potential to be organic, natural and should be celebrated. What is more, the Anglican Church is still well placed to be a driver for social action for the good of all, but we must be very self-aware and self-reflexive in how we use our privileged position and resources. How can we be "with" people, and not just "for" them? What about when we are in the minority?

We live in divisive times and so a focus on what we have in common and the good we can do together is crucial for the flourishing of our society. Many people who have served their community alongside those of other faiths have found their own faith growing as a result and so the relationship between questions one and three is to a certain extent mutually reinforcing.

But what should we actually do?

The short answer is, engage in whatever you feel confident to do. Pray and ask God to guide you. Try things and learn from what goes well and what could have been done better. Here are some things that have worked for others:

Individuals

As individuals, people have

- Held a coffee morning in their home for their friends and neighbours and now have a weekly gathering for those of many faiths and none.
- Invited international students around for a meal and conversations about Jesus.
- Given their neighbours or colleagues Christmas cards or gifts, or given cards and gifts at the time of festivals of other faiths.
- Offered to pray for friends and neighbours at times of celebration and of difficulty.
- Talk with colleagues at work about their own faith and learn about their colleagues' faith.

Groups

As a group, people have

- Taught people of other faiths a skill such as knitting, or English as a foreign language.
 - Taken part in activities such as Visit my Mosque day (held annually in February or March).
 - Collaborated on social justice issues, for example tackling homelessness with One Roof Leicester.
 - Prayed for their friends of other faiths during times of the year that are spiritually significant for them (such as for Muslims during Ramadan or Hindus during Diwali).
 - Run a group where they read each other's sacred texts together; they go by names such as Scriptural Reasoning, Texts Together, the Holy Book Club or Prophets' Stories.
 - Run a "Christian club" in their local school, where pupils of all faiths and none come together to learn the stories of Jesus.
 - Taken assemblies in their local school, perhaps following the format of "Open the Book."
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Whole Church

As a whole church family, people have

- Held a Church Open Day, and specifically invited people from other faith communities.
- Prayer walked their area, leaving notes to let those of other faiths know they have prayed for them.
- Run parent and toddler groups that include those of other faiths.
- Collaborated with other faith groups in tackling issues such as holiday hunger.
- Run a “Spring Fair” for their local community, developing partnerships with people of other faiths as the years go by.
- Invited people of other faiths to visit for a cream tea, to a Harvest Songs of Praise service, to a Christmas tree festival or carol service.
- Run events such as “a Taste of Faith” or a “Festivals and Faith” evening, facilitated by the St Philip’s Centre.
- Welcomed visitors from schools with a Hindu, Sikh or Muslim ethos.
- Invited school groups, including children from all faith backgrounds and none, into church for special services and occasions.



To discuss

In your context, what aspects of interfaith engagement are you doing well?
What requires further work?
What are your next steps?

The most important thing to recognise is that you should build relationships for the long term. Be generous in how you relate to people, offer to pray for or support them as is appropriate.

This is a journey that takes time; you may start very small but there is much to celebrate in even the littlest of engagements.

Finally, if you want someone to talk with, then get in touch with Tom Wilson or Laura Johnson at the St Philip's Centre director@stphilipscentre.co.uk and courses@stphilipscentre.co.uk or **0116 2733 459**.

We would love to talk with you and support you in whatever you want to do.



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