

American Muslim Intra-Faith Dialogue Booklet

**A Practical Guide to Initiating an Intra Faith Alliance,
Respect and Understanding between American Muslims**

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This attempt is dedicated to the victims of sectarian violence all over the world which includes the people, who died, and their families and loved ones who continue to suffer because of the loss of their loved ones at the hands of the few intolerant people amongst us.

Harmony, tranquility and understanding start from within. When internal enrichment starts, it can translate into positive changes within, and then the external environment around us. Lasting harmony and understanding for a community starts from within and then it can spread the same respect towards others. How would other people take a community seriously, which misunderstands and misrepresents itself?

This booklet is not meant to suggest that inter-faith dialogue is not important. While the American Muslims find themselves active in the inter-faith dialogue and understanding, we must not lose sight of the reality that significant differences exist within the community and we must initiate open and respectful intra-faith dialogue as well.

Some Relevant Verses of the Quran

O mankind, we created you by a single pair of man and woman and made you into nations and tribes that you know each other (Hujurat: 13).

And hold fast, all together, by the rope which Allah (stretches out for you), and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude Allah's favor on you; for you were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace, you became brethren; and you were on the brink of the pit of Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus do Allah make His Signs clear to you: That you may be guided. (Al-E-Imran: 103)

As for those who divide their religion and break up into sects, you have no part in them in the least: their affair is with Allah: He will in the end tell them the truth of all that they did. (Al-Anaam: 159)

Say to My servants that they should (only) say those things that are best: for Satan do sow dissensions among them: For Satan is to man an avowed enemy. (Isra: 53)

Be not like those who are divided amongst themselves and fall into disputations after receiving Clear Signs: For them is a dreadful penalty,- (Al-E-Imran: 105)

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INTRODUCTION:

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. In the last many years, there has been significant amount of challenges that have been identified amongst many countries with a Muslim majority. One of these challenges has been the intra-faith differences and the manifestations of these differences. At times, the lack of dialogue and understanding between different Muslims has allowed people to instill internal conflict for their own benefits.

People embracing Islam either at birth or in their lifetime have included people of all colors, cultures and backgrounds. Historically, for a variety of reasons and because of individual's personal choices people within Islam have identified themselves to belong to different groups and or sects. Because of Islam's appeal to the heart and mind of an average individual, the numbers of people coming to Islam or developing better understanding of Islam do find themselves to be different from many other people within the same faith. These differences can be based on their perception, background, cultural understanding, as well as the different sects or groups one may be influenced by or identify with.

In the United States, Islam remains one of the fastest growing religions as well. The diversity within the Muslim community in United States is probably one of the best examples of diversity that can exist in any community anywhere in the world. All different groups and background of people identifying themselves as Muslims continue to believe to maintain a peaceful society and to ensure that all people around them in the community live in peace and harmony. Building effective relationship within and in between people is an important contribution to social harmony and helping to focus all those involved to identifying emerging issues and address common questions and challenges.

While there are significant international challenges that do exist for people within the faith of Islam, the Muslims in United States have a clear and important responsibility to lead by example and help the Muslims all across the world on how to develop an effective meaningful positive change within the community. Reinforcing the basic principles of respect and understanding for all and by dispelling misconceptions about each other, we can all work towards a common goal.

The information in the following papers are created to help find local solutions across America to begin with, followed by other parts of the world to help build harmonious, multi cultural, multi perspective, and multi sect, diverse Islam to allow people within the faith to help promote dialogue and understanding and respect for each other.

This book is an attempt to provide some practical tools for people within the community who feel that the time has come to unite and work towards building bridges and develop better understanding and tolerance.

The book can be broadly divided into 3 parts.

- A) Principles for better intra-faith relations.
- B) Understanding Dialogue:
 - a) Understanding dialogue for peace and understanding
 - b) Ground rules for intra faith dialogue
 - c) Special skills and understanding for dialogue
 - i) Listening qualities
 - ii) Rights, responsibilities and skills
 - iii) Understanding types of dialogues
 - iv) Differentiating between dialogue and debate
 - v) Skill sets for a facilitator
 - d) Lessons learnt from successful intra-faith meetings
- C) Steps in setting up an intra-faith meeting
 - h) Formation of a small working group.
 - i) Needs analysis and information collection.
 - j) Approaching local Muslim intra faith communities and their leadership.
 - k) Meetings and constructing an agenda and laying the foundation.
 - l) Follow-up and ongoing communication.
 - m) Identifying common goals and projects to help strengthen understanding, friendship and respect.
 - n) Points of Agreement or Similarity Intra-Faith Muslim communities

A

Principles towards Better Intra-faith Relations

1. We should confess our failures and lack of love, respect and sensitivity to people of other perspectives in the past. We should forgive one another, seek the forgiveness of others and commit ourselves to a new beginning.
2. We should affirm that good intra-faith relations can open the way to better inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations and peace within our surroundings and ultimately throughout the world.
3. We should recognize building true community, both among people and various ethnic and religious communities, as our primary objective.
4. We should affirm the importance of promoting a culture of dialogue within and among all communities and traditions.
5. We should condemn violence and terrorism as being against the spirit of all true religions and we should pledge ourselves to understanding the causes and work towards effectively removing these causes.
6. We shall respect the integrity of all perspectives and ensure that they have the freedom to follow their own beliefs and practices.
7. We should believe that the different groups are enriched by identifying agendas in which they can collaborate, such as making peace, protecting the environment, eradicating poverty and ensuring the human dignity for all.
8. We should affirm that it is important for us all to listen to and learn from other perspectives so that we can value Islamic plurality as a factor that enriches our communities.
9. We should attempt to live out and explain the truths of our own perspectives in a manner that is intelligible and friendly to people of other perspectives.
10. Cultural diversity as well as intra-religious diversity in our communities must be affirmed as a source of enrichment and challenge.

B

Dialogue:

a) Basics of dialogue for understanding

Muslims must choose between love and hatred.

1. We should commit ourselves to proclaiming our firm conviction that violence and terrorism are opposed to all true religious spirit and we condemn all recourse to violence and war in the name of God or religion. We should undertake actions to do everything possible to eradicate the causes of terrorism.
2. We should commit ourselves to educate people about respect and mutual esteem in order to achieve peaceful coexistence and solidarity among members of different ethnic groups, cultures and religious groups.
3. We should commit ourselves to promote the culture of dialogue so that understanding and trust may develop among individuals and peoples as these are the conditions of authentic peace.
4. We should commit ourselves to defend the right of all human beings to lead a dignified life, in accordance with their cultural identity.
5. We should commit ourselves to engage in dialogue with sincerity and patience, without considering what separates us as an insurmountable wall, on the contrary, recognizing that facing our differences can become an occasion for greater reciprocal understanding.
6. We should commit ourselves to pardon each other's errors and prejudices of the past and present, and to support one another in the common struggle against egoism and abuses, hatred and violence, and in order to learn from the past that peace without justice is not true peace.
7. We should commit ourselves to stand at the side of those who suffer poverty and abandonment, speaking out for those who have no voice and taking concrete action to overcome such situations, in the conviction that no one can be happy alone.

8. We should commit ourselves to make our own the cry of those who do not surrender to violence and evil, and we wish to contribute with all our strength to give a real hope of justice and peace to the humanity of our time. It is important to unite for those who remain in-synch with the basic principles of tolerance and respect despite human challenges.
9. We should commit ourselves to encourage all initiatives that promote friendship between peoples in the conviction that, if a solid understanding between peoples is lacking. This is particularly important because as technological progress exposes the world to increasing dangers of destruction and death.
10. We should commit ourselves to ask the leaders of nations to make every possible effort so as to build, at both national and international levels, a world of solidarity and peace founded on justice.

Dialogue:

b) Ground Rules for Intra-faith Dialogue

FIRST Rule

The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn; that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of others perspective.

SECOND Rule

This is a two-sided (bilateral) project within each community and between religious communities.

THIRD Rule

Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity.

FOURTH Rule

In intra faith dialogue we must not compare our ideals with our partner's practice, but rather our ideals with our partner's ideals, our practice with our partner's practice. This may allow us to see how similar the ideals and the practices in principle are.

FIFTH Rule

Each participant must define himself/herself for others and it is important to understand that conversely, the interpreted must be able to recognize him/her in the interpretation.

SIXTH Rule

Each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard and fast assumptions as to where the points of disagreement are. Not following this may set the participants up for failure.

SEVENTH Rule

Dialogue can take place only between equals. Both must come to learn from each other. If one party feels the other is inferior or superior to them may lead to difficulties in understanding.

EIGHTH Rule

Dialogue can take place only on the basis of mutual trust and respect.

NINTH Rule

Persons entering into intra faith dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own traditions.

Dialogue:

c) Special skills and understanding for dialogue

i) Listening qualities

These guidelines here because listening is so vital to any form of dialogue, including intra-faith dialogue. These guidelines are designed to facilitate healthy dialogue and deep listening and to create a safe space for meaningful conversation on all levels:

- 1. WHEN YOU ARE LISTENING, RECOGNISE AND SUSPEND ASSUMPTIONS** - What we assume is often not known to us and is invisible to us. We assume that others have had the same experiences that we have had and they see things just how we do and that is how we listen to them. It is critical for healthy listening to learn to recognize assumptions by noticing when you get upset or annoyed by something someone else is saying. You may be making an assumption. Identify this, suspend it and resume listening for understanding of the other.
- 2. WHEN YOU ARE SPEAKING, EXPRESS ONLY YOUR PERSONAL RESPONSE AND SPEAK ONLY ON YOUR OWN BEHALF**- You should speak by your tradition, beliefs and practices as you have interpreted them in your life. Speak for yourself. Use "I" language rather than "we" or "us". Take ownership of what you say. Speak from your heart. Notice how often the phrases "We all", "of course", "everyone says", "you know", come into your conversation. The only person you can truly speak for is yourself.
- 3. LISTEN WHILE AVOIDING JUDGMENTS** - The purpose of dialogue is to come to an understanding of the other, not to determine simultaneously or later whether they are good, bad, right or wrong. If you are sitting there thinking: "That's good", "That's bad", "I like that" "I don't like that", then you are having a conversation in your own mind, rather than listening to the speaker. Simply notice when you do this, and return to being present with the speaker rather than the

minds internal conversations.

4. **POSTPONE STATUS** - Everyone should be looked at as an equal partner in the inquiry. There is no seniority or hierarchy or superiority. All should see themselves as colleagues with a mutual interest and quest for insight and clarity. Everyone is an expert on their own perspectives and lives. That is what you bring to the dialogue process.
5. **HONOUR CONFIDENTIALITY** - Leave the names of participants in the room so if you share stories or ideas, no one's identity should be revealed if discussed and understood. Create a safe space for self-expression.
6. **LISTEN FOR UNDERSTANDING, NOT TO AGREE WITH OR BELIEVE**
You do not have to agree with or believe anything that is said. Your job is to listen for understanding.
7. **ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS WITH INTENTION OF CALRIFICATION** to assist your understanding and to explore your personal or public assumptions.
8. **HONOUR SILENCE AND TIME FOR REFLECTION OF DISCUSSION AND PERSPECTIVES** - Notice what others want to be say, rather than what you want to say.
9. **ONE PERSON SPEAKS AT A TIME** – It is important to pay attention to the flow of the conversation. Notice what patterns emerge from the group discussion. Make sure that each person has an opportunity to speak, while being conscious that no one is required to speak.

Dialogue:

c) Special skills and understanding for dialogue

ii) Rights, responsibilities and skills

For true dialogue to occur it needs to take place within a protective environment of mutually accepted rights and responsibilities. This process is based on two fundamental values: a) respect for the human person and b) trust in the process of dialogue. Dialogue works best when the participants are willing to develop certain skills that allow them to facilitate the process.

Rights	Responsibilities	Skills
1. Each person has the right to <u>define him/herself</u> without being labeled by others.	1. Each person must be willing to seriously <u>question his/her assumptions</u> about 'the other'	1. Each person should be able to <u>evaluate and articulate his/her own attitudes, values and positions</u> on issues within the context of his/her tradition
2. Each person has the right to <u>express his or her beliefs, ideas and feelings</u>	2. Each person must <u>allow</u> the same right of self-expression that s/he expects for him/herself	2. Each person should <u>learn how to be more sensitive</u> to what the other is saying
3. Each person has the <u>right to ask questions</u> that help him/her understand what someone else has said	3. Each person should ask questions that <u>respect the other's right of self-definition</u> , even in times of conflict or disagreement	3. Each person <u>should learn how to respond to questions</u> in ways that help others understand
4. Each person has the <u>right not to change</u> or be forced to change	4. Each person must <u>accept the others as equal partners</u> in the dialogue, and acknowledge the dignity of the traditions represented	4. Each person should learn to <u>deal with different points of view</u> while maintaining his/her own integrity
5. Each person has the right to expect that what is said will be <u>held in confidence</u>	5. Each person must agree to <u>hold</u> what others say in confidence	5. People should learn to deal with others from a <u>position of mutual trust</u> , based on an expectation that others come to the dialogue in a spirit of honesty and sincerity

Dialogue:

c) Special skills and understanding for dialogue

iii) Understanding types of dialogues

Five Types of Intra faith Dialogue

1. **Informational:** Acquiring of knowledge of the perspective of partner's religious understanding, history, founding, basic beliefs etc.
2. **Confessional:** Allowing the faith partners to speak for and define themselves in terms of what it means to live as an adherent.
3. **Experiential:** Dialogue with faith partners entering into the feelings of one's partner and permitting that person's symbols and stories to guide.
4. **Relational:** Develop friendships with individual persons beyond the "business" of dialogue.
5. **Practical:** Collaborate to promote peace and justice

Dialogue:

c) Special skills and understanding for dialogue

iv) Differentiating between dialogue and debate

In debate winning is the goal. In dialogue finding common-ground is the goal.

Debate is oppositional: two or more sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong. Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward a common understanding.

In debate one searches for the others positions flaws and weaknesses. In dialogue one searches for strengths in the other position.

Debate creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right. Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude, openness to being wrong and an openness to change pre-conceived ideas.

Debate defends one's position as the best solution and excludes other positions. Dialogue opens up the possibility of reaching better solutions than any of the original solutions.

Debate assumes there is a right answer and that someone has it. Dialogue assumes many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.

Debate implies conclusion. Dialogue remains open-ended.

Dialogue:

c) Special skills and understanding for dialogue

v) Skills for a facilitator

Successful Facilitators Responsibilities

- Help be clear for people in the meeting
- To understand the purpose of the group.
- Help foster a sense of ownership by all members.
- Be open to all who wish to participate.
- Equally share the running of the group.
- Make every effort to avoid making this into an exclusive group.
- Be apolitical in the sense of not bringing the internal politics of issues to the discussion table within the community

Dialogue:

d) Lessons learnt from successful intra-faith meetings

- **Communicate** to others as equal partners in the search for truth
- **Recognize** that listening as well as speaking is necessary for a genuine conversation.
- **Respect and Treasure** the sense of wonder that comes with encountering the new, the unusual and the surprising.
- **Be conscious** of your own need for ongoing conversion to your own professed beliefs. Remember, it is not ones job to convert others to their beliefs, but to be faithful to ones own
- **React** to others as a friend, not as a threat
- **Be insightful** of vulnerable people and do not try to exploit them
- **Be eager** for knowledge about the other person's perspective. Learn to understand what others actually believe and value. And allow them to express their beliefs and values in their own terms.
- **Be honest** in sharing your beliefs and do not try to downplay them to accommodate. Other people see through this and lose respect for you
- **Do not misrepresent** or disparage other peoples' beliefs and practices
- **Remember** that it's our differences that can make a difference, so rejoice in the richness of our diversities

C

Steps in constructing an intra faith network:

- a) Formation of a small working group.
- b) Needs analysis and information collection.
- c) Approaching local Muslim intra faith communities and their leadership.
- d) Meetings and constructing an agenda and laying the foundation.
- e) Follow-up and ongoing communication.
- f) Identifying common goals and projects to help strengthen understanding, friendship and respect.

a) Formation of a small working group.

Starting with a group of people who do understand what is at stake. These should include people who understand the current environment and situation, and are not willing to accept the status quo. Keep the working group informal as human instincts of developing hierarchy can potentially setup the project for a shaky start. This important part would require all members of the initial group to be committed and understand the importance and the need for the success of this network. It is also important that these people familiarize themselves with the information in the previous chapters of this booklet.

b) Needs analysis and information collection.

Have a brainstorming session to do need analysis.

1. Identify and understand if there is a need for an intra faith network.
2. What are the needs for the local, national, and global levels for intra faith activities?
3. How can this intra faith network help to meet local challenges and be a path of success for others?
4. Ask questions about why we are trying to achieve and what is it, which is achievable and set goals.
5. Need to understand and identify.
 - i) The religious profile of the defined area.
 - ii) Places of worship of the defined area.
 - iii) Listing of key Muslim community leaders.

c) Approaching local Muslim communities and their leaders.

Once the ground level of work has been done, the network needs to have a meeting with local community and the leaders and inform them about the importance of this project and develop partnership and understanding with these members.

There is a general belief that part of the challenge on discordance in the intra-faith Muslim communities is partly because of the religious leaders within these communities. However, it is also important to understand that many if not all of these religious places of worship do have systems where one way or the other, the leadership or caretakers are responsible to the people. If the key working group has had difficulties with the local Muslim community leaders, it may be worth reaching out to the larger circle of community with or without the leader. Once a critical mass of people who chose to work together and live with respect and tolerance, they can with much more ease develop education of the current or future leadership of their respective communities where the leadership too is tolerant of everyone else.

d) Initial meeting and constructing an agenda.

Important to develop and generate trust and confidence within the group. Provide information and ground roots of meeting suggested activity, theological and community dialogue group, intra faith women's group, intra faith youth group, prayers for peace, discussion on local issues, preparation of common statements, social justice challenges, etc.

e) Follow-up and ongoing communication.

This is critical part to keep the momentum of the process going. It is recommended that there should be once a month meeting so people can get together and have special forums to discuss various educational, understanding or community relevant programs.

Activities around areas of commonality should be instituted. Subgroups with focus on specific areas and issues can be created who can subsequently report to the larger group and develop respect and understanding with each other by working together for the success of common future.

f) Identifying common goals and projects to help strengthen understanding, friendship and respect.

Social justice group
Children Education forum
Media education
Theological and community dialogue group
Intra faith women's group
Intra faith youth group,
Prayers for peace,
Inter-Faith education group.
Local issues,
Preparation of common statements
Identifying ways of taking this project nationwide and help support the process worldwide.
etc.

g) Points of Agreement or Similarity Intra-Faith Muslim communities:

A. Some examples of disciplined practice, common to us all:

1. Believe in one God
2. Believe in Prophet Mohammed (SAW)
3. Belief in God's books
4. Practice of compassion
5. Service to others
6. Prayers
7. Practicing moral precepts and virtues
8. Attention to diet
9. Fasting and abstinence
10. Practice in awareness (recollection, mindfulness) and living in the present moment
11. Pilgrimage
12. Study of Quran

B. It is essential to extend our formal practice of awareness into all aspects of our life.

C. Humility, gratitude, and a sense of humor are indispensable in the spiritual life.

D. Prayer is a communion with Ultimate Reality, whether it is regarded as personal, impersonal, or beyond them both.