

TOOLKIT FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS FOR MAKING FRIENDS AND SHARING WISDOM

Thank you for downloading this document.
We hope it helps you to make friends across
religions as promoted by prominent religious
leaders ([youtube.com/MakeFriends](https://www.youtube.com/MakeFriends)).

We would like to consider this a beginning of a
process, a relationship, even a friendship. In this
spirit, we would love it if you could share with us
the fruit, applications, experiences, and lessons
learned, so that we might all benefit from what
you took home from the campaign and the
toolkit.

Please share stories, ideas, insights and pictures
on our Facebook account, [www.facebook.com/
Elijah.Interfaith.Institute](https://www.facebook.com/Elijah.Interfaith.Institute)

We also realize that the success of the process
requires broad dissemination on different
platforms that you and your friends, old and
new, connect on. We would be grateful if when
sharing anything related to our campaign
and toolkit, on any platform, you use the
[#MakeFriends](#) hashtag. This will allow people
around the world to identify your postings.

We look forward to hearing from you and to
staying in touch.

In friendship,

Rabbi Alon (Goshen-Gottstein)
The Elijah Interfaith Institute



Part I

1. Principles of Interreligious Friendship

Making friends with people from other religions will enrich your spiritual life.

The basic principles of interreligious friendship include the following:

- Interreligious friendship begins with a recognition of our common humanity and the human quest for meaning. It recognizes fundamental similarities between religions, including the search for living in goodness and harmony and living an ethical life. Fundamental to interreligious friendship is awareness that the different religions seek to transcend ordinary life through aspiration and orientation of life toward a higher spiritual understanding of reality, or a supreme reality called by most believers “God”.
- Interreligious friendship is based on a higher common interest, beyond self interest.
- Interreligious friendship is characterized by reciprocity and engages both sides to a relationship. Friendship is based on a mutual give and take.

2. Approaching Difference

Interreligious friendship is not friendship that casts aside religious difference, overlooking it in the interest of perceived commonality. Rather, it is friendship that keeps us mindful of religious difference and approaches this difference as a means of learning, growth and transformation that occur within the friendship. Religious difference can be approached as a source of blessing.

3. Upholding Identity

Maintaining the identity of our religious community is a primary concern of the teachings of our religions. The practice of interreligious friendship should not be a means of weakening or diluting identity. Rather, it should be a means of strengthening and deepening it.

4. Practicing Speech

Practicing interreligious friendship is closely related to how we speak. Questioning is fundamental to interreligious friendship. Friends must be willing to question and to be questioned. Hard questions are part of honest speech, but must be clearly distinguished from attack or criticism. In interreligious friendships, the face of our friend is always before us. We learn to speak the same in the absence as in the presence of the friend.

5. Friendship in Action

Action is a primary arena for the manifestation of friendship. We expect support, collaboration and solidarity from our friends if issues pertaining to our well-being arise. Interreligious friendship can be based on common dedication to ideals or causes such as social justice, fighting hatred, poverty and illness. The commonality shared by friends finds expression through shared commitment and collaboration for the well-being of society and the world.



6. Friendship as Spiritual Gift

As we move from ignoring differences to recognizing, understanding and respecting our differences, we are also called to discover a deeper unity that transcends our differences. Love finds its fullest expression in a friendship that is consciously grounded in God, or in the ultimate reality.

Part II

Practical suggestions for Interreligious Friendship

Here are some practical suggestions, for how friendship may be practiced, many of which grow out of the discussions of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders. If you have additional recommendations, please share them with us. We can add them to the list.

Although the interreligious friendships that Elijah is promoting are one-on-one human relationships, it is usual to nurture them in the context of a supportive environment.

As religious leaders, you may apply these suggestions both personally and as part of broader communal efforts.

1. Share a Meal: Invite a family from another religion to join your family at a home meal. This can be arranged as an 'exchange' program between two congregations, whereby everyone has a chance at being a host and everyone can be a guest. And/or organize communal meals. The advantage of this will be that if there are (religious) dietary restrictions for practitioners of one religion, there is no embarrassment or inequality. There is nothing like eating together to create bonds of friendship.
2. Organize a 'friendship walk'. One possibility is to walk together from one place of worship to another. When you talk, you are face-to-face but when you walk, you are shoulder-to-shoulder. There is no antagonism and no competition. You are facing in the same direction. Walk together as an instrument in addressing common challenges – walks can be used to make a public statement about issues that the interreligious community seeks to address, such as showing respect for sacred spaces. Variations could include creating human chains or being present when sites of other faiths are under threat.
3. Jointly taking social action, responding to societal challenges. While this can be practiced independently of friendship, it enhances friendship, by providing common focus and common goal in healing society. Sharing insights into the local scene – spreading the importance of awareness of others in your community; increasing awareness of the local community's economic and social divide.
4. Share culture – create opportunities to share music, art, story-telling and other cultural activities. This can take the form of interreligious festivals or reciprocal events at each other's venues. Music breaks down all barriers. Art is a window into the heart of another.
5. Sharing narratives - creating space for sharing of suffering and sharing of achievements.



6. Sharing Wisdom - The particularity of your vocation as a religious leader will find expression here, as it is typically the religious leader who has knowledge of tradition and its sources and who is best equipped to facilitate sharing wisdom. Ongoing learning about each other's beliefs and from each other's sacred sources can take multiple forms, including inviting speakers, joint text-study and more. Respectful study of each other's sources can be an expression of friendship as well as a way towards friendship. Tips, instructions and sample texts for joint study are offered in the following section.

Part III

Sharing Wisdom: Educational Principles and Methodology

Sharing wisdom takes place through the encounter with scriptures, the history of their interpretation, the various expressions of wisdom within the tradition, and the wisdom of those present, as they have been shaped by their tradition. We regard Sharing wisdom as the key activity in building deep relationships and understanding between people of faith.

Each tradition is best equipped to interpret its scriptures, in light of context and with knowledge of its history. Other traditions may have insight to bring, when looking at sources of a given tradition. Hence, we invite interreligious readings, with the goal of opening new horizons, while respecting the primary interpretive role of the host community.

The Elijah Method for Healthy Sharing of Wisdom

There are certain principles that characterize healthy sharing of wisdom. These include:

- Respect for the beliefs and religions of each participant: creating an environment where each faith is valued and respected.
- Respect for the sources: Each text is acknowledged as a 'sacred source' and studied for its inherent, authentic meaning for adherents of the faith from which it emanates.
- Respect for academic rigour: While respected and recognized as sacred, each source is subjected to analysis in accord with legitimate academic methods.
- Openness to multiple interpretations: Within the parameters of respect, questioning and dialogue are encouraged in this pluralistic learning environment.
- Respectful learning does not preclude the use of humour and encouraging a lively spirit of interpersonal interaction.

Principles of Text Study

When studying sources:

- a) Attention should be paid to the origin of the source, including the author and historical setting, the status of the source within the faith system, the influence the source has had historically and the influence the source has for contemporary followers.



- b) The key questions to pose are: 'What is the wisdom that is contained in this passage? In what way does it help the believers lead a better spiritual life? What are the spiritual fruits of this teaching?' In encountering scriptures of the other: 'What in this text or teaching elicits respect in me? What challenges me (including difficulties I have with it)? What do I find inspiring about it?'
- c) Participants should be encouraged to discuss texts in pairs or small groups, creating opportunity for each person to express opinions.
- d) Although the facilitator may have a strong opinion about the appropriate/ correct interpretation of a text, alternate interpretations should be articulated and examined respectfully.
- e) If sources are presented in translation, participants must understand the limitations of translation and be made aware of multiple understandings/ interpretations of texts.
- f) Participants need to be made aware that no faith has a monolithic position and facilitators need to indicate the complexities and contradictions from within each faith group. Participants should be encouraged to add further sources for comparison and for expansion of the discussion.

Stages of the Process

A good facilitator will lead participants through a learning process

- Reading: It is important to read the source aloud, often more than once, and to ensure that every participant has heard and understood the words.
- Listening: Try to hear and learn the logic of the other tradition to the full, before responding, critiquing.
- Asking: Clarify what is needed for genuine understanding by encouraging participants to pose relevant questions.
- Discerning: What are the key issues being tackled or the key questions being answered and what other issues are raised in the process?
- Comparing: Identify similar issues, challenges, processes in different traditions. Try to ascertain to what degree different traditions are indeed similar or different.
- Reflecting: Reflect on significant questions:

What is the price for the choices we make? What price does my tradition pay and what price does another tradition pay for making specific choices?

What has been helpful - What have been constructive ways that my tradition has coped with a given issue? Can they be extended to another tradition?

Can we learn from one another how to meet challenges, difficulties?
- Overcoming stereotypes: Encourage participants to ask themselves if what has been studied has confirmed or broken stereotypes? How has our perception of a tradition changed through this study process?



- Inspiration: Ask what has been inspiring in what has been studied together?
Seek inspiration within one's own tradition, especially in dealing with problems relevant to the tradition under discussion, in a process of mutual inspiration.

Sample Study Materials

Elijah Interfaith Institute is happy to share with you two sets of study texts that will allow you deepen the process of sharing wisdom between traditions. The first, titled “Religious Leadership – Ideals and Challenges”, is suited particularly for groups of religious leaders. This can enhance your work of reaching out to leaders of other faith groups or of working with local councils of religious leaders. The study unit explores issues such as What does it mean to be a religious leader in today's world? To what degree are the challenges that confront religious leadership the perennial challenges that have arrested the attention of the faithful and their leaders for generations and to what degree do we encounter today challenges that are unique to our day and age?

Click [here](#) to access English study unit on Religious Leadership

A second study unit is devoted to prayer, and may be more useful for engaging both leaders and the faithful of the community. All religious traditions include a prayer or meditation component. Prayer is something that differentiates the religious life from other cultural expressions - but to what extent does it divide one religion from another? The study unit allows us to consider whether different forms of prayer are interchangeable between traditions or limited to the tradition from which they come and how we might be inspired by one another's life of prayer.

Click [here](#) to access English study unit on Prayer

Part IV

Creating the Framework for Interreligious Friendship

As a religious leader, you are positioned to bring about change in the religious congregation you serve as well as the broader community, by advancing a process of cultivating friendship and sharing wisdom across traditions.

These activities will be enhanced by forging relationships with other bodies, or aligning yourself with existing interfaith initiatives. Let us consider several relevant scenarios:

A. *Creating opportunities for interreligious encounter in your community where none exist*

1. Know your community: find out who your neighbours are. Are there religious institutions nearby which are likely to be good partners for you? Are there religious institutions in your community which could benefit from a relationship with your institution? Are there social, economic or political needs that could provide incentive for your community to forge a relationship with another (or vice versa)?



2. Fear of the unknown is a great disincentive: the first step in creating a relationship is breaking down ignorance and thus overcoming fear. Here are some suggestions if there is resistance to the idea of meeting the religious other:

- Step 1: Use available resources, including those produced by the Elijah Interfaith Institute, to read/ learn about the religious other in the safe environment of your own religious community, prior to face-to-face engagement.
- Step 2: Invite one or some members of the neighboring community into your community to meet them on your ground. Perhaps use the opportunity to explain who you are and what you believe.
- Step 3: Arrange a visit to the place of the other. This could be an opportunity for a superficial tour of their premises or an opportunity to learn more about them.
- Step 4: Have a social event for both congregations.
- Step 5: Create an opportunity for people to ask questions about each other's practices and beliefs.
- Step 6: Set up a regular meeting/ activity: This could take the form of a study circle or it could be based around providing a social service, a sport or craft activity or something purely social. The key is the regularity of meeting.

B. Joining your own Congregation to already existing interreligious frameworks

Follow steps 1-5 above

Once you have created a conducive environment within your own community, have representatives of the existing/ identified interreligious institutions extend the invitation for you to join them. You may have to approach them to express your interest.

C. Introducing "Sharing Wisdom" to Existing Organizations

If you are already active in an interreligious organization but feel that the time has come to deepen relationships and activities within the organization (as we often hear is the case), we recommend the following steps:

- Step 1: Raise the issue. Others may feel it is time to deepen relations and that introducing a study element with explicit religious focus is opportune.
- Step 2: Provide the study resources. Elijah Interfaith Institute's website provides many resources for sharing wisdom. Some of these can be found below.
- Step 3: Engage in textual study, following the guidelines spelled out in Part III, above.
- Step 4: In the course of study, feel free to share your spiritual life and its journey with a member of another religion, especially as it applies to the study material. Engage it personally. You may discover new insights arising out of such sharing and you may discover your friendship deepens in ways you had not imagined.

