

Christian Leadership in a Multifaith World Curriculum Designed by Interfaith America & CCCU

Module 1 – Christian Foundations for Interfaith Bridge-Building
Activity 1– Introduction to Interfaith Cooperation

Overview

This activity will introduce students to key concepts of “interfaith cooperation” (including what it is and what it isn’t) and showcase concrete examples of how Christians have engaged in interfaith action.

Learning Outcomes

Students who successfully complete this activity can:

- Define interfaith cooperation and civic pluralism
- Recognize some of the unique opportunities and challenges of living in a religiously diverse democracy, such as the U.S.

External Materials

- Video introducing [Christian Leadership in a Multifaith World](#) curriculum (2 minutes)
- [Steph Holland - Student Interfaith Leader](#) video (4 minutes)
- Interfaith America, [What is Interfaith?](#) (1B) video (4 minutes)
- [Pages 89-97 of Interfaith Leadership](#)
- [Lesson 2 Module 2A - Interfaith in American Democracy](#) (4 ½ minutes)
- [Pages 130-132 of Interfaith Leadership](#)

Activity

Before beginning this lesson, watch the 2-minute introduction video: [Christian Leadership in a Multifaith World](#)

What is “Interfaith Bridge-Building”? A Story

In the video introducing the curriculum, we heard a powerful call to follow Jesus by extending love to the stranger and extending our Light in the world. This is sometimes called “interfaith bridge-building” or “interfaith cooperation.” But what is interfaith bridge-building? And what does it involve? And how do we pursue it in such a way that deepens our faith and brightens our light, as was shown in the video? This activity will begin to address these questions.

One of the best ways to describe – and, indeed, participate in – interfaith bridge-building is through story. So, let’s start with the story of a Christian college student who found herself, quite unexpectedly, in the midst of an interfaith bridge-building opportunity (excerpted from *Sacred Ground*, by Eboo Patel (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), pp. 134-135):

Cassie came to the question of what it means to be a person of strong faith in a situation of diversity in a very personal way. When she was a teenager, she devoted her life to Christ. Her somewhat surprised parents found themselves dropping their daughter off at a conservative Evangelical church on Sunday mornings in the suburbs of Seattle, the only region in the country where more people check “none” more than “Christian” on surveys of religiosity. There, Cassie learned Scripture and praise songs, leadership and humility, what it means to be saved and how to spread the Good News to save others.

When she graduated from high school, Cassie went to a liberal arts college in Wisconsin. There were only enough Christians there to form a single student group. It included mainline Protestants as well as Evangelicals, people whose idea of worship was sitting stiffly in church pews and others who spoke in tongues. It also included Catholics. This was something of a challenge for Cassie. In the church where she was baptized, she had been told that Catholics aren’t Christian.

Soon, Catholics became the least of Cassie’s theological worries. During her time as an undergraduate, Cassie became friends with a young Muslim from Bangladesh. She found him to be righteous and pious and kind, many of the qualities that she had at one point associated only with Evangelical Christians. One evening in the library, Ahmed asked Cassie if he could interview her. Cassie said sure, and asked why. It turns out that Ahmed was doing a project for an anthropology class. He had seen Cassie’s Bible and cross, observed her Wednesday-night prayer group, watched her go to church on Sunday mornings, noticed the distinct language with which she talked to her tribe, and had chosen to make an ethnographic inquiry into the exotic life of the American Evangelical Christian.

As she answered the questions, talking about the meaning of the cross and reading aloud passages from the Bible, Cassie had the sudden realization that this anthropology exercise presented her with the opportunity she had been hoping for. She took a deep breath and prepared to make her move. Ahmed beat her to it. Looking Cassie deep in the eyes, he said, “You are such a wonderful person, exactly the person I have been looking to share something with. I would like to tell you about my religion—Islam.” And with words eerily similar to the ones Cassie was about to say—*truth, love, faith, God*—Ahmed tried to convert her.

For a second there, Cassie was stunned. She had spent years in church learning the script to convert others, and she now found herself on the receiving end of that process. She wasn’t really offended, just surprised. Finally, not really knowing what else to do, she began to blurt out the words that had been gathering in her head since she first met Ahmed: “Has anybody ever told you what it means to have a personal relationship with a man named Jesus?” Now it was Ahmed’s turn to be surprised. His eyes got wide, and he started to say something. And then the corners of his mouth started to turn up, and pretty soon they were both laughing.

As this story demonstrates, religious diversity is all around us, and it doesn’t always present itself in the ways that we might expect. In order to remain faithful Christians in a *multifaith* world, it helps to have some familiarity with how to build *interfaith* bridges (more on that distinction later). Interfaith bridge-building helps us answer the question Cassie faced in the story above: “How can I be a righteous Christian while remaining friends with a good Muslim?” Too often, those of us who have experienced that dynamic understand our situation this way: “I’m friends with a Muslim, even though I’m Christian.” That’s not a formulation that says much about either Christianity or friendship. This activity will help us get to a different place: “Because I am a Christian, I have formed a friendship with a Muslim.” In other words, “It is precisely the values

that I derive from Christianity that prompt me to form a meaningful and mutual relationship with you.” Here, faith and friendship are connected, mutually enriching instead of mutually exclusive.

Let’s hear about another Christian called to engage in interfaith work (4-minute video): [Steph Holland’s story](#)

Defining Key Terms

Before we dig into the topic of interfaith cooperation, it is important that we take a step back and get clearer about some of the central concepts and terms that we’re using. Topics as big and broad as “religion” and “faith” can be overwhelming to explore without having a shared vocabulary for the words and concepts that we will be using together.

It is also true that these terms are highly contested in some spaces. To that end, we acknowledge that the definitions that we provide below are not exhaustive, but rather reflect Interfaith America’s understanding of these topics, and are intended as a starting point for our collective exploration.

- **Interfaith = “Inter” + “Faith”**

Let’s start with the term “interfaith” itself by breaking it down into its constituent parts: “inter” and “faith.” The “inter” in interfaith stands for interaction between people from different religious or non-religious backgrounds. This is why we use the term “*interfaith*” over the frequent synonym, “*multifaith*,” the world has long been “multi” in the sense that people who orient around religion differently have existed on the same planet at the same time. “Multifaith” is a descriptive term, akin to “diversity” (see below). Our era is distinct in the interaction between diverse individuals and groups. And our goal is distinct in that we seek positive *interaction* between these individuals and groups.

The “faith” in interfaith isn’t actually a synonym for “religion” in this context. Rather, drawing from the scholarship of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the “faith” in interfaith refers to one’s personal orientation toward one’s belief or ethical system, rather than the tradition as a whole (more on that in a minute!). Put together, “interfaith” is about how our interactions with those who are different have an impact on the way we relate to our religious and ethical traditions, and how our relationships with our traditions have an impact on our interactions with those who are different from us.

This might seem relatively straightforward; however, it aptly describes a dynamic cognitive process that *all of us* engage in but comparatively *few of us* actively reflect on. When we meet people who come from different religious backgrounds – or, for that matter, racial or economic or geographic backgrounds that are different – we are simultaneously drawing from our experience with and knowledge of Christianity to inform how to engage with our new acquaintance, *and* our engagement is also informing how we think about and understand different facets of Christianity.

Part of the power of defining “interfaith” in this manner, and particularly the “faith” component, is that it creates conceptual space for us to acknowledge all the ways that different aspects of our identity interact and inform one another. As we all know, Christians are not just walking Gospels, and two different Christians might have vastly different understandings of how to follow Jesus’s example. There are countless experiences and inflections to how we understand our identity, or

even one single piece of it, like our Christian identity. So, while it may seem obvious, it's important to remember – for both ourselves and others – how our race, gender, hometown, politics, etc. inform and are informed by our Christian perspectives.

To learn more about the term interfaith, let's watch "[What is Interfaith?](#)" (This is Lesson 1, Module 1B from Interfaith America's Introduction to Interfaith Leadership curriculum. 4 minutes.)

- **Interfaith Cooperation / Bridge-Building**

Interfaith cooperation is a process in which people who orient around religion differently do three different things.

1. Come together in a way that respects different religious identities.
2. Build mutually inspiring relationships.
3. Engage in common action around issues of shared social concern.

The goal of interfaith cooperation is civic pluralism (see definition of civic pluralism below). Interfaith cooperation does not depend upon shared political, theological, and spiritual perspectives. People who engage in interfaith cooperation may disagree on such matters. The goal of interfaith cooperation is to find ways to bring these people together to build relationships, learn about each other, and engage in common action despite such differences. Though interfaith cooperation is the standard and preferred term, interfaith bridge-building, interfaith work, and interfaith engagement are alternative terms for the same concept.

To learn more about the idea of interfaith cooperation, read a [short excerpt \(pages 89-97\)](#) from [Interfaith Leadership](#), by Eboo Patel.

- **Civic Religious Pluralism**

The term "pluralism" is understood and defined in a variety of ways. Interfaith America draws its understanding from the work of Diana Eck, who argues that diversity is simply the fact of people with different identities interacting with one another. In and of itself, diversity is neither good nor bad. Pluralism, on the other hand, is an achievement. It is the "energetic engagement of diversity toward a positive end."

Sometimes, especially in some discussions of Christian theology, the term "theological pluralism" denotes the belief that there are multiple truths, and that no tradition has exclusive access to it. This is *not* the sense with which Interfaith America uses the term "pluralism." Indeed, Interfaith America is focused on *civic* pluralism, not theology. Civic pluralism describes a society in which multiple religious, philosophical, and ethical beliefs and practices exist and interact. Civic pluralism is built on the belief that people who orient around religion differently can build relationships across lines of difference, have shared values, and can engage together in common action for the common good. Civic pluralism **does not** require that one relinquish their beliefs, share the beliefs of another, or even believe that the other has a valid truth claim.

To learn more about the idea of civic religious pluralism, let's watch "[Interfaith in American Democracy](#)" (Lesson 2, Module 2A from Interfaith America's Key Concepts of Interfaith Leadership curriculum; 4 ½ minutes).

- **Shared Values**

The world's religious and philosophical perspectives, among their beautiful diversity, also share certain values. These are philosophical values such as compassion, justice, and service, as well as more action-oriented values such as hospitality, care of the environment, and charity. These deeply held, widely shared beliefs provide a platform upon which people who may hold other widely disparate opinions can come together in agreement.

For interfaith leaders, both **shared values** and **diverse approaches** are important. Even while religious and ethical traditions may hold values in common, they likely approach these ideas in diverse ways, through different rituals, narratives, heroes, and philosophies. This is a hugely important opportunity for interfaith leaders because it gives us a way to identify *commonality without the pretense of sameness*.

To learn more about the concept of shared values, let's read another [short excerpt \(pages 130-132\)](#) from [Interfaith Leadership](#), by Eboo Patel.

Student Assignment Options

1. Create an "Identity Cloud"
 - If you have access to a printer, download this [worksheet](#) and complete it as best you can. If you don't, no worries! Just take any blank piece of paper (or if you have a digital drawing program with which you're comfortable, that works too!) and follow these simple directions:
 - Start by drawing your religious or ethical identity in the center.
 - Then think about other aspects of your identity that influence how you understand your "faith" (you don't need to be limited to identity categories; you can also think about personality traits like "outgoing," "academic," "inquisitive," etc.).
 - For each aspect of your identity that influences your religious/ethical identity, draw a smaller bubble around the central one, and connect it by a line.
 - When you're finished, reflect on the following questions:
 - What kinds of things bubble up in relationship to your religious identity or worldview? Did you expect that?
 - When you look at your responses to the first question, does it provide insight as to why you're engaging an online activity on interfaith bridge-building right now?
2. What Does Civic Pluralism Mean to You?
 - First, take a few minutes to review your newsfeed and note where you see challenges around religious identity and diversity at play. See if you can find local, national, and international stories that implicate questions of religion.
 - Would moving toward the vision of civic pluralism help address any of the challenges in the news stories you identified above? How so?
 - We've spent this activity discussing what civic pluralism looks like in the United States. What does civic pluralism look like to you? How do you envision it? How would you describe it in your own words?
3. Photo Hunt Activity

- Take 5 photos representing religious diversity in your community. Include at least one example of religious diversity that you were unaware of before this exercise, and one example of “intra-faith” diversity (or diversity within a religious tradition).
- Describe these photos and what type of interfaith knowledge they represent when you upload the photos. Why is this photo an example of that type of interfaith knowledge? For example, if you take a photo of a mural depicting religious diversity at a historical event, specify that that photo is an example of the “history of interfaith cooperation.”

Going Deeper: Additional Resources

- *Watch:* Additional videos from Interfaith America and Dominican’s [Interfaith Leadership Video Series](#)
- *Read:* Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Patterns of Faith Around the World*; Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*
- *Read:* Harvard University Pluralism Project, “[From Diversity to Pluralism](#)”
- *Explore:* [The Pluralism Project](#)
- *Explore:* [Interfaith America President and Founder Eboo Patel's This I Believe essay from NPR: "We Are Each Other's Business"](#)
- *Explore:* The [Pluralism Project's profiles on American Religious Communities](#)
- *Watch:* “[Let’s Revive the Golden Rule](#),” TED talk by Karen Armstrong (9 minutes)