



Presbyterian Mission  
**World Mission**

# Living and Working Together



## Mission Toolkit: Christian-Muslim Relations

### **Muslim Views of Christianity and Christians**

Muslims have various points of departure when viewing Christianity. The Quran extols Jesus as unique and one of the greatest among God's prophets. Islam explicitly recognizes its relatedness to and continuity with Judaism and Christianity, "The People of the Book." The Quran speaks very critically of the "erroneous teaching propagated by Christians," these being most notably the divinity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. At the same time, it reserves kind words for the followers of Jesus. The Quran offers clear principles to guide Muslims in relating to Christians, affirming the complete freedom of different religious communities to coexist. The diversity of religious traditions is explained by different reactions to the various prophets, a part of the plan of God.

Muslims, like Christians, have often failed to live according to the ideals of their tradition. Most Islamic literature on Christianity has been polemical, with much distortion and erroneous information. Jesus is always respected. Christians and Jews, though they have distorted their revelations, are to be protected under Islamic authority. While there is "no coercion in religion," Muslims hope that others will become Muslim, as Islam is considered the highest form of religion. Islamic theologians have participated in formal dialogues with Christian leaders in the United States and throughout the world. Islamic organizations in the United States have often urged their communities to seek positive relationships to the "People of the Book" in their local areas.



### ***Studying Islam***

Too often, we study “things.” Islam is not a thing, an object for close scientific analysis and ultimate mastery. Islam, like Christianity, is a living tradition: a corporate and individual faith; a common thread of many and diverse lives, cultures, and histories. Studying Islam means going beyond reading books and discussing “issues;” it means interacting with Muslims, living witnesses and neighbors. Think how offended we Christians would be if a Muslim studied Christianity from one or two books, was led in discussion by another Muslim, and then stopped, saying “Now I know. Now I understand what Christianity is all about.” Studying Islam must involve entering into relationship with Muslims, allowing them to know us, to probe the depth and meaning of our faith struggles, as we seek to understand theirs.

Begin by selecting one or more books that would be appropriate for your church group. Include in your study a visit to a mosque or Islamic center, an invitation to a local Muslim speaker, or some other activity that will bring your group into direct personal contact with Muslims. In this way, Christians can learn by knowing as well as know by learning.

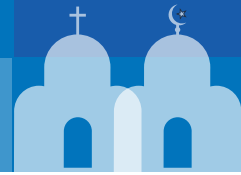
### **Initiating Contact with the Muslim Community**

#### ***Developing Vision and Purpose***

It may take some effort to begin a study group in your church, but this is one way to develop a vision for better Christian-Muslim relations in your community. Pastors can also include material in their preaching that will encourage congregations to reach out and listen to their neighbors of different faiths. Preachers can begin to paint a picture of faithful witness, holding in balance openness and commitment while encouraging listening, speaking and acting.



*How will you choose to learn more about Islam and Muslims? Use resources in the “Learn” and “Act” sections in this toolkit for suggested ideas.*



### **Selecting a Contact Person in Your Church**

Once a vision or purpose has begun to form in a congregation, the group needs to take concrete steps to initiate a relationship with the Muslim community in its area. Fostering better Christian-Muslim interaction most often begins at the individual level. The church needs individuals who can transcend their own religious tradition and, in many cases, also their own culture. Persons who have had significant previous experience in crossing frontiers – such as in living overseas – often have this ability or gift. Others can be found who have particular family or educational backgrounds that make them capable of warm contacts beyond accustomed boundaries. Still others will bring bonds of racial or ethnic commonalities despite differences in faith. An initial individual (or small group) should feel the support of the church and be encouraged to form relationships with Muslim community leaders, visiting the local mosque or other Islamic organizations. When searching for contact persons, be sure to keep in mind the goals of your church in initiating constructive dialogue with Muslims.

When a bond of trust and respect is formed between some Muslims and an individual Christian (or small group), the contact person(s) can function as a bridge between the Muslim and the Christian communities. They can speak in church gatherings about understanding Islam and Muslims, and they can introduce their Muslim friends to the church. If the church has trust in a person it has commissioned, it will be more likely to trust this person's Muslim friends. Through the gradual exposure of the church to Muslims in various settings, a sustainable community relationship is possible, and joint projects for the good of the community might arise from sharing common concerns.

Groups may also want to discover organizations already functioning in their community in which Muslims are involved, be they civic, educational, ecumenical, or interfaith community ministries. Mutual participation in community projects may provide excellent opportunities for dialogue as well as service.

### **Contacts in the Muslim Community**

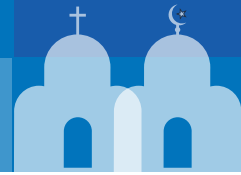
Most cities and many towns in the United States have one or more formal Islamic cultural centers or mosques. The board of directors, or the imam or mullah, would be the most likely contact for church leaders who wish to initiate conversations with Muslims in their area.

Colleagues or acquaintances who are Muslims could provide an introduction to the community's Islamic leadership. If you need help in finding the Muslim institutions in your area, you may wish to contact national Islamic institutions. Visit the Hartford Institute for Religion Research online database of Masjids, Mosques and Islamic Centers in the U.S. to search by your state.

If there is no organized Islamic community in your area, contact a nearby college, university or seminary that has a religious studies faculty. Ask if they have any contacts with Muslims in the area.

To search online for National Islamic Institutions, visit: [hrr.hartsem.edu/mosque/database.html](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/mosque/database.html)

How has the media shaped your understanding of Islam and Muslims? To better understand how the media, specifically photojournalism, distorts our view of reality, watch [vimeo.com/29280708](https://vimeo.com/29280708).



### **Frequent Barriers and Cultural Influences**

#### ***Stereotypes and Assumptions***

As with any other people who are different or new to our experience, Muslims are often unfairly stereotyped by the majority population. The U.S. media reflect our tendency to generalize “others” and, in a sense, shape the picture we Americans have of our world. The words “Islam” and “Muslim” have long stirred up images of covered women, camels, swords, strange garb and, in recent years, suicide bombers, anti-American riots, terrorists and holy war. These images have poured into our minds from television, newspapers and magazines, movies and literature, social media, historical accounts (both recent and old) and even from some missionaries who have lived in predominantly Muslim societies. These negative stories and images contribute to the difficulty Americans have in speaking with a Muslim neighbor.

#### ***Distrust of Motives of Others***

One great difficulty people have in approaching persons of different faiths is a conscious or unconscious distrust of the others’ motives. This distrust can be a result of unfortunate experiences or ingrained stereotypes of the other as untrustworthy and dangerous. Are Christians approaching Muslims using dialogue as a planned means of conversion (or vice versa)? Are “they” interested in us as people, as people of faith, or objects of curiosity? Is religion really just a mask for redefining the social agenda to our disadvantage? Does our dialogue partner merely wish to engage us in a destructive debate, or to understand us?

What difference will it make? Some of the distrust which is encountered can come from deep-seated historical realities of social alienation that require a reconciliation beyond mere temporary goodwill. Can those making an initiative be expected to continue interest? Or will the end result be an even greater sense of alienation? Does the other even recognize the pain past actions have brought to the present moment?

#### ***Unfamiliarity of Tradition, Lack of Preparation***

Some church leaders who have approached the leaders of their local Islamic center, inquiring about the possibility of initiating dialogue for mutual education, have not received a ready positive response to their initiative. When the local Islamic center does not have trained imams or mullahs, the message sometimes comes back that no one is particularly well equipped to speak with authority on religious matters. Some who are educated in their own tradition indicate they do not feel they have sufficient experience with Christians to undertake teaching Christians or engaging in dialogue with them about Islam. Yet another reason some Muslim communities have shown little interest in dialogue with their Christian neighbors is that their time and energy is focused on needs within their own group or community. Mosque leaders are often volunteers with full-time jobs. Despite all the limitations, some have felt compelled to extend themselves beyond their capacities in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.



Churches know that too many programs can exhaust the faithful. In the face of these circumstances, it is important to contact the leaders of the Muslim community early and to be clear and honest about intentions. This will help to dispel suspicions and false expectations, and to build trust. It will help mosque leaders prioritize their commitments. Christians also need to discern when they should withdraw and return later with another initiative, on the same or on another basis.

### ***Insensitivity of Presentation***

Muslims and Christians alike have often been insensitive in their presentation of their own faith, in the process railing against the other, treating the other's faith with contempt. Negative presentations of a faith tradition tend to turn listeners away and induce a reluctance to engage in further conversations. First impressions have a great deal of influence on the future of a relationship with a person of another faith. If Christians do not present their faith in a way that demonstrates genuine respect and openness to their Muslim neighbors, they will be less likely to engage in dialogue. The same is true conversely, for it is impossible to share with someone who will not demonstrate enough respect to allow others the freedom to define themselves and their faith.

## **The Call to Dialogue with Muslim Neighbors**

### ***Encouragement***

Christians are called into dialogue with their neighbors. It has become increasingly necessary to engage those Muslim neighbors in our midst in relationships of mutual understanding and respect. Many Christians have begun the slow process of overcoming barriers of fear and misunderstanding, to become friends and partners with Muslims in the quest for human life that is pleasing to God. The necessity will not go away, and it will continue to become more urgent.

### ***Caution***

In some settings, opportunities may still be limited or even rendered impossible due to tension and conflict. Dialogue does not occur in a vacuum, and Christians will encounter other neighbors along the way who may also need to be invited to the table. It should be noted that not all attempts at Christian-Muslim dialogue are successful. Many have backfired or have served to confirm stereotypes on all sides. Any time that groups of strangers come together there is risk involved. In order to minimize the risk, however, some general guidelines have been developed through the World Council of Churches.

*Please see following page: Interfaith Guidelines for Dialogue*

*Many Christians have begun the slow process of overcoming barriers of fear and misunderstanding, to become friends and partners with Muslims in the quest for human life that is pleasing to God.*

# Living and Working Together



## *Interfaith Guidelines for Dialogue*

1. The goal of dialogue is building bonds of relationship. Because trustful bonds are not built easily or quickly, patience and perseverance are essential disciplines of dialogue.
2. Dialogue is a cooperative activity. Dialogue starts through response to varied initiatives. All partners need to be included from the beginning of planning processes.
3. Dialogue takes many forms that complement and enrich each other. In local settings, dialogue best takes place between different groups and on different subjects that affect the lives of all sections of the community.
4. Dialogue partners are responsible to listen to and hear the self-understanding of each other's faith. Partners should define themselves and provide opportunity for others to question them.
5. In dialogue, it is important to respect the religious institutions from which people come. Individuals usually do not represent their full religious community. They do speak from their own experience.
6. Partners in dialogue should take stock of one another's religious, cultural and ideological diversity, being alert for opportunities and needs.
7. Partners in dialogue should be aware of their own cultural loyalties and of their ideological commitments, in order to avoid any hidden agendas.
8. Dialogue should be pursued by sharing activities in community. Dialogue is most vital when its participants actually share their lives together.
9. Dialogue should generate educational efforts in the community, to correct or restore the image of neighbors.
10. Dialogue should help people know one another in the context of their deepest religious expression as well as through talking together. Understanding is enhanced through visits to family and community rituals, ceremonies, and festivals.
11. Christians should plan and undertake dialogue ecumenically whenever possible. The challenge is before us. May God lead us into new relationships with our neighbors that reflect the love God has shown to us.

