



FRAMEWORKS FOR INTERFAITH CONVERSATIONS

Interfaith conversation, helps establish relationships and share positive knowledge across lines of religious difference. We've seen this take multiple shapes at different campuses: interfaith reflection after a service event, interfaith dialogue on a pertinent social issue, and conversations that simply seek to understand one another's beliefs about shared values. The thing is, interfaith conversation can be as challenging as it is important.

There are many ways to frame a space in order to have a productive interfaith conversation, but how can one know which one is best? Here's the thing: how we choose to frame our spaces for interfaith conversation largely depends on our goals for the conversation. In this resource you will find three models for interfaith conversation and tips on how to choose which one is best for you and your campus.

MODEL #1

SAFE SPACES

Folks who have been in this interfaith gig for a while are likely familiar with this term already. Although the definition of the term can vary from person to person, and campus to campus, generally “safe spaces” are those spaces wherein folks can feel welcome to fully and freely express the complexity of their identities (gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.) without fear of judgment or an inhospitable environment. Safe spaces have become a popular way for students to build an accepting community with one another on college campuses. Safe spaces have a rich history in many social movements, and the movement for interfaith cooperation is no exception.

“So when should I use safe spaces?”

Safe spaces are most useful when your intention is to offer a place where folks can process thoughts and feelings in the context of a group regarding deeply personal matters. For example, say a hate crime has occurred on campus against a particular identity and you’ve decided to gather folks together for interfaith conversation to process the incident. This is a moment where your best bet is to establish a safe space. In this situation, it’s important to set up a space where people are reassured that their vulnerability will be processed with productive sensitivity.

Many students across college campuses also need spaces to discuss their personal identities and what it means for those identities to participate in a diverse community. It is not uncommon for this campus and many others to touch on other aspects of identity—race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.—through the lens of their faith or philosophical identity. This would be another example of when safe spaces are productive—people will be able to share their sentiments thoughtfully and candidly knowing that their deeply held personal values and identity won’t be under scrutiny.

LONG STORY SHORT...

When the name of the game is providing support, safe spaces are the ticket.

MODEL #2

BRAVE SPACES

Brave spaces seek to establish a way in which folks can both bring their entire selves—composed of multiple deeply held identities—to the table, while openly and respectfully disagreeing on important issues. Guidelines are typically set up to respectfully manage the degree to which brave spaces are open, ensuring that any discomfort or disagreement becomes a productive and meaningful learning opportunity for everyone engaged.

“So when should I use brave spaces?”

When your primary objective for interfaith conversation is learning about others’ religious and nonreligious traditions while also thinking critically about what it looks like when people who are fundamentally different work together, brave spaces shine. Some of the best learning comes from honest conversation that’s also open to intelligent and respectful disagreement. This not only helps us learn more about those around us, but it also helps us hone our own sense of values and identity as they come into direct contact, positive or negative, with others.

Brave spaces are important to keep in mind for interfaith conversation specifically as it capitalizes on the idea that honest interfaith dialogue requires courage. It’s easy for the “aren’t we all actually the same?” generalization to creep into interfaith conversations, and brave spaces empower us to challenge this notion and instead characterize interfaith dialogue by what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks refer to as “the dignity of difference.”

LONG STORY SHORT...

Brave spaces empower people to respectfully address the ways in which they are fundamentally different and yet still manage to work together.

MODEL #3

COMMUNITY AGREEMENT

One increasingly popular option for many groups is to establish a “Community Agreement.” Rather than name the space outright (as “safe” or “brave,” for example), this space is characterized by crowd-sourced guidelines. If facilitating an interfaith conversation under the “community agreement” model, one would ask the group something to the effect of, “What do you need in order to get the most from this conversation?” Creating a community agreement allows for some flexibility while also establishing ground rules to ensure that whatever happens, no one will feel disrespected.

“So when should I use a community agreement?”

This is actually a little more finicky to define since the flexibility of community agreements could lend itself to many different objectives. However, the defining feature of a community agreement is the crowd-sourced aspect. When considering this model, ask yourself why allowing the collective to establish the expectations for the space would be the best option.

We’ve been discussing a lot of examples that focus on the “interfaith” aspect of “interfaith organizing,” but community agreements could be great way to set up space for the “organizing” half of the equation. For instance, picture what a brainstorming meeting for your interfaith group/council/committee would look like if it started with establishing a community agreement. This has the potential to give ownership of the space to everyone in the group so that everyone feels involved and valued right out of the gate. Does this mean community agreements can only be used in this circumstance? Certainly not! The main takeaway here, though, is to be sure that if you choose this model you’re okay with sharing the reins with the entire group.

LONG STORY SHORT...

Community agreements offer a strong sense of group ownership and shared responsibility of the space, while being able to accommodate a number of objectives.

MODEL #4

THE ONE YOU CREATE!

The list we've presented here is by no means exhaustive, and you might have an even better idea up your sleeve! These models are frameworks and are not intended to be completely prescriptive. You want to use a community agreement to help establish a safe space? Go right ahead! Would you like to have a brave space that calls out sensitivity in a way that a safe space might be inclined? I don't see why not! In the spirit of picking and choosing, we've included a list of guidelines you might want to consider for any and all of these models.

GUIDELINES

1) Dialogue, not debate

While engaging friendly (or unfriendly, as the case might be) debate has its place, it doesn't tend to be in the realm of interfaith conversations. This is not to say that we don't want folks to stand up for particular perspectives and deeply-held beliefs—absolutely do so! However, don't do so merely for the sake of argument.

2) Use "I" statements

While it's easy to slip into speaking in generalizations (e.g. "Catholics believe that," "atheists think that," etc.), it's always good practice to keep statements anchored in concrete personal experience so we don't accidentally say something that might very well be untrue of others' personal experiences.

3) Step up/step back

Ever have a conversation among a group where the same few people speak up while the same few people sit quietly? It's good practice to be aware of this and to empower people to "step up" if they haven't shared their own perspective, as well as to encourage folks to "step back" if they've had many opportunities to share.

4) Oops/ouch

Even though all of the frameworks provided for interfaith conversation avoid the possibility for anyone to feel hurt or personally offended, it happens! When it does, folks should feel free to say so (ouch), and the other party can have the opportunity to clarify meaning (oops).

5) Assume good intentions

In the spirit of guideline #4, it's possible that someone might feel offended by what another person says when engaging interfaith conversation. Even so, it helps to assume good intentions. If someone chooses to attend an interfaith conversation with their free time, odds are it's not because they have it out for anybody. Keeping this in mind brings an air of understanding to the conversation that will keep things civil and productive.

6) Controversy with civility

Think of this as a response to the common saying "agree to disagree." When we agree to disagree, difference is not engaged and is instead dismissed—therefore, no learning actually occurs. Allowing controversy with civility means that opposing viewpoints can be engaged respectfully as means to learning from one another.

7) Own your intentions and your impact

While we do expect people to assume good intentions, that doesn't mean we should disregard the fact that what we say has an impact. For example, if a cisgender person honestly shares that they don't understand how anyone can be transgender, this remark would indeed have an impact on a transgender person. Own the good intention, and own the impact it will still have on others.

8) Examine "challenge by choice"

"Challenge by choice" is the idea that participants can choose if, and to what extent, they will participate in a given activity. That's a good idea! However, we don't think the reasons someone might choose to abstain from a particular conversation should go unnoticed. If there's an interfaith conversation on, say, the #blacklivesmatter movement and you find yourself sitting quietly—why do you think that is? Think about how you can learn from these types of moments.

9) Examine "be respectful"

This whole "examination" thing is pretty hip. In this case, we still want folks to be respectful of one another (of course, right?). "Respect," though, can mean different things to different people! Let's not just glaze over the command to be respectful, but take a moment to ask ourselves what that actually looks like. Ask participants, "When people are being respectful of one another, what is happening specifically?"

10) Offer reminders during moments of challenge

If and when tensions do get high and it feels like the conversation is taking a turn, remind participants of the space that was agreed upon before the conversation began. There's no shame in saying, "Let's hit the pause button for a moment and take some time to remind ourselves of the guidelines." In a make-or-break moment of conversation, doing this allows the room to take a breath and forge ahead with both bravery and sensitivity.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Since we imagine that many of you will be using this resource to facilitate your own interfaith conversations, here's a good tip to keep in mind: know your baggage. As the facilitator for any of these models, we are indeed human beings that will bring our own baggage to each of these spaces. Picture it: you're in an interfaith conversation, and someone makes a derogatory joke about conservative Christians—and perhaps you empathize with the sentiment behind the joke! If you haven't explored your own baggage beforehand, this joke might fly under your radar, and the space is no longer welcoming for conservative Christians. On the flipside, know what issues might get your dander up and cloud your ability to effectively facilitate!

As you engage interfaith conversation on your campus, we'd love to hear what models have worked for you, challenges you've encountered, and anything else on the topic on which you might be chewing!

To share any of this or to ask questions, our digital door is always open at bettertogether@ifyc.org.

