

Religions for Peace

USA

Religions for Peace USA Interfaith Dialogue Dinner Guide: “A Seat at the Table”

A Seat at the Table are small, informal gatherings of people of all faiths and cultures who get to know one another and their faiths. *Religions for Peace USA* believes that these conversations - intentionally planned out and well facilitated - can be transformative. The opportunity to get to know your neighbor of a different faith helps to dispel misinformation and stereotypes.

What follows is a detailed instruction on how *Religions for Peace USA* imagines these dinners to be carried out. Included is the necessary information on setting up a dinner, facilitating the conversation, and follow-up with guests. It was developed as a part of the Our Muslim Neighbor initiative. For more information on that program see www.ourmuslimneighbor.org

Setting up a dinner:

1. *These dinners should not be gatherings of more than 12 individuals.* We understand that sometimes they grow larger than we anticipate and because of that strongly stress that the maximum amount of guests that can sustain a group conversation is 15.
2. If you are willing to host, extend invitations in writing or in person that clearly communicate to your guest the start time and end time, the location, and what they can expect out of the evening together. A sample description is as follows:

This is the first A Seat at the Table. We're excited to invite you to this time of food, fellowship and getting to know our neighbors of different faiths. We will provide food, and facilitate part of the conversation. We look forward to seeing you at the Home of Joe and Donna Smith, 27 Drury Lane, Syracuse NY. Dinner will begin at 5:30 PM and we'll wrap up the conversation by 9PM.

3. Once you have extended your invitations and have received your RSVPs, make sure that you have taken into consideration all dietary restrictions.
 - a. A Description of Halal and Kosher food restrictions are as follows:
 - i. **Halal** simply means permitted or lawful. So when we are talking about halal foods it means any foods that are allowed to be eaten according to the teachings of Islam. What is halal certification? This means that food has been subjected to approved certification systems that guarantee to consumers that nothing in the food has any forbidden (haram) components. What is haram? The opposite

of halal is haram. Food can be forbidden in Islam if it includes: blood, alcohol, meat or any products from a forbidden animal, including pigs and any, carnivorous animals or birds of prey, meat or any products of an animal which has not been slaughtered in the correct manner in the name of Allah

ii. **Kosher** means a certification of food, or premises in which food is sold, cooked, or eaten that satisfies the requirements of Jewish law. Those foods which are prohibited: Pigs and rabbits, Shellfish, such as lobsters, shrimp and clams, are all forbidden, as are eels, octopus, sharks, and whales, along with all birds of prey.

4. Once you have set the menu, consider the set up of the table: *it is best to have everyone around one table so that all can clearly see each other. Having nametags and place cards is very helpful.*
5. Two or three days before, make sure you remind your guests of the dinner, what time it will begin and end, and confirm their attendance.

Facilitating the conversation

1. Once your guests have arrived and the food is ready, welcome people to the table and serve them food. If it is buffet-style, welcome people to serve themselves. The important point is to make sure that people start eating!
2. **A quick caveat.** It is important to guide the conversation and offer a presence of a moderator. A couple key points here:
 - a. You have to hold the space in the room so that people understand the goals of listening to their neighbors respectfully.
 - b. It is important that we realize that the individuals in the room do not represent an entire faith tradition.
 - c. We are talking with persons not religions. Relate to “Samuel.” Not “Samuel” who speaks for all of Christianity!
 - d. Often, these conversations involve aspects of vulnerability that can make others uncomfortable. It is crucial that we:



*We need to listen and be heard - make sure to **step up** and **step back**.*

- i. *Are comfortable with silence* as a time for processing and that it does not need to be continually filled with empty words.
 - ii. Stress the *intersectionality*, the *connections* and the *similarities* peoples' experiences have with others at the table.
 - iii. *Break peoples' isolation*. Bring them into contact with other stories that can relate to their own.
 - iv. *Ask people to share stories*, and not simply facts and thoughts.
 - v. *Be okay with vulnerability*. We have to recognize that we are trying to create a space where people feel safe and validated in their beliefs and cultures.
- 3. When everyone has their food it would be appropriate to welcome them and offer an **introduction**. An example is as follows:
 - a. *We want to thank you all for being here for this "A Seat at the Table." These small gatherings are meant to bring neighbors together of all faiths and cultures in order to help build communities of trust and to form relationships. We find that sharing food and having an informal, yet deep conversation can change lives. So thank you for coming!*

- 4. Explain the plan for the night. It is important that you let your guests know how the conversation is going to flow and to **outline ground rules for the conversation**. We cannot stress enough how important it is that you clearly communicate to your guests to have this conversation in a respectful manner. An example:

- a. *What will happen for the rest of the dinner is that I (or if you are not facilitating, name the facilitator) will guide our conversation through a number of questions about what it means to be a community that is welcoming to all people of every faith and culture. In order to do this we need to set out some ground rules that will help us listen to each other.*

- i. *The first is that we cannot interrupt others as they are speaking. Please let every one speak their turn.*



Sharing stories is a great way to get people to relate in ways they otherwise wouldn't be able to: narrative ground our lives and help us to connect emotionally and intellectually.

- ii. *The second is that if you have already spoken in response to one of my questions, please let others speak before you jump in there.*
- iii. *A basic guideline is STEP UP, STEP BACK. This rule, of speaking your viewpoint and then listening to others, is crucial to making sure we have an environment that is safe and respectful for all.*

5. Pose the first questions and offer some background on why it's important

- a. There are a number of questions that you could begin with, and four are listed below. We recommend starting the conversation as the questions appear – meaning, if this is your first time, begin with the first question; but if you feel more comfortable with A Seat at the Table and its goals, go for the second. As you get more comfortable, offer the remaining questions.

- i. First questions: *What does it mean to live in a diverse community of faith and culture? What challenges and blessings does this provide us, in living in communities of faith (and no faith!) and different cultures.*

- 1. Background on question: Living with those who think and act and look exactly like us is easy. But living with others who have different experiences and different views on the world is something that is both challenging and deeply enriching. According to many scholars, the United States is now the most religiously diverse nation the world has ever seen. We are not only a country with different races and ethnicities, but of different languages, histories and for us, religious beliefs. What does this mean for your community today? Many of our co-workers, or children's friends and our neighbors are people of different religious traditions. What does this mean for our communities? This is an important question because we know that people don't all look, think and act alike. But creating a community that is truly diverse and welcoming to all diversity is something that is extremely important. So what are your thoughts? What does it mean to live in a diverse community? What challenges and blessings does this provide us?

- ii. Second question: *Over the last several years, the United States has seen a rise in Islamophobia – acts of violence based on prejudice against people of the Muslim faith and of Middle Eastern origin. What does this rise in violent activity mean for your community? If you feel unaffected by it, are there examples of times when you felt*

your own community unjustly threatened? How was that sense similar or different from the experience of persecution against Muslims in the U.S. today?

iii. Third question: *We are gathered around this table as people of different faiths and cultures – but we all share the same community. Think about what your faith and cultural identity have to offer the*

community at large – what do your neighbors at this table need to know about your faith and culture that could improve their lives or their community? This could be something small, or it could be something large.



Our religious and philosophical traditions help bring us together in unique and deep ways.

iv. Question Four: *Sharing the aspects of our faiths that are closest to us often reveal deep similarities between the world's religions. But it is important that we realize we want a community of unity, not uniformity. What aspect of your faith do you think is unique to your religion and would it benefit others to hear this from you? Can you*

listen to what is treasured most from people of other faiths, and realize that its something that is also treasured in your own tradition – what does this mean? How do we hold our differences and our similarities in tension in order to build a more welcoming community to people of all faiths and cultures?

6. Final question

a. It's important that we end on a high note in these conversations. So we recommend always ending the conversation with this final question.

i. *We know that building a welcoming, diverse community is a challenge, and that this work isn't easy. But we also know that our faiths, our families, our work do in fact give us hope! Share with others here at the table a message of hope that keeps you coming back to this table. What gives you inspiration and hope that we can overcome these challenges and truly build a diverse, welcoming community together?*

7. *Wrap up*

- a. Throughout the conversation make sure that you are watching the time – it is important that you don't have one person monopolize the conversation. It is also important that you make sure that you keep people on track and end on time. When it is close to the ending, make sure that you segue into a good closing and thank people for coming. Here is an example:
 - i. “We are getting close to our ending time, and I know that we all have plenty more to say! We hope that you enjoyed your time here together, that you felt that you got to know your neighbors a little bit more and feel that you understand what brings you together. We’re going to have to wrap it up and be respectful to your time. So thank you for coming!”

Thank you and Good Luck!



***For More information reach out to:
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