

# What activities can we do that are new and innovative?

Inter faith and belief engagement can take many forms. This includes activities such as dialogue; joint campaigning, activism and fundraising; social events; creative arts projects; academic programmes; as well as off campus or community based activities and events.

## Interfaith and belief Forums

An inter faith and belief forum can provide a place for students of different faiths to engage with each other and meet a specific need: for students' unions to increase formal engagement and representation with faith societies and their members.

Inter faith and belief forums take different forms at different students' unions depending on the specific needs and interests of those involved. Some 'forums' are relatively informal. Others aim for some degree of representation from different groups.

For example, one approach is to have a forum with representatives from each faith society (ideally two from each – one male, one female), and at least one person from the students' union (the societies, activities or welfare officer). It can also be useful to invite participation from the chaplain(s) and someone from the institution. Whatever the type of forum may be, it should model the relationships the students' unions would like to see amongst students on campus: positive, respectful and mutually engaged.

Below is a list of key things for you to consider when setting up your inter faith and belief forum and organising your first meeting:

- The students' union officer or other person responsible for convening the forum should meet with each of the representative groups before the inaugural meeting to clarify its purpose and agree the aims of the initial

meeting. This can help manage each groups' expectations of what will be achieved from the first meeting and the forum generally.

- Manage any existing or arising tensions in the meeting (or where possible beforehand). If tensions are ignored members of the forum are likely to get frustrated and stop participating.
- Communication: decide in the first meeting how members will communicate with one another between forum meetings; how they can add items to the next meeting agenda; and, how often the forum will convene.
- The convenor should follow up with everyone individually after the meeting. This is a good way to keep people engaged, check out any concerns and ask them for their feedback. In addition to the activities the forum organises for all students, you could propose that the forum members organise an activity for themselves to get to know one another. For example, visiting a place of worship or local exhibition together; or participating in some inter faith and belief training together.
- Alternatively, you could propose the members of the forum model the activities they want to see other students do.

It is important to note that while an inter faith and belief forum may be an excellent way of discussing issues students of faith have on your campus, it is unlikely also to serve as an inter faith and belief dialogue group.

## Storytelling

Sharing our real life experiences, our stories, can make a refreshing change from discussion of ideas and beliefs, and offer a very direct way to encounter the other. This is a particularly good way for students to engage in an informal dialogue setting, and can be set up as part of a simple socialising event between different faith groups on your campus.

In inter faith and belief dialogue it is far too easy to discuss topics that may put us at odds with our conversation partners. If we begin an inter faith and belief dialogue by focussing on political or theological tenants we may find that the conversation does not go very far before we start arguing about who is "right" and who is "wrong".

If however, we encourage participants to begin with a story from their own lived experience, it is often less threatening for listeners. While they may not have lived the same experience as the storyteller, it is unlikely that they will challenge the veracity of his or her story. Instead, the storyteller is inviting the listeners to share in a piece of his or her experience, even if it is grounded in different beliefs and values.

The dialogue is therefore inclusive rather than exclusive and allows for mutually appreciative encounter. Stories are a crucial tool for enabling people with different identities to interact positively.

## Tandem dialogue

[\*Conversations for the Soul\*](#) is a series of semi-structured one-to-one conversations about faith (also known as tandem dialogue). Usually a group of about 16 participants meet together for an initial meeting and induction, at which everybody finds a partner and form a pair. Over the next four to five weeks, the pairs decide a date and time to meet, once a week for about an hour. Using prompts or resources that are provided in the initial meeting the pair talk about a variety of topics or themes relating to their religion, beliefs and practices. A final group meeting is usually organised by the project facilitator/coordinator to end the

process formally and for participants to share their experiences and feedback. Usually strong friendships are formed between the pairs, or at least a better understanding and knowledge of another person's faith identity.

This is a useful approach for in-depth discussion and dialogue on topics such as balancing demands; death and immortality; doubt and keeping the faith; why bad things happen to good people; tolerance and limits, and much more.

The programme was developed by St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace using materials from Christian Kaestner and Sheffield University. St Ethelburga's Centre has worked with NUS to develop these resources for use by students and students' unions. For more information and resources please see their [website](#).

## Textual study

Some students will want to learn (or study) more about other religious traditions in greater depth. Much traditional inter faith and belief dialogue has been between religious leaders and scholars, exploring what it means from each faith tradition to encounter the 'other'. This type of inter faith and belief dialogue continues today and can include the study of religious texts and scriptures for shared understanding, discussion of broader theological considerations, and reflections on current issues of importance on a local and national level. It is possible to learn more about one another's traditions and beliefs through mutual study of sacred texts. By listening, learning, questioning and understanding one can achieve a greater depth of understanding. This kind of activity is sometimes organised by university chaplaincy teams or departments of religious studies. It can be conducted both on an academic and more informal level depending on the organisers and participants.