

Creating a Safe Space

For an authentic and meaningful dialogue between diverse groups individuals have to be placed in a welcoming and accepting atmosphere: safe space. This is particularly important when the focus is on conflict and reconciliation, or the theme is a sensitive one such as faith and belief. The perceived safety of an environment will have a direct impact on the ease with which relationships are formed and their sustainability.

What do we need to feel safe?

Some things to remember:

- **Start slowly:** Don't plunge in too deep too soon. Aim to engage participants' attention at the beginning and find creative ways for them to get acquainted and warmed up.
- **Ice-breakers:** Choose a good, imaginative, and nonthreatening icebreaker that is appropriate for the group in question. Good ice-breakers allow for depth of engagement but allow each person to choose their own level.
- **Roadmaps:** Offer a roadmap for the whole event or workshop so people know what to expect and where they are being taken. Remind people periodically of the process.
- **Practicalities:** Be clear about practicalities – for example comfort breaks, refreshments, and prayer facilities.
- **Transparency:** Be transparent - about the motivation for the event, it's purpose, and (if appropriate) where you or the students' union stand on the relevant issue.
- **Set ground rules.** Ask the group what they need to feel safe and then write up the responses and get group agreement. The ground rules are likely to be more authentic once the group is warmed up and knows one another. So it is often useful to come back to the ground rules at the start of a new session, and ask if people feel the need to add anything.
- **Feedback:** Communicate that you are endeavouring to create safe space and invite feedback about when it isn't working. Offer a clear route for participants to communicate with the facilitator. It may be difficult for participants to voice this in front of the group, so ensure that they feel they can approach you in breaks or how to contact you to voice concerns.

Ongoing factors:

- **Think it through:** Try to second guess how people might feel about each exercise and offer solutions to potential issues (e.g. translating faith-based language into something that works for those with no faith; reassuring about confidentiality at points where participants need to take risks in what they share; and offering safer alternatives for people who are new or shy).
 - **Make it voluntary:** Always offer people a choice – they can opt out if something feels uncomfortable or they can choose a less risky alternative.
 - **Avoid creating too many expectations:** Ensure participants feel that there are no expectations put on them that they will go to a particular place. Every step of the process is optional. In some exercises it may be important to stress that there are no right or wrong responses or contributions, and that they will not be judged for what they share.
 - **Language:** Pay attention to language. Acknowledge that people have different words for similar things. Invite people to translate (where necessary).
-