

## The role of a facilitator

In this area of work many activities can benefit from a facilitator who helps ensure that faith and belief engagement is rewarding and successful for those taking part. A facilitator has the authority to change the activity or topic of conversation without taking on the role of a strict authority figure. It is a role which requires a balanced and fair handling of situations; the facilitator cannot fully put aside their personal beliefs but must strive to consider the effects of what is said and done on all those present. He or she can ask questions or stimulate the activity or dialogue at particular points, but their role is predominantly listening to and observing the group, ensuring individuals are comfortable and adhering to the ground-rules.

Learning how to facilitate inter faith and belief activities and dialogue is perhaps one of the most challenging parts of organising inter faith and belief activities. Developing these skills takes time and practice, and cannot be achieved merely by reading this guidance.

Remember NUS does provide further support and training as necessary, but the best way to learn is to practice.

A facilitator has an impact on the way the group functions, if the facilitator doesn't feel safe around the topic in question or the combinations of people in the room, the group won't either.

- **Prepare:** The facilitator can improve the sense of safety they convey by preparing adequately. This could involve: getting clear about their own relationship with the issues involved; taking quiet time before the meeting starts; or running through possible scenarios that might arise and possible responses – either with a colleague or in their imagination.
- **Be a non-anxious presence:** As a facilitator, being calm, attentive, and a good listener will increase the group's sense of safety.
- **Be comfortable handling expressions of strong emotions:** Have strategies for holding and responding confidently, so that strong emotions are held and included rather than repressed.
- **Encourage good listening and openness:** Encourage participants to use 'I' statements and avoiding putting forward value judgements between faiths and beliefs of matter of fact rather than personal opinion. In inter faith and belief activity and dialogue it is important to be sensitive to when a participant's description of their religion may move from sharing of what is precious to them towards seeking to convert those present. Even if the intention is not to proselytise the appearance of doing so can make other participants uncomfortable or even upset, undermining the aims of the exercise. It is possible to help avoid situations like this by reminding as a facilitator you can open up discussion to different points of view, or by asking others to comment.
- **Model the behaviour you want to see:** If you want the group to share personal or risky things, make sure you are willing to do the same yourself. Obviously you don't want to tell them your life-story and leave no time for them, but you might need to show that you are willing to go to the place you are inviting them.
- **Flexibility:** The confidence to be spontaneous or to move with the group in unplanned directions will keep the group energy alive. Confidence is also needed to work with whatever issues and topics arise.
- **Facilitating in pairs:** This can increase the sense of holding a group, particularly larger groups. You can divide the roles in various different ways e.g. sharing the leading of different exercises, or having one person attend to process and another to content.

