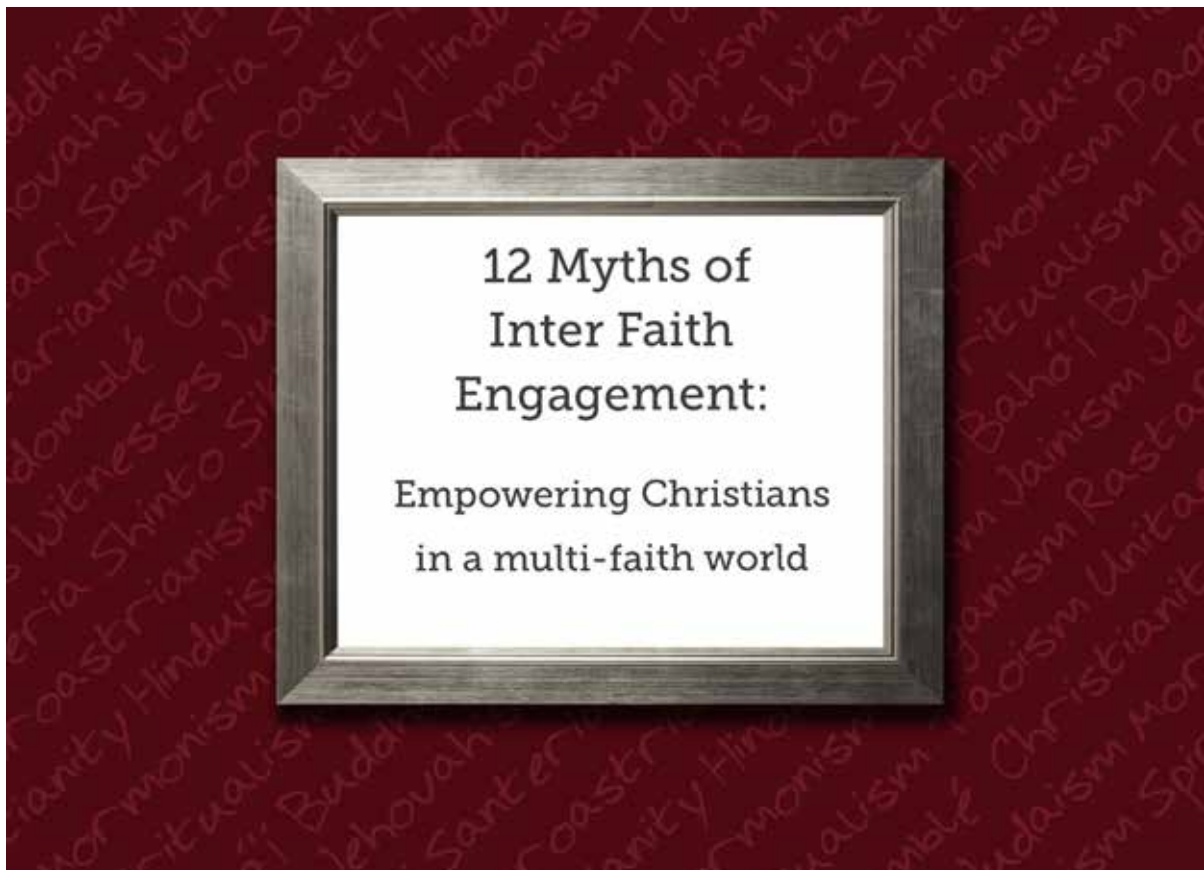


Faith and Society Files: 12 Myths of Inter Faith Engagement

Resource designed to be used in a small group setting to allow for discussion and conversation by people of all faiths or none.



Ways to use the 12 Myths sheets

This resource is designed to be used in a small group setting to allow for discussion and conversation by people of all faiths or none. You could include it in the programme for an existing small group, Christian Union or youth group; or perhaps set up a new group and invite people who enjoy a conversation, to express their point of view in a non-judgemental way. Consider that people might wonder what will happen in the group. Explain that it is a discussion group for friends to talk to friends about the issues that matter.

Preparation:

Each myth has some information to challenge the myth, followed by questions for discussion. In preparation for each session it might be helpful to read through the card before you begin.

Ground Rules:

In order to facilitate conversation there should be a few rules that each group agrees to at the beginning. Discuss them together – here are a few suggestions:

- This group will be a safe place to speak openly and honestly about what we think.
- We will listen to what each person has to say – try not to interrupt someone in full flow!
- We will try to understand fully a person's opinion before expressing our own.
- We will respect each other's point of view.
- Recognising that we will not agree about everything, we will disagree agreeably – no shouting, no aggression, no personal attacks.
- We will all learn together.

Getting Started:

There are 12 myths in total. They are numbered but can be discussed in any order. Spread the cards over a table with the myth title facing upwards. Group members could take it in turns to choose a myth for the group to discuss.

Keeping going:

You will probably find that members of your group have different levels of knowledge on this subject. Don't worry - the aim of these cards is for people to share their knowledge and explore the issues together. You may find that, as you talk, new questions come up naturally. Do not discourage this as it is important that each person feels able to contribute as much or as little as they wish. Try and encourage participation by making sure everyone gets a turn.

Leading:

As the 'host', try to avoid 'leading' too much. The host's job should be to make everyone feel comfortable, start the session and bring it to a close at a suitable point.

Wrapping up:

At the end of each week, you may choose to decide on the myth for the following week, or you may wish to let people choose again on the evening.



Myth 1:

We could never agree with people of other faiths about anything

All human beings, people of all faiths and none, experience joys and sorrows; they have a sense of what is good or evil, of fairness and justice; we share a common compassion for those in need. So it is not surprising then that every major world faith has a version of The Golden Rule. Jesus' words are well-known: *'Treat others as you would have them treat you.'* [Luke 6:31] There are many others, expressed either positively, as in Islam: *'No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself'*, or negatively, as in Confucianism: *'Surely it is a maxim of loving-kindness. Do not to others that which you would not have them do to you.'*

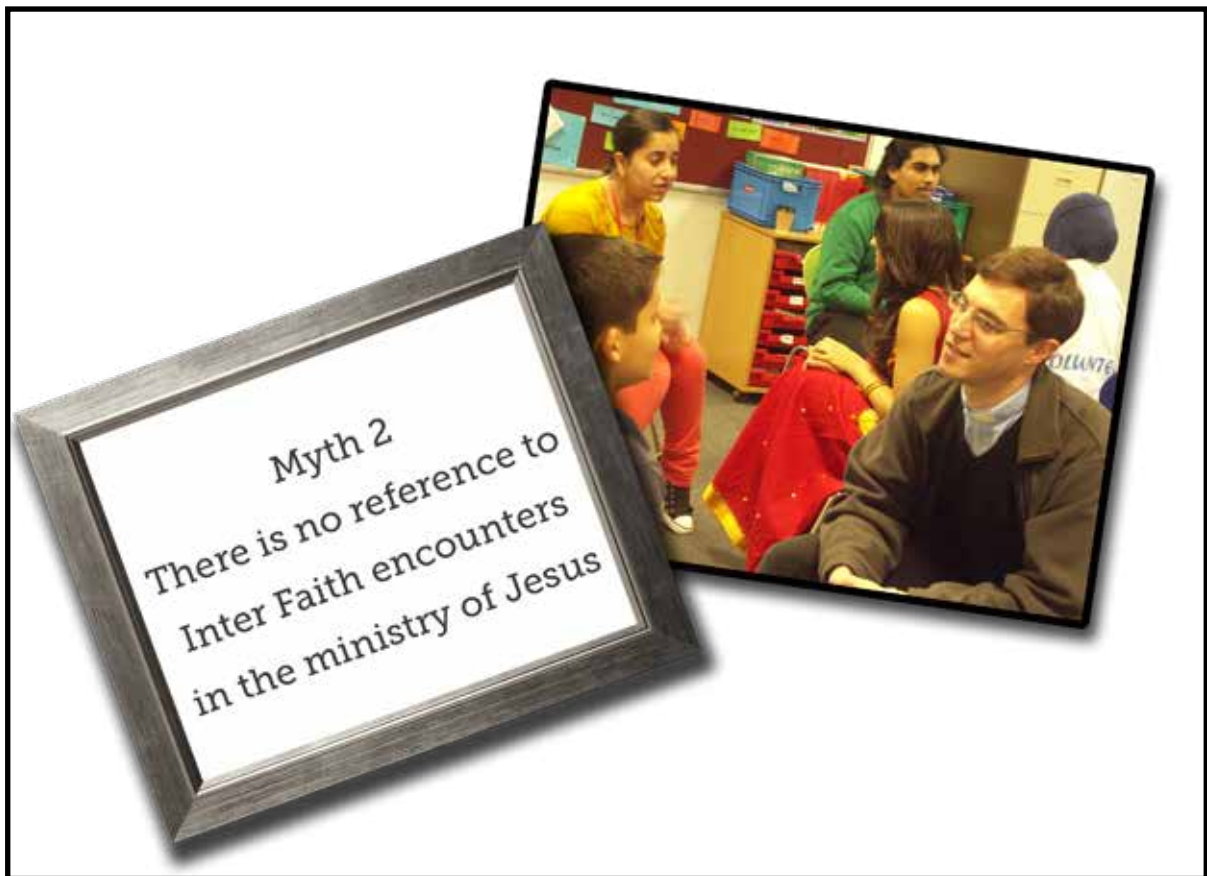
This care for others is seen when people answer appeals for help, whatever their beliefs. With a common purpose, they work more efficiently together: Islamic Relief and Christian Aid are both members of the Disasters Emergency Committee, coordinating responses to humanitarian crises.

Psalm 19:1 - *'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the works of his hands.'*

John Calvin, a leader in the Protestant Reformation, suggested that God can be known to everyone through the natural world, without knowing Jesus or believing that through him God is revealed in person. People of many faiths respond to a sense of something greater than themselves through prayer and the way they live.

To think about:

In 1986 at Assisi, Italy, five world faiths each issued a declaration committing to care of the environment based on their own beliefs. Soon three more added their statements to the 'Assisi Declarations'. Why do these faiths share a concern for the environment? What else might they have in common? In what ways are their values and beliefs similar?



Myth 2:

There is no reference to Inter Faith encounters in the ministry of Jesus

Jesus, a Jew, lived alongside the Roman occupying force which followed its own beliefs. He wandered into Samaria, where the people's beliefs, while similar in many ways to Jewish beliefs, were so different - in the view of both faith communities - as to make them enemies. Even if we didn't have any records that he did, it would have been impossible for Jesus not to bump into people of other faiths. But we know he did - so how did he respond?

Jesus selects an Inter Faith context for his most famous parable. The Samaritan, a person of another faith, is the hero, and the Jewish priest and Levite are the ones who fail to stop and help. Why should Jesus choose to answer the question: 'Who is my neighbour?' in this way?

Jesus speaks about daily life, where Roman soldiers could demand that their bags were carried: *'If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two!'* [Matthew 5:41] A potentially difficult encounter is turned into an opportunity for outrageous generosity rather than natural resentment.

What happens when a Roman Centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant? He recognises that Jesus can heal by his word of authority without even coming to his house. The greatest praise Jesus gives is to this Centurion: *'I have not found such great faith even in Israel.'* [Luke 7: 1-10]

To think about:

When the Magi came to visit him, Jesus had an Inter Faith encounter! These men respond to an 'invitation'. Is this significant? Jesus himself sometimes takes the initiative in meeting people of other faiths, sometimes he responds to events. How will we follow him?



Myth 3: **Inter Faith engagement means we sell out on our beliefs and weaken our faith**

If we engage with people who say they have no faith, does our faith weaken? We may find that we are challenged, but are we betraying our beliefs? Similarly, Inter Faith engagement often makes us think more about what we believe. This should strengthen our faith and even inspire us! It may also help us understand more about another faith community and what it stands for.

In every Gurdwara, Sikhs give, prepare and serve free food for anyone, irrespective of religious belief – 24/7 – all day, every day. Sikhs are demonstrating their belief that God values every human being equally. How do we respond to this pattern of hospitality and the faith that inspires it?

Inter Faith settings may be unfamiliar and we may not get it right first time – maybe Paul didn't? He and Barnabas were horrified when the people of Lystra started to worship them, after the healing of a lame man. Later the mood changed - some Jews arrived to stone Paul. [Acts 14:8-20] Neither response was what they wanted! So when Paul arrives in Athens he relates more carefully to this 'other faiths' place, making links to their 'unknown god' and the words of their poets. [Acts 17:16-33]

God is much bigger than our minds can grasp! God is already at work in people's lives and the Holy Spirit gives us understanding and confidence to communicate.

To think about:

Canon Andrew White, the former vicar of Baghdad, says: "Don't take care, take risks and make sure that the church is totally and utterly relevant. The reason I became a clergyman was because I was too bored sitting in the pews. There are so many churches that aren't full of life."



Myth 4:

If we engage in any Inter Faith encounter we will be contaminated

Like William and Dorothy Carey who sailed for India in 1793, Christian mission workers have lived in countries where other faiths predominate. They are not contaminated by working alongside people of other faiths. Why should time spent with people of other faiths in the UK be different? All mission involves engagement with people who have different beliefs – sometimes different religious faiths. Are we fearful of the unknown or of being overcome by dangerous, even demonic forces? Paul wrote that nothing *'will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus'*. [Romans 8:39]

God has demonstrated this through the incarnation: Jesus came to this broken world, which tried to destroy him, but failed. Encounters with other faiths might make us wary or uncertain, but they need not control us or take us over.

Was Jesus contaminated when he spent time with the woman he met at the well? [John 4] If he had been concerned, would he have gone into Samaria in the first place? As a male Jew, he should not have been speaking to an unknown, foreign woman, with a different religion and a dubious lifestyle. And yet he did, finding common ground in their discussion of worship and knowing God.

To think about:

What are we fearful of as Christians? The contamination of something entering us, or the contamination of our mind becoming confused? If we believe *'the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world'* [1 John 4:4] and Jesus' commission to go to all people groups with the gospel [Matt 28:19], what are we afraid of?



Myth 5:

Muslims are taking over the country ... we need to keep them back

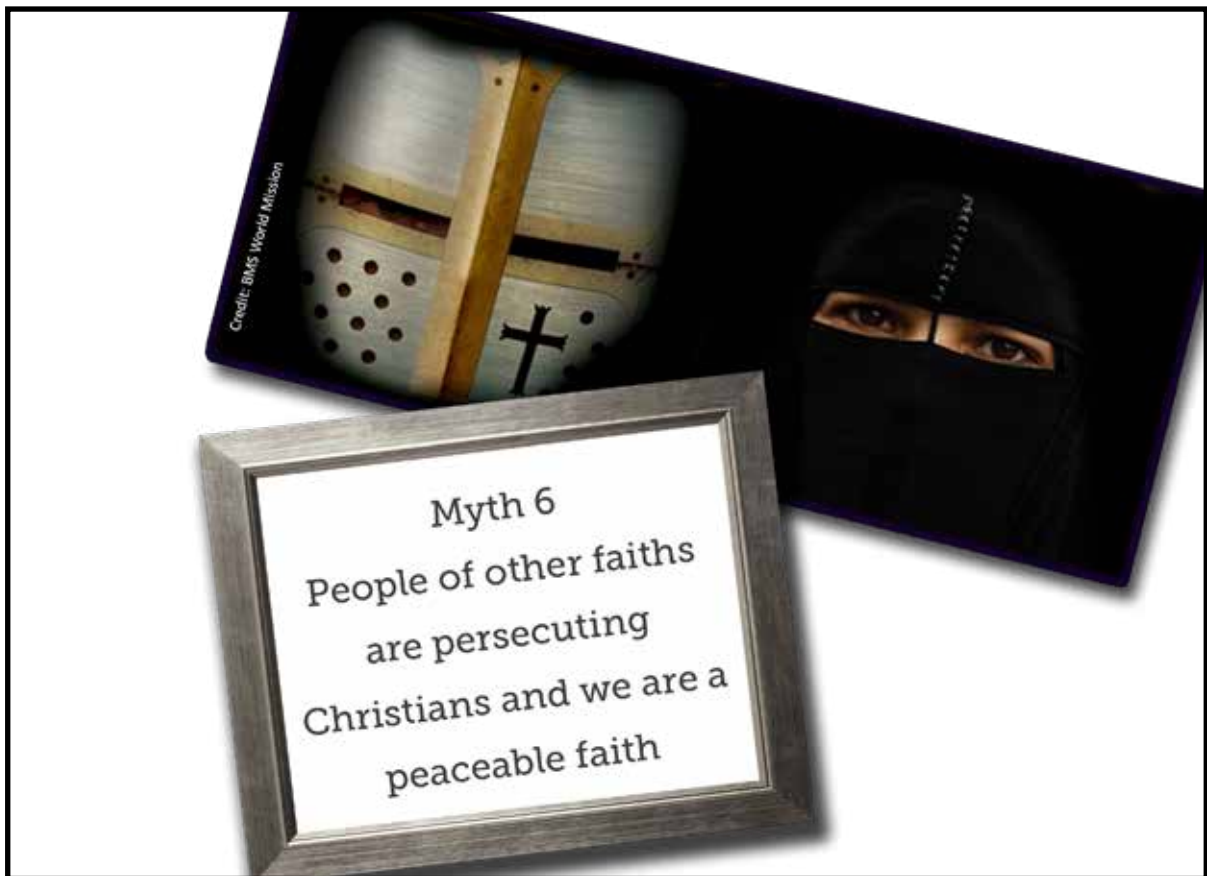
Many feel that people of other faiths, particularly Muslims, are taking over the country and that Christians are being pushed to the margins. Actually, recent statistics¹ show that Muslims make up only 4.4% of the population whilst over 59% identify themselves as Christians. Since only a small proportion of Christians attend church regularly, they may feel like a minority and lament a loss of influence. Professor Paul Weller, a Baptist involved in inter-religious relations asks, 'Might it be that we are not so much losing rights, as losing privileges?' Is that worth thinking about?

The first Christians were very definitely a minority, as many are today, yet that did not discourage them - quite the reverse! They worked hard to influence people and governments: and this privilege we had in the past should be afforded to all - of all faiths and none. Eric Pickles, MP: 'Too often communities that live side by side don't get together as often as they could to discuss and tackle the issues and challenges that matter to them most. This can lead to isolation and misunderstandings which are not healthy for local communities when, by and large, irrespective of creed or faith most people want the same thing, for their neighbourhoods to be better places to live.' In Leicester the different faiths work together to improve the city and keep faith at the heart of the city. One year people from other faiths complained that the Christians did not get their Christmas tree in the shopping centre. Instead of hostility, should we work with other faiths for common values?

To think about:

Writing to the exiles in Babylon, Jeremiah says, '*seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.*' [Jeremiah 29:7] Do we need to be reminded of God's continuing presence: that we are called to help transform the multi-ethnic society in which he has placed us alongside others? Are we abusing our majority position by keeping people of other faiths voiceless in our society?

1 Figures from 2011 Census



Myth 6: People of other faiths are persecuting Christians and we are a peaceable faith

While this is true in some parts of the world, it is equally true that some Christians are persecuting peoples of other faiths, and have done in the past. We might say those Christians are not living as Jesus would want, but they bear the name 'Christian' and are seen as aggressive. Jesus said: "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.*" [Matthew 5:9]. So, for several centuries Jesus' followers were all pacifists and were often killed for their beliefs. As Christianity became linked to the Roman Empire, Christians reasoned that they might fight for a 'just cause'. Can this justify war and violence conducted against people of other faiths, historically in the Crusades and the conquest of Latin America, and more recently 'ethnic cleansing' in Serbia?

Causes of conflict are complex: ethnic groups struggling for power, land and resources may have different religious identities, without religion being the root cause. In their book *The Pastor and the Imam – Responding to Conflict*, former enemies James Wuye and Muhammed Ashafa show how the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum, which they founded together in Nigeria, uses teaching from the Bible and the Qu'ran to promote peace, rather than intensify conflict and persecution.

To think about:

There are people in all faiths, including Christianity, who are persecuting people of other beliefs. What examples can you think of within Christianity of this being true? If we truly believe that each religion is about peace, how do we make this known? How do we deal with violent extremists from all religions and expose them as not holding to the true values of their faith?



Myth 7: Other faiths only engage in Inter Faith relations to convert us!

Maybe some Christians only engage in Inter Faith relations to convert those of other faiths!

Because Christianity is a faith that seeks to convert people we might think that people of all other faiths want to convert us. This is not the case. Some Muslims do. Others, such as Hindus and Jews, generally do not.

Paul clearly wants to convert the Athenians: commenting on the altar 'to an unknown god', he says, "*Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you*". [Acts 17:23] But, as Jews, the apostles were wary of such a 'mission' imperative involving witnessing to the Gentiles. Without a vision from God, Peter would not have visited the home of Cornelius, a Roman! [Acts 10]

As freedom of religion is a human right, can we be honest and open? Julian Bond, former Director of the Christian-Muslim Forum writes: '... how happy would we be if Hindus and Buddhists really understood our faith ... and wanted to know more about Jesus?' Knowing how important our own call to be missionary disciples is, can we understand and respect those of other faiths who honestly feel the same about their beliefs? Might this be one way in which we 'love our neighbours as ourselves'?

To think about:

Does our insecurity arise from a lack of confidence in our own faith? Refer to the Guidelines at: www.christianmuslimforum.org/downloads/Ethical_Guidelines_for_Witness.pdf



Myth 8: Inter Faith engagement only relates to major world faiths

What are the major world faiths – and how many are there? Maybe six - Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism; others would add Zoroastrianism, Bahá'í Faith and Jainism, and more. If none of these, apart from Christianity, is visible in an area, is there no faith diversity and is 'Inter Faith engagement' irrelevant? How would we know that someone had a different faith? It is often not possible to tell merely by appearance exactly what someone believes. While a neighbourhood might seem, at least nominally – and only – 'Christian', a look beneath the surface might dispel this idea. Every individual has a world view or belief, including those with no religious identity.

There may be anxiety about engaging with people whose faith is unfamiliar. In Athens Paul was troubled at first when he saw the number of idols, but he found common ground within the prevailing culture of the people. Building bridges may require some investigation into another faith. By talking to people you find out what is important to them – and discover shared values.

Having established that people of other faiths live close by, how far do we go in engaging with them? Some world views take us outside our comfort zone, because they are so different in belief and practice. Yet people are attracted by them, especially if major faiths seem remote from their own experience – and fighting among themselves! Paganism, with its concern for the environment, can be very attractive – as can many New Religious Movements. Do we ignore or exclude them because they are strange or unknown?

To think about:

If we fail to explore, understand and value the beliefs within our communities, are we ignoring the value of each human life?



Myth 9: God only works through Christians

God, the Creator, made people in his own image, male and female. In Psalm 8 this unique status becomes a source of wonder: *'What are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?'* No one people group or faith community is specified – the psalmist speaks of humans receiving God-given stewardship; human potential is part of his design. People continue to fulfil this task, however inadequately, whether they recognise God's authority personally or not.

Throughout the Bible there is evidence of God's presence and activity among all people, in spite of the 'chosen people' wishing it were otherwise. Jonah finds it so difficult to grasp that God is concerned about Nineveh that he runs away. When he finally obeys and the Ninevites respond, with the people leading the people, Jonah is furious that God has shown compassion on this non-Jewish people.

Cyrus, king of Persia, becomes God's agent to initiate the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, calling on anyone who can support the returning exiles to do so. [Ezra 1:1-8] Today voices from other faiths are equally active. Dr Taj Hargey, chairman of Oxford's Muslim Educational Centre, writing in the *Daily Mail* defended the right of a Christian nurse to wear a cross at work: *'As a Muslim, I am filled with despair at the attitude of our politically correct officials towards Christianity. For me, all true religious faith, if practised with benevolence and humility, can only strengthen our society. To undermine religion is to undermine society itself.'*

To think about:

Most faiths are involved in relief initiatives where they make a difference to communities throughout the world. Is this a sign of God working among them?



Myth 10:

The Inter Faith agenda seeks to make one world religion

Each faith has distinctive beliefs which make it unique and set it apart from others. Sometimes politicians are encouraging a single religious response in communities by trying to promote single multi-faith buildings in planning, and multi-faith worship as part of civic occasions. The people of faith who are engaging in Inter Faith work are seeking to bring about a mutual respect and celebration of the others. Unfortunately, the media often does not understand this aim.

For Baptist Christians, freedom of religion underpins their very origins. In 1612, Thomas Helwys wrote, 'For men's religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.' [Mystery of Iniquity] This was an amazing statement for the time, for which Helwys was sent to prison, where he died. It remains a challenging one today.

While we do not agree with other faiths, we are called to respect and understand their genuine search for meaning in life beyond themselves. Baroness Warsi shows this – as a Muslim – speaking of Christianity: "The societies we live in, the cultures we have created, the values we hold and the things we fight for all stem from centuries of discussion, dissent and belief in Christianity."

To think about:

Respect and understanding are actions not just words! How can '*Loving your neighbour as yourself*' become evident in Inter Faith relationships? How might giving and receiving cards and gifts at key festivals demonstrate a readiness to recognise faith and celebrate diversity?



Myth 11: Being involved in Inter Faith activity means we have to worship together

Harmonised worship is not an aim that most would seek. Can we distinguish between being together to pray, and praying together? While it is possible to recognise that a desire to worship is a response to something outside ourselves, there are differences in understanding the purpose and practice of worship. These differences need not prevent people of different faiths from praying about the same concerns; for example, responses to tragic events, or for good community relations. When relationships of understanding and trust have built up, friends of different faiths will naturally want to pray for each other, especially in times of personal, or family, illness or tragedy.

In his discussion with the woman at the well, Jesus recognises that the Samaritans worship, but in a different way and in a different place. His emphasis is on worship in the future which will be in spirit and truth. The Psalms were part of Jesus' worship experience and remain a central part of Jewish and Christian liturgies today.

There is a difference between respectful observation and participation. There are examples of instances where Christians have been to a mosque to observe Muslim prayer and Muslims have been to a church to observe Christian worship.

To think about:

The Birmingham Faith Group, which began after 9/11 following threats to the Muslim community, called faith communities to prayer after the 2011 riots: "As people of faith we call on you to pray for peace, to pray for those affected by destruction and greed and to pray for those, including the police, working round the clock to maintain the rule of law, care for the distressed and rebuild damaged businesses." Is there a difference between worship and prayer? Would either of these be more or less appropriate in different contexts?



Myth 12: **We can't work alongside people of other faiths**

This may be the way we look at things – but is it God's way? When disaster strikes, people come together, whether to respond to an overseas or local emergency. Can we explore what this means?

Some missionaries work with other faith communities on the basis of shared values and find that this expands their thinking. David Kerrigan, BMS World Mission Director, wrote in his blog: '... how does this kind of mission affect your theology? This is a favourite of mine – seeing again and again how our once watertight doctrinal formulations leak like a sieve once we actually sit down and get to know the kind of people our theology sometimes alienates.' *Thinking Mission* - 23 October 2011

Christians are called to be salt and light in society and we cannot be such if we don't mix! We will certainly be outside our comfort zone. If we emphasise what unites us rather than what divides us, such as the Golden Rule, then we will find ourselves among friends even if they are not followers of Jesus.

To think about:

Rick Warren (author of *Purpose-Driven Church*), addressing a Muslim convention called on Muslims and Christians to work together to create respect, restore civility to civilization, promote peace and tackle major world problems. "Tolerance is not enough. People don't want to be tolerated, they want to be respected, they want to be listened to. They want to be valued... I am interested in interfaith projects." Are you interested?

What Next?

Hopefully, after you have discussed all 12 myths, the group will have an increased knowledge of other faiths and how to engage with them.

Why not arrange a final session to explore how group members can use what they have learned to make a real difference in your community?

Why not arrange to meet with people of other faiths or visit their place of worship?

If you decide to explore this topic further there are other resources available at:

www.baptist.org.uk/interfaith

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