

# Why You Need to Develop Interfaith Relationships

In reflecting on the question of interfaith relationships, I must acknowledge that I have the most experience and feel the most urgency in the relationship among the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Though I took a seminary course in contemporary Judaism, for most of my ministry my contact with the Jewish community was minimal and infrequent.

Then, when the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum advertised a week of study on the theme, "Christianity and the Holocaust: Asking the Hard Questions," my seminary nominated me to be part of the interfaith group of 15 scholars.

We considered some little-known, painful aspects of Christian history that influenced the various steps that led to the Holocaust.

One of the expectations was that participants use our learnings in our own educational work.

Because I did not teach any courses on Judaism, Holocaust studies or comparative religion, I decided to prepare a general lecture for my seminary as well as a series of sessions to share with area congregations, Christian or Jewish.

At about the same time, Rabbi Alan Cohen, who had just retired from a local conservative synagogue, contacted me.

He was creating an interfaith clergy group and asked me to serve on his board. I eagerly agreed, and our subsequent work together broadened my believing world.

My deepening relationship with persons in the Islamic community also came as the result of a vocational assignment.

Before that, I was aware of the fear and hysteria about Muslims in the wake of 9/11 and other terrorist attacks.

Somehow, this did not square with the times of devout prayers in mosques I observed during a trip to Egypt, nor with what I saw in the Muslim nation of Indonesia while on sabbatical.

The few U.S. Muslims I knew personally were professionals providing valuable services in the community. I was at a loss for how to proceed in learning more.

Then, in 2007, a large group of Islamic scholars reached out to the major Christian bodies of the world with a document titled "[A Common Word](#)."

It was an invitation, bearing dozens of signatures, to engage in dialogue around the two great commandments: love God and love your neighbor.

Various religious bodies, including the Baptist World Alliance, responded in turn with conferences, conversations and documents.

American Baptists held a dialogue event with Islamic scholars at Andover Newton Theological School in Newton, Massachusetts.

Afterward, denominational leaders felt this discussion should be extended in other parts of the country.

Central Baptist Theological Seminary, where I taught, was asked to create such a Muslim-Baptist dialogue in the Midwest. I was tasked with chairing the event.

I was to recruit a planning committee and develop the committee's fellowship and trust so we could effectively facilitate the event. The only stipulation was that both Muslims and Baptists be involved.

Thus, began my search for the planning committee. I approached prospective members and invited (or persuaded) them to participate.

Because we discovered the best meeting time was between work and evening

events, we decided to share dinner as we talked.

By so doing, we learned what foods were appropriate for all and which caterers could meet our joint requirements. Our meeting schedule also included time for Isha, the sundown prayers of Muslims.

A year and a half later, we held our Muslim-Baptist dialogue day. Coincidentally, we gathered shortly after the bombing at the Boston Marathon.

We began with a generous meal that all participants could enjoy, and then continued with presentations and guided conversations, with Muslims and Christians at every table. More than 100 people, who had never participated in such interfaith discussions before, filled the room.

That event was vital in helping participants move into our larger believing world. I believe even more significant was the deepened trust and friendship that developed among those of us who planned the event.

Such moments of peace and growing mutual understanding are significant in our troubled world.

Persons commit vicious and violent acts, often claiming their faith motivates them. Suspicion of others grows, and retaliation takes various shapes and forms.

Public policies are based on our worst suspicions of the other – policies about military engagement, immigration, travel and more.

Places of worship are vandalized. Students (even children) and co-workers are subjected to suspicion and harassment when another act of violence occurs.

We must learn to think clearly about who is responsible for such events, and, even more important, who is not. We need to get to know one another, to form authentic relationships, to build the rudiments of trust.

I seek to do so as a Christian, molded by Jesus' love for me and the world and

striving to follow his example and teachings.

As I read the gospels anew - seeking to see Jesus in his own interreligious world - I find passages jumping out at me, leading me to new insights.

I see Jesus teaching, healing and providing for people from wide geographical areas.

He responded compassionately to diverse people, including Romans, Canaanites and Samaritans - all groups with long histories of political and religious conflict with Jews.

As we consider the fast-changing religious scene of our day, we are called to explore Christ-like ways of relating and conversing with others whose religious (and spiritual-but-not-religious) beliefs differ from our own.

It won't always be comfortable, but the invitation is compelling, and the need is real if we want to take Jesus' example seriously in an increasingly multifaith world.

✘ *Richard P. Olson is retired from Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas, where he was distinguished professor of pastoral theology. Olson chaired the planning committee for the ABCUSA-sponsored Midwest Baptist-Muslim Dialogue event. He has authored 17 books with various publishers.*

*Editor's note: This article is excerpted and adapted from the introduction in Richard P. Olson's book, "Side by Side: Being Christian in an Interfaith World" (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2018), which is available [here](#).*