

Faithful Living Workshops

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A Handbook

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Based on the
Living Faithfully Workshops Pilot Project (2002-2003)
And the two consultations on
Living Faithfully in the United States Today
Of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research

What Is a 'Faithful Living Workshop'?

Many people feel that inter-faith dialogue is beyond them. They think of it as something involving experts, or requiring advanced degrees; it does not strike them as an activity for which they are prepared. Often, public events that focus on inter-religious relations or inter-faith dialogue reinforce this perception. Many people decide, "If that's what it takes, I can't do it!"

But there are other ways to enter into inter-faith relationships. Sharing a time of living together is one such way. Another way is the way of story telling, of giving a first person account of one's own life, and receiving the same from others. In these approaches to inter-faith dialogue, academic or professional expertise, or advanced religious training, offers no advantage.

A Faithful Living Workshop is a way for a limited number of people from a variety of traditions to spend three full days living and sharing their stories together.

Those who participate will share meals and other aspects of daily life in a residential conference center or retreat setting. They will have time to take walks or to exercise together, to talk over shared food, to watch a sunrise or hear an owl with each other. They will have the opportunity to be present to observe each other's ritual and prayer practices.

In a series of structured sessions, they will also engage each other in exploring what is involved in trying to live as a person of faith — as a Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, Jew, etc.--in the society we share in these United States. They will tell their own stories of trying to be faithful members of their traditions, in words or through other means, and listen to each other with care. Based on this mutual sharing, they will then explore together the issues, concerns and interests that have emerged as most pressing or important to them, to their religious communities, and in the common life of the area in which they live.

What Can Such A Workshop Accomplish?

The main goal of a Faithful Living Workshop is to foster personal relationships of some depth among a diverse group of people who come from the different religious communities in a particular place. Bonds of inter-religious trust and respect are begun, or deepened, among Workshop participants. They come to know each other as struggling and faithfully committed human beings.

Connecting with one another at this level of shared humanity, workshop participants become witnesses of one another's lives, and often, then, begin to learn how to be caretakers of one another's stories. Just as their own stories have been received and

valued, they want to listen to the stories of others with open hearts and minds, and to tell the stories of the others faithfully. As a result, the participants' ability to reach across religious boundaries at times of conflict or stress is strengthened. The personal relationships they have built may enable them to work together more readily to solve social problems, and can be the basis for a variety of later contacts and initiatives.

Those who take part also learn a model of communication that is rooted in respectful listening, or non-judging attentiveness, and in first-person story telling. They will be able to use this model in building healthy communities of diversity. The model of sharing and listening allows the group to bring up and explore problems, ideas and issues that they care about in the context of personal, lived experience. This beginning encourages progress in wrestling with such matters together.

By intention, the Workshop is not structured with the idea that it will lead to a pre-determined outcome. Workshop organizers do not try to decide in advance what will be most important or beneficial to discuss. The conversation of the group is allowed to set the agenda and to move it forward. Our experience has convinced us that the approach of personal sharing or story telling allows people to be more expansive and to identify for themselves the issues that are of immediate and real concern to them.

As the process unfolds, participants usually begin to see that greater knowledge and understanding of one another will promote a healthier, less dysfunctional, community. Although they may come with no intention to build relationships of a continuing nature, participants often become supporters of the efforts of people in other traditions to live faithfully within their traditions.

Each Workshop concludes with a time for conversation about what the group might want to do next. Here again there is no pre-set outcome: Participants may want to involve more people in similar experiences of sharing and conversation. They may want to do a community project together. Or they may want to meet again after a certain period of time, to let the relationships that have been begun grow, and what they have learned mature, before considering more active steps.

All who take part will at least have the opportunity to stay in contact with one another, through the local host/organizers, and by other means they devise, such as a web group, a shared listserv, etc.

Why Focus on Living Faithfully?

People in all religious traditions ask, "How do I live in fidelity to my own religious tradition? Through what practices and in light of which ideas am I a _____ (Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jew, Muslim, etc.)?" We have found that sharing

experiences, insights and concerns related to this question is personally and spiritually significant, and can lead in many directions. It is a good question with which to begin.

The word “faithful” itself, however, is not used in all religious traditions. The use of the word in these workshops is maintained because of its many meanings and connotations: When a husband and wife are loyal to one another and steadfast in the vows they have made to each other, they are “faithful.” The life of a monastic, or any member of a religious order who takes formal vows, is measured by “faithfulness” to those vows. An accurate accounting of facts or a carefully reproduced rendition is “faithful” to the original event or occurrence. For those who believe in the God who reveals and makes promises, “faith” means primarily to trust in God who speaks the truth; the “faithful” are those who live in accordance with God’s word. “Faith” is an act of a person or a community, a quality of believers, a term for a religious tradition, a statement of beliefs, and much more. In religious communities that do not refer to faith in God, practitioners put their trust in spiritual guides, their teachings, or insight into a reality greater than any individual’s conditioned ideas. This style of life also requires “faithfulness” in intentional practice.

Because we live in the United States, the question of faithful living has an additional dimension. To ask, “How do we live faithfully in the United States today?” is to ask not only about our religious lives, but also about our lives as Americans.

Does America, a place of many cultures and religions, truly value religion and the contributions of particular religious groups? Religion often seems pushed out of the public sphere and into our private lives. Citizenship is what is expected in the public realm. But such a division between private and public, according to many members of religious communities, often allows less important values to obscure the religious convictions and ideals that they want to use to define the common good. While privacy of faith may allow each of our religious communities to thrive separately, American society as a whole impinges on every community.

The interaction of cultures, ethnicities and religious beliefs and practices in the history of the United States is also connected to the development of a unique tradition of religious freedom here. This tradition, even though imperfect and marked by mistakes, failures, and violations, has been enormously influential throughout the world. Our understanding of religious freedom continues to evolve, and often comes into conversation about living faithfully in our time and place

For these reasons, the Workshop begins with an initial question that gives participants room to consider how we can live faithfully, according to our deepest religious convictions, in this pluralistic society.

We suggest the following as a first question: “When in my experience living in (your city or town) has it been very difficult to be faithful to my religious tradition, and when has living here especially aided me in being faithful to my religious tradition?”

Or, if you prefer an alternative with more emphasis on individual practice, consider: “What would I have to do, or stop doing, to consider that I am no longer living faithfully in continuity with my religious tradition?”

The Process of the Workshop

The workshop uses group definition of issues, small-group conversation, and techniques for the safe exploration of conflicts that arise, but it is essentially rooted in story telling. It may be helpful to think of it as **an unfolding exploration that begins with the sharing of the participants’ own stories**. This time of sharing and listening leads to reflecting together on what all have heard and said, and to identifying and analyzing the issues being raised. Then participants again turn to one another for stories and experiential insights that shed light on those concerns. A rhythm and way of working with one another takes shape.

In developing this Workshop model, we identified four phases or aspects of the process of sharing it employs. We believe these four “steps” describe elements of the experience participants may have in the Workshop. They also mark four identifiable movements in the process of entering into an exploration of living faithfully together.

1. Story telling: This is a way of introducing and opening ourselves to one another. Our sharing of our own stories allows us to “speak ourselves” into our own religious traditions, and to see and hear the connections among our religions and religious communities in new ways through the stories we share.

2. Framing important issues and key questions: Questions arise in all our minds as we listen to one another sharing our individual efforts to live faithfully in this multi-religious society. We naturally reach out to one another for help as we attempt to identify and express the major concerns and questions we have as people trying to live faithfully in our particular area.

3. Addressing fears, prejudices, and isolation: Fears, hurts, misunderstandings, and feelings of uneasiness also arise in story telling and framing issues and questions together. Disagreements, differences of opinion and views, gaps in our understanding of one another, partly or fully revealed pains and fears arise. We feel vulnerable with one another, and, in many cases, are drawn closer together. At the same time, this sharing of feelings and issues tests the group’s willingness to get along with each other, despite

reactions we may have to what we are hearing. We may find that we have serious questions or disagreements over questions of religious practice and the history of relations between our religions, both here in the United States and elsewhere.

4. Celebrating each other's joys and building mutually supporting relationships: Through the process of ever-deepening sharing, it is not surprising to reach a point at which we want to continue in community with each other. Our desire and intention become to live as friends who are comfortable recognizing one another's sources of joy and happiness and able to respond with support for one another. We begin to think about ways to build relationships, networks or communities that will uphold our full commitment to our own religious practices and also our interconnectedness and supportive friendship with each other.

If you do not see each of these phases in your particular Workshop, or you encounter them in an order or manner very different than what is described here, do not be alarmed. Each Workshop, like every gathering of people, is unique. These are aspects of the process that are likely, but not required.

(Before the Workshop begins, please look at the section on story telling at the end of this handbook.)

Getting Ready to Organize a Faithful Living Workshop

Four "ingredients" are essential to organizing a Workshop:

1. You or others on your organizing team will need to have knowledge of the diversity of religious communities in your area, and personal knowledge of people in those communities, in order to know whom to invite to the Workshop.

As you begin to plan, you or your team will need an accurate picture of the religious diversity of your area. This will help you determine how many religious traditions, or "families" (such as the Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, etc.), you can include, and the diversity within each of those traditions that is represented where you live.

You need to be able to invite individuals whom you know, or who are known by trustworthy persons, in order to be sure you are inviting people who are ready to take an active and open part in this kind of workshop. (See the section on "Who To Invite" below.)

2. You will need to find a residential setting at which to hold the Workshop. Since the dimension of shared living is an essential part of the design, the setting should not be a hotel, nor a congregation, but a conference center or retreat at which participants will live more closely together.

The facility should be able to plan meals that are sensitive to the dietary restrictions of all participants (completely vegetarian or "vegan" menus often suffice). It should have a comfortable meeting space for the whole group, as well as smaller rooms for any small-group discussions you may have. A space suitable for meditation, prayer and other spiritual practices is a requirement. Such a facility in a more quiet and natural environment is ideal.

3. Your team should include one or more persons with experience facilitating the kind of personal sharing and group-driven discernment processes that are involved in the Workshop. Facilitators need not be professionals, but the Workshop's success depends, in large part, on a facilitator (or, better, facilitating team) who can be both effective as time-keeper and conversational "traffic cop," and also able to invite and enable sharing and group process.

4. Give yourself enough time! You will have to plan well in advance to secure the kind of facility you want, and to get the Workshop on the calendars of the participants you want to invite.

Who To Invite

The people who come together for the Workshop can be religious leaders, or thoughtful practitioners of a tradition. They can come from a wide variety of occupations, and from many different backgrounds. In general, aim for the greatest diversity of people you can, keeping in mind the following guidelines:

1. Given the limited time-frame of the Workshop, it is essential to limit the number of participants to 17 or 18, including the facilitator(s). Sharing by each of the participants takes time, and should not be rushed; a larger number could easily limit the group's progress.

2. Make sure that each religious tradition from which participants will be invited has two or three persons who will attend. This will ensure that each participant is accompanied by at least one other person from her/his own tradition. Do not force anyone into the position of being the lone voice of a religion! Having two or three people from each invited tradition also allows you to look for people who come from different strands or "denominations" within each tradition, in order to include some of the internal diversity of the religious communities involved.

3. But also try to maintain some correspondence between the number of participants from any one tradition and the relative size of that religious community in your area. If there are more Muslims than Buddhists where you live, try to invite more Muslim than Buddhist participants. Since Christians are still a majority in all

U.S. communities, your largest single group of participants will be drawn from the spectrum of Christian traditions.

Settling on the traditions you want to include in the Workshop, and the numbers to be invited from each, can be complicated. In many cases, you will not have room to include all groups. For example, if you decide that, in your community, you need to involve 3 Buddhists, 6 Christians, 2 Hindus, 3 Jews and 3 Muslims, you will not have two vacancies left for any other, smaller group in your area (such as Bahai'is or Sikhs). It might be more important, in terms of building your community, to add a Spanish-speaking Christian. (To our longer [5-day] national consultation we invited 23 participants [including the facilitating team] of many ethnic and cultural backgrounds: 3 Buddhists, 7 Christians, 3 Hindus, 4 Jews, 4 Muslims, and 2 Native Americans.)

Remember that your goal should be to invite a diverse and representative group of participants from those religious traditions with a significant presence in your area, rather than to include someone from each group that is present.

4. Invite individuals whose engagement with their own religious community is important to them. Again, these need not be religious authorities or “experts.” Everyone who comes is considered a peer; no one’s voice or story is given any more privilege than any other’s. Choose people who are willing to talk about religious and spiritual issues, even though they might feel some hesitancy to do because of cultural or social expectations. Be sure that those you invite are also willing and able to listen.

The people who gather need to have, at minimum, a curiosity about one another and a predisposition to learn rather than to argue or instruct. As one participant put it, the Workshop offers time “not simply to talk, but to look into each other's eyes.” It is not a forum in which to debate matters of belief, nor to convince one another of an idea or path. Those who come need to be ready to ask, “Who is this person so seemingly different from me?”

Making Your Invitations

In order to make your invitations to a Living Faithfully Workshop, you and your team need first to

- Develop for yourselves a clear and comfortable way to present the workshop, your hopes for it, and (if relevant) how it fits with other initiatives or plans;
- Determine the site(s) and dates for your Workshop;
- Arrive at a clear understanding of Workshop leadership (who will facilitate, who is making logistical arrangements, etc.; and

- Put together a list of invitees by traditions and the diversity within them, with "back-ups" in the likely event that some of your first choices will be unable to attend.

The next step is to send letters of invitation to your "first choice" list, well in advance of the time you want to hold the Workshop. Ask for a decision from those invited within 3 to 4 weeks. A sample invitation letter is included on p. 9.

7-10 days after you send the letters, call to extend your invitations personally, answer questions, clarify the purpose of the Workshop, etc. When someone on your invitation list agrees to participate, send a letter of confirmation, reminding them of the dates, and letting them know that you will send travel details and other information a month before the Workshop will be held. Ask confirmed participants to inform you of any specific mobility, health or dietary needs.

One month before the Workshop convenes, send the second letter with details about how to get to the conference or retreat center, and about the schedule. Include a firm reminder that all participants are expected to arrive at the beginning of the Workshop and stay through the end. Let them know how family members and others can reach them in the event of an emergency. Tell them how glad you are that they are coming!

Dear _____:

Greetings! I/We hope this letter finds you well. [A sentence or so reminding the participant of your connection to them, or telling them how or through whom you have come to write to them]

I/We hope that you will be able to take part in a multi-religious gathering on [dates], to be held at [name of site].

This “Living Faithfully Workshop” will bring together 18 persons from 6[or 5] religious traditions, for 72 hours to share with each other about how they are learning to live in fidelity to their own religious traditions in contemporary American society. The focus question is, “What is involved in living faithfully in this time and in our place?”

The [your institution or group] will bring this group from many religious traditions together for a time of sharing that is different from the traditional inter-religious dialogue.

Our conversation will be conducted primarily through sharing our own experience of the topic in the first person, and through careful listening to one another. We will not have a detailed agenda prescribed in advance, but will let the group’s interests and interaction guide our exploration. We will make use of structured time for sharing and listening, small group discussion, and individual writing or creative response. No one will be invited as an “expert,” nor will there be any formal papers or presentations to prepare; each person invited, whether or not professionally involved as a religious leader, will have equal status and an equal right to take part in this sharing. No attempt will be made to determine the outcome of the Workshop in advance; that too will be allowed to take shape out of our coming together.

Every religious community is confronted by a thousand challenges as we all try to adjust to today’s realities, while maintaining continuity with our traditions. Each of our traditions stand to learn a great deal from the ways in which others have “kept the faith” while also keeping in touch with the world around them. In our time, when there is widespread loosening of the ties binding people to their religious traditions and institutions, clarifying our experience of maintaining those ties is of public significance. Making clear the ways in which our efforts to be true to our own traditions are also related to living side by side in our pluralistic society is also important.

[Add a paragraph about any hopes your institution has for the gathering]

Facilitators for the workshop will be _____ from _____. All expenses other than your travel to the conference site will be paid for. Because of the nature of the Workshop, we cannot accept part-time participation. We will begin at 3:00 p.m. on _____, and conclude at 3 p.m. on _____ .

I/We hope you can take part in this Workshop on living in faithfulness to our own traditions, and in relation with one another. If you can attend, please contact me/us {method, numbers, etc). And please call if you have any questions, or need more information.

Workshop Structure

In order to make the most of this workshop, a clear but flexible schedule is important. The model we have developed uses three full days, with three nights spent together (a bit more than 72 hours), and a planned rhythm of personal sharing, conversation and relaxation. If you need to develop an alternate structure (suggestions below), try to preserve the amount of time that the group will spend together – less time than this will begin to impede the deepening of relationships that is the workshop’s goal.

You will see that at a number of points during the workshop, the gathered community, with the help of the facilitators, makes decisions about what issue or topic to explore next, and how to do that (i.e., through small groups, free-flowing sharing, writing or artistic response, or another method). This means that the actual flow of your Workshop may look quite different than what is outlined here.

This outline is based on prior experience, and guided by the principles of safeguarding adequate time

- 1) for intentional sharing/listening,
- 2) for interaction;
- 3) for personal reflection and spiritual practice, and
- 4) for socializing.

Allowing time for all of these activities is more important than following any pre-set plan. In other words, feel free to adapt and improve on this schedule!

Thinking about other scheduling possibilities for a Faithful Living Workshop:

- Relationships take time to develop, and are enhanced by getting to know one another in a variety of ways – in intentional conversation, in talking over meals, by sharing an activity, and to a surprising extent by time spent together in a shared living space. In any alternative structure, consider how to include as many of these elements as possible.
- We found in this pilot project that a valuable depth of connection and conversation is lost if the time together is cut to less than 72 hours. We also learned that having the time spent together be sustained, rather than broken into short and separate segments, leads to more significant connections.
- Consider adapting this model by inviting participants to an overnight retreat, followed in a month by a second overnight retreat. Or, combine a two-night retreat, beginning with dinner on day 1 and ending with dinner on day 3, followed in a few weeks or a month by another full day together.
- It might also work to schedule 4-8 weekly gatherings in a row, from 9 am to 9 pm, although maintaining continuity between them (and consistent attendance!) would be a challenge.
- If nothing else, try exploring faithful living, or any other question, beginning with first person story-telling and listening, then moving into conversation, allowing the insights and questions of the group to lead the exploration forward!

Model Outline of a Workshop (with notes)

Day 1 (perhaps a Friday):

Arrival and check-in.

3:30 Introduction to the Workshop, and brief self -introductions (2-3 minutes each)

Introducing the initial question:

When in your experience living here has it been very difficult to be faithful to your religious tradition, and when has living here especially aided you in being faithful to your religious tradition?

5:30 p.m. Social time

6:00 Dinner

7:00 p.m. Sharing Session 1
Individual responses to the initial question (10-12 minutes each)

Day 2 (Saturday):

Opportunity for morning meditation, if any group members desire

(This is something that members often organize, especially when Buddhists are part of the group. The leaders' responsibility here is only to make clear that there is a place available for anyone wishing to use it before breakfast.)

7:30 Breakfast

8:30 Spiritual Practice

(At the very beginning of the Workshop, offer this opportunity for a brief time of prayer, meditation, or other practice in any one tradition. Invite interested members of each community to lead this, if they want to do so. Invite the whole group to observe or take part to the extent that they are comfortable.)

9:00 Sharing Session 2
Individual responses to initial question, continued

10:30 Break

11:00 Sharing Session 3
Completing individual sharing if more time is needed
Group Conversation, using the question:
"I'd like to hear more about _____."

- 12:30 Lunch
- 2:00 p.m. **Small Groups**
 Based on the group's sharing and reflection, facilitator(s) bring suggestions for next step or further exploration; Group adopts or adapts suggestions and continues sharing and conversation in small groups (or through other appropriate means)
- (For example, facilitator(s) might identify 3-4 themes or issues that many participants mentioned in the sharing of their own experience, and suggest that the group spend time talking about those themes. S/he asks the group 1) if the themes/issues are the ones they heard in the stories that were shared; 2) if these are the themes/ideas that would benefit from more discussion; and 3) if the suggested or amended plan seems a good way to proceed. A theme might be restated or another focus substituted for one that the facilitator(s) suggested. Participants then move into small groups, with representation in each group, as far as is possible, of the diversity that is present, to discuss the themes in more depth. The facilitator(s) might want to suggest the make up of the small groups as a somewhat artificial way of ensuring their diversity.)
- 4:00 p.m. **Coming Back Together**
 Short reports from the small groups are shared in words and/or other media. A facilitator records the main ideas or questions shared on newsprint or whiteboard for all to see. (Some groups have included visual and/or other elements they have shared together as a part of their reports, and this is certainly welcome!)
- Group discusses the ideas, questions and issues raised
- 5:30 p.m. **Social Time**
- 6:00 **Dinner**
- 7:00 **Sharing Session 4 – Group Conversation**
 To what ideas and themes do we want to give additional attention? Do any of these issues especially need group discernment or joint inquiry? Is there one central question arising for the focus of group sharing tomorrow?
- (The aim of this session is to allow the group to do identify the questions or subjects on which they most want to focus further conversation. At this juncture, it is very important for facilitators to invite everyone who wants to speak to do so, since the stronger voices, if not checked, can all too easily take over the group decision making process.)

8:30 Spiritual Practice (led by members of one community, as offered)

Day 3 (Sunday)

Opportunity for morning prayer or meditation, if any group members desire

7:30 a.m. Breakfast

8:30 Spiritual Practice (led by members of one community, as offered)

9:00 Sharing Session 5

Individual responses to the question defined last evening
This will require 90 minutes plus a break mid-way

(Again each participant is asked to share from their own experience and personal story, for 5 minutes or less. Facilitator(s) can make this invitation clear at the end of the prior evening session, so that group members will have some time to think about what they want to say. Remind them that the request is for them to share their own experience and thinking; no formal presentation is necessary. Also remind the group as you get underway that you will stop speakers after 5 minutes, so that everyone has a chance to share.)

11:00 Group discussion and interaction

12:30 Lunch

2:00 Time for Reflection

Group convenes to hear, adapt, and affirm the suggestion for focus offered by the facilitator(s), and then engages in reflection through individual writing or creative expression, or using another approach.

(Time for quiet reflection and writing or visual expression offers one way to further deepen the interaction. When the group gathers, the facilitator should again present a summary of a few of the main themes or questions from what they heard in the morning session, and check with the group that s/he has not missed something critical. Then s/he invites participants to take some time to reflect further on what they have been discussing on their own, and to express in writing, or through another medium, the heart of their reflections in a form that can be shared with this community. Ask them to turn in their reflections by 4:30 so that they can be duplicated for everyone before dinner.)

- 4:30 Participants turn in writing or what they have created
Time for walking, socializing, etc.
- Individual contributions are copied by 5:00 or 5:30 for all participants to pick up and read
- 6:00 Dinner
- 7:00 Sharing Session 6:
Group Sharing
“What did you mean by ----? ““Tell me about ____?”
- 8:30 Spiritual Practice (led by members of one community, as offered)

Day 4 (Monday)

Opportunity for morning meditation or prayer as group members desire

- 7:30 Breakfast
- 8:30 Spiritual Practice
- 9:00 Sharing Session 7: Group Sharing
Ask *“What do you want to discuss before we leave?”* or a similar question to help participants identify pressing or unfinished matters.

(Make sure everyone who wants to take part in this exchange can do so.)

- 10:00 Break
- 10:15 Final Sharing Session
Facilitator(s) suggest focus; group adapts and engages in the kind of sharing best suited (open conversation, a last “round” of personal observations, a talking circle, etc.)
- 12:30 Lunch
- 2:00 What Do We Want to Do Now?
Time to evaluate what the group has learned, what remains unfinished; what, if anything, participants want to do together in the future
- 3:00 A closing prayer/meditation/spiritual practice prepared by facilitating team or by group as a whole

Basic Ground Rules for the Workshop

The workshop is not an opportunity for debate, but rather a time for listening, learning and conversation (speaking with, rather than over against). The point is not to find flaws in what other participants say, to prove who is right or wrong, or to counter others' arguments. Rather, look for the significance and meaning in what others share, and work together toward understanding.

Conversation and discussion in this workshop are in the first person. One's own experience and ideas, which may also involve the affirmation of the insights of others, are the touchstone for what is said. Say what you think, and listen to what others say.

Communication of this sort requires respect for others, and the willingness to take their ideas and experiences seriously. Try to actively imagine and "enter in" to the experience and thinking of the others in the group. Consider how another's experience has contributed to her thinking. Try to understand what he is saying.

Be aware of differences in how people communicate. Verbal communication is more difficult for some than for others. Some are not as comfortable with personal sharing as you may be, or vice versa. Still others present their experience and ideas in ways that may strike you as indirect, overly general, or overly concrete. Pay attention to the style of how others speak: it is part what they are sharing with you.

Be open to changing your mind, or to hear from others pieces of an answer to questions that concern you. This will help you listen carefully.

Talking about matters of personal and religious importance can generate strong emotions, and intense disagreement. It is not necessary to agree with others' conclusions in order to respect them; even if you disagree, it is possible to work with them to reach some common understanding. Rather than critiquing another's story or viewpoint, think about yourself and your own views in the light of what s/he is relating. Set aside the urge to prove one another wrong. Instead, ponder and explore disagreements, searching for common concerns that might lie beneath or within them.

Everyone has an equal right to participate, to agree or disagree, and to "pass" until they are ready to speak. Denigration or belittling of oneself or others is not acceptable. Everyone is responsible for helping to create a safe atmosphere.

Each person has the responsibility to respect the confidential nature of the stories and ideas that are shared. This expectation of confidentiality needs to be clearly stated.

Tips on Facilitating

This workshop is based on first-person interaction and an open-ended agenda. It calls for a style of facilitation that is both flexible and dependable, very attentive to each group member as well as to the movement of the group's process and thinking. In addition to specific suggestions that have been included in the outline above, some tips may be helpful.

The sharing of stories that begins the workshop is critical to all that follows. Each participant is invited to respond autobiographically to the initial question. These stories take the place of formal papers presented by "experts"; the key input or source material consists of what all of the participants have to share. Listening to what each person has to say is thus very important. To encourage listening, minimize any background noise or distractions, and invite the group to turn cell phones or beepers off (unless absolutely needed) and be present and attentive.

The facilitator needs to make clear the time each person has to speak, and remind the group that there are to be no interruptions. Stop any interruptions that do occur with a repeat reminder, or a gentle request to hold comments until all have shared (you might suggest jotting down any responses, and keeping track of questions to explore later). Maintain the limits on each one's sharing, so that everyone will have adequate time. Use a soft bell or some other minimally intrusive signal to tell the speaker that his/her time is nearly up.

Following the story each person shares, the facilitator should permit only questions that are absolutely necessary for clarification. S/he may ask if anyone has a question for clarification, AND should also ask that all other questions be kept until all have shared. Again, be ready to enforce this, so that no one derails the flow of story telling and listening until all have been heard and it is time for discussion. Firmness with humor helps.

No detailed agenda should be prepared in advance. The stories that the participants share will reveal a variety of points of common interest and concern; the stories themselves provide the basis for all of the subsequent conversation in the whole group, in smaller groups, and for individual reflection and writing.

The facilitator works with the group at each point to identify the next step in the conversation. Sometimes this involves articulating major themes mentioned by a number of participants, and suggesting further conversation about them. At other times, the facilitator might want to suggest another, more brief round of sharing to move the conversation forward; or a time of personal writing, followed by further sharing. The facilitator(s)' task is to help the group structure their conversation in ways that allow them to give time and attention to the themes and issues that are most widely shared and most important to them.

It can be helpful if one of the facilitators is able to take extensive notes of each contribution, and make them available for the group. If you are able to do this, give the notes of each contribution to the one who made it, and ask him/her to look them over and make any corrections. Then share the corrected notes with the whole group for their reference. Note: This kind of note-taking is definitely a gift; only attempt this if you have more than one facilitator, and are sure that you have the capacity to provide notes that are fairly accurate and inclusive. Otherwise, just rely on the collective memory of your group.

If a participant shares a particularly painful personal issue, the facilitator's responsibility is twofold: first, to be attentive to the emotional needs of the individual and the group's normal desire to respond to them; and secondly, to invite the group to keep its commitment to the group process. The facilitator needs to be ready to respond with caring and appropriate support for the individual, and also with a warm invitation to the group to think about whether and how to return to the issue, if desired, after completing the sharing that is underway.

Especially difficult or painful topics and issues should be approached carefully, and only if everyone –and particularly the person or persons most affected—agrees that more attention to the topic is desirable. Check for a clear consensus on this before going ahead.

If the group thinks it is important to explore such an issue, one approach that can be helpful is to adopt a “fish tank” method: invite 3 or 4 people who want to talk about it to sit in a circle within the wider circle, and to share what they have to say while the rest of the group listens. When one in the inner circle finishes what she has to say, she can return to the group, and another who might want to add something can join the speaking circle. When everyone who wants to speak has had a chance to do so, bring the sharing to a close.

An alternative approach is to invite the whole group into a “talking circle.” In this kind of sharing, the opportunity to speak simply moves from person to person around the circle. This can be made visible by using an object to pass from the person who begins to the next person, etc. When the object or turn comes to a member of the group, that person can either speak until finished, or else keep silence and pass their turn (and object, if you are using one) to the next person. Keep going around and around the circle until the members of the group have said what they have to say about the topic.

One of the facilitators' most important tasks is to help the group move from one conversation or activity forward into the next activity or further conversation. Again, the facilitators need to be able to identify ideas, themes, questions or concerns that are emerging out of the group process, articulate what they think they are hearing or learning back to the group, and suggest one or two possible ways to move forward.

The facilitator(s) propose a path as a way to help the group choose what it wants to do next.

Thinking About the Issues That May Come Up

In the workshops we have experienced a wide variety of issues have been discussed. Not every group will deal with all of these, and you may well discuss others. We share these only to give an idea of the possible breadth and depth of this sort of conversation.

- Differences in our neighborhoods and communities in relation to diversity and the willingness or reluctance we encounter of our neighbors to engage with one another across lines of cultural and religious difference
- Varying attitudes to dialogue in our own religious communities, including curiosity, misunderstanding, suspicion, hostility; and the problems of how to allay concerns, clarify purposes, and invite participation
- Feelings of insecurity and fears in all of our communities, regarding a wide range of things including identity; the intentions of others; proselytizing; erosion of one's own faith commitments through dialogue; misunderstanding of our tradition; exclusion or rejection; shyness with "others"
- Dealing with the parts of our own religious traditions that tell us to stay in our own "box" and care only for those like us, vs. developing compassion in our communities and building relationships of caring and service
- Finding the resources to speak up, when necessary, to challenge underlying ideas of an inter-religious discussion, to represent our traditions faithfully, or to counter inaccurate characterizations, insensitive behavior, stereotyping, or attacks; and yet doing so in ways that are not overly defensive and invite mutual support
- Learning how to respect and to respectfully question each other in relation to the ways we practice and the beliefs we hold, even if we do not feel comfortable with, find harmful or untrue, or dislike, a particular religious tenet or practice
- Enabling our religious communities and social institutions like schools, police and the justice system, hospitals and health professionals, flight attendants and travel agents, funeral arrangers, social workers, etc., to deal with specific

events, such as inter-marriage, customs for care of the dying and the dead, spiritual needs of people of other religions who are in trouble

- Identifying ways to nurture understanding and mutual support, to develop together a more complete understanding of the matrix of issues and world views in which we live and the resources available to address community needs, and to engage with one another
- Addressing social issues that affect all of us, and the pain of exclusion associated with them, especially racism; the impact of technology on faithful living; the roles of women and sexism within our traditions and in the wider society; the divisiveness of sexual orientation and matters of human sexuality; issues such as abortion and the death penalty; targeted conversion efforts
- Exploring joint social activism and sensitive approaches to social agreement
- How our definitions of ourselves affect our interactions with others
- Exploring tensions between religious practices and our national culture, between religious tradition and ethnic heritage; between religious commitments and family ties; between public and private expressions of our religious traditions
- Learning the style and forms of communication of people of different religious traditions and cultural groups, and learning how to structure conversations and joint activities in ways that will encourage maximum participation
- How to deal, within our traditions and between them, with our approaches to truth; how to make room for the ways in which truth is held and expressed through ideas, stories, doctrines, practices, verbally and nonverbally, individually and communally
- Wrestling with what constitutes authentic religious teaching, and how to deal with the changing relationship in all of our communities to teaching authority and the multiplicity of sources of teaching, insight and information; and also how to evaluate changes and variations in traditional practice in each of our traditions
- Common concern for the passing of our religious traditions on to the next generations, and for faithful renewal of our religious traditions

More on the Story-Telling Method

Story telling is like weaving, or like three-dimensional chess. Things are going on at many levels at once.

To pay attention to first-person stories is not to succumb to the contemporary pathology of selfishness or individualism. As participants recount efforts--successful or unsuccessful--to live faithfully, they are placing those moments within the larger story of their community's life. Everyone's story is part of a larger story. Each story gets part of its character from the past. But each one's story also is being shaped in the present, and particularly by the stories we are hearing from others.

Sharing my story is different than simply tailoring what I say to respond to a point another person has made, or speaking to highlight commonalities. When I listen to the personal stories of others, and share my own, my perspectives shift by 5, 10, 90 or 180 degrees.

In telling and hearing one another, we may realize that all of our stories are constantly in motion. And we see ourselves afresh: "How does my practice look through another's eyes? Does my practice end up excluding people, tying them down, putting them in boxes?" To direct this sharp, critical eye at oneself is itself an expression of faithfulness.

When we tell our stories in the company of people whose context is very different from our own, several things may happen. We can begin to see that our own story is not "privileged"; it is not the one that sets the standard for anybody else--including the other conversation partners who are adherents of my own tradition. Everybody has a place in this sharing; no one is silenced. We are all vulnerable.

Stories have the capacity to dehypnotize us, to detoxify us. We all are victims of the distorted images others have of us, and also of the false images we have of others and of ourselves. When we tell and listen to stories, however, we are awakened from the hypnotic trance of such images, and our thinking can be cleansed of any toxicity it may contain.

Some of the deepest connections that are made in this kind of sharing occur when words and pictures fail. When storytelling spills over into tears or into laughter, it become especially clear that this kind of encounter is different in kind from discussion of doctrines or comparisons of texts. Those activities have their own integrity, and often have a profound impact on the shaping of religious communities, but living faithfully sometimes can't be talked about, at least directly

We need to be honest about the ways our communities have hurt each other, and how our own communities have hurt us. As one participant put it, "There are terrible stories that are part of the tradition that is my home." Story telling can involve ventilation. Fresh air blows into our minds and hearts. We hear specific ideas, new insights, unfamiliar language, but more than any of these, there's a sense of cleansing, of more oxygen, of de-clogging arteries.

There is also a recognition that religious practices are as much a part of the story as are the words and images through which the stories are conveyed. In the Workshop, members of each tradition perform rituals that the others observe or participate in to the extent possible for them. The rituals ground the stories, and the stories told make the rituals easier for everyone to enter to some extent.

Each person's story encourages the others to be more articulate about their own. We are confirmed in our own traditions not by rejecting others, but by seeing the goodness in them. We do not become religious relativists; we don't become "comparatively religious." And we don't engage in "competitive pain." We begin to glimpse answers to questions such as: What makes religion alive in this culture? What makes it possible to hang in there?

In this process, we become caretakers of one another's stories, witnesses to the lives of others who are our neighbors. And we can begin to work through a set of questions: Who are we to each other? What is our responsibility--our connection to--the stories of people whose lives have been very different from our own? What have we learned from each other? How have your stories changed me? How can we tell each other's stories faithfully? What accountability to we have to one another, and what are the channels or forms or community for such accountability?

People who engage in this process often find that they want to keep in touch with each other. Participants visit one another, and also hold each other in their prayers and thoughts. As one said, "I have found our laughter to be a mark of who we have become together. It has been not only the sound of us that I loved, but the sight of us—our faces and our colors, our clothes and our shapes and sizes—our unlikely, unpredictable, and altogether fitting combinations that are a preview of the future for coming generations." It often happens that those who gather want to establish some sort of community of support and celebration. The way of story telling is often a path of opening to new possibilities.

(This section is based on the Conclusion: The Way of Conversation, in "Living Faithfully in the United States Today," Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, Collegeville, MN, 2001.)

A Note on the Genesis of this Workshop Model

This model was developed first through two national consultations held at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, in Collegeville, MN. These week-long gatherings were organized in cooperation with the offices for Interfaith Relations of the National Council of Churches of Christ U.S.A., and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The model was then shortened and otherwise adapted in a number of variations by Jay T. Rock and Peg Chamberlin and colleagues in Orlando, FL, Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN, Seattle, WA, and Lexington, KY.

These local “pilot” workshops were conducted with support from the Greenville Foundation and the United Church of Christ and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Our thanks to all the women and men, of many religious traditions and places, who took part in these conversations, and helped to shape this model in the process!

When we human beings take the time to talk with one another about what really matters to us, we say things that surprise even ourselves! The lump in my throat, or tears in your eyes, our sudden shared laughter, are a kind of knowledge that adds immeasurably to the ideas we share. We are profoundly grateful to all who shared themselves and their insights and energy to bring this workshop into being. May it be of use in bringing us and our communities into faithful relationship!