

Managing religious diversity: some “dos and don’ts” of interreligious dialogue

by CHRISTOPHER LONGHURST

New Zealand has one of the highest religious diversity rates in the world. The way that diversity is managed is important, because religious diversity can be the cause of either personal transformation and social cohesion, or civil conflict and social disintegration.

It depends on how New Zealanders view and respond to that diversity. The following looks at managing religious diversity through a few simple “dos and don’ts” of interreligious dialogue for peace in the world today.

■ Want to learn about the other’s religion

One of the main purposes of interreligious dialogue is to learn about the other person and their religious views. Agree that the main purpose of the dialogue is to learn about each other and each other’s perceptions. Interreligious dialoguers become less judgmental as they gain more awareness and understanding. Wanting to learn will help each partner to be more open to accepting religious differences. Furthermore, barriers to interreligious literacy will be broken down, and positive relationships forged when dialogue partners want to learn.

■ Be person-centred, not religion-centred

Some interreligious dialoguers believe it is important to focus on religious issues. However, personal interreligious relationship comes first. Focusing on persons will foster empathy which builds relationship. Share personal stories. This leads to understanding why one believes and practises what they do. Emphasising common values and topics related closely to everyday life also helps, as does avoiding contentious ideological issues. Through a person-centred approach, religious identity becomes less important than human life and happiness. In other words, the person comes first.

■ Look for commonalities

Differences tend to be obvious. However, it is helpful to look for what is similar, and focus on those similarities. Spending extra time to acknowledge commonalities helps build relationship. Religiously-diverse people can show tangible signs of looking for commonalities by visiting each other’s places of worship to see how they are similar, reading each other’s sacred texts to discover parallels, and exploring each other’s ancestral figures, histories, ideas and rituals, to know what is held in common.

■ Respect differences

In dialogue it is essential to respect religious differences. There ought to be no struggle here. Respecting differences allows dialogue partners to not have to avoid difficult subjects. Ask if a difference is real or abstract.

Oftentimes, differences tend to be purely conceptual. While they are always important, it is precisely because of this importance that mutual respect is vital in dialoguing. Respecting the differences leads to more inclusive thinking and deeper relationship.

■ Place difficult issues into a broader context

In interfaith dialogue, usually the difficult issues are not with the dialogue partner, but with the fact that major world religions became divided due to historical conflicts, and this caused division amongst people. For example, it is no one’s fault today that communion between Western and Eastern churches was divided in the eleventh century, or that a dispute occurred some fourteen centuries ago splitting the Ummah over who should succeed the Prophet Muhammad as leader of Islam. Stepping back to place an issue into its broader context can help address the matter, more than simply agreeing or disagreeing. Recognising that division over religious differences is a result of historical division within communities will help avoid personalizing issues.

■ Don’t try to change the other person

Don’t enter the dialogue with an intention to change the other person. Anyone who seeks to change the other should not be involved in interreligious dialogue. Such an approach would invariably cause tension and lead to conflict. Feelings of resentment surface when dialogue partners feel they are being pressured to change their beliefs or practises. Participants must feel free to listen to each other, without any pressure to have to assent to what is being shared.

■ Be open to changing yourself

Interreligious dialogue provides practitioners with new perceptions, yielding a sustainable transformative relationship. Therefore, be open to changing your own viewpoints without being afraid of such change. What gets transformed is not your values or principles, but how the other is perceived, and your views on related interreligious issues. Self-transformation is a core goal of interreligious dialogue. Expect to be changed in a positive way. Do not block yourself from this possibility. Openness to self-transformation is key to building meaningful relationships, and creating a successful interreligious dialogue.

■ Love the religious other

Above all, effective interreligious dialogue requires love, that is, to will the good of the religious other. There is an obligation to see the religious other as a brother or sister to be welcomed and loved. Jesus said, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35). Islam teaches; do good unto the neighbour who is a stranger (Qur’ān 4:36). The interreligious goal of transformation is best achieved through love. Dialoguing in love will establish a relational quality that extends the boundaries of self to include the other. Through love, the dialogue becomes a commemoration of our differences and a celebration of our relational gifts.

■ Finally, dare to pray together

An ultimate act of interreligious dialogical love is to pray together. The World Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi on October 27, 1986, hosted by Pope John Paul II, saw the world’s



Pope Francis prays with Istanbul’s grand mufti Rahmi Yaran during a visit to the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, also known as the Blue Mosque, in Istanbul in 2014 (CNS photo/L’Osservatore Romano via Reuters)

religious leaders stand together and pray for peace. What greater display of love amongst religiously-diverse people is possible? Assisi marked a paradigm shift in interfaith relations, that expanded and evolved to the point where Pope Francis recently stood inside Istanbul’s Blue Mosque alongside Grand Mufti Rahmi Yaran, facing Mecca with their heads bowed together in prayer (image 1). Praying together during interreligious dialogue is one of the ultimate acts of interreligious love. In fact, the dialogue becomes a trialogue. It includes the ultimate spiritual partner.

In sum, there are many “dos and don’ts” for successful interreligious dialogue. The aforementioned are only a few grassroots guidelines to

foster a productive interreligious dialogue in countries like New Zealand, which has a relatively small population and high religious diversity. When effectively managed, that diversity can produce an enriched, cohesive and vibrant society. Knowing the basic “dos and don’ts” of interreligious dialogue and putting them into practice would be an excellent place to start.

Dr Christopher Longhurst is a lecturer at Te Kupenga – Catholic Theological College. He is also a member of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Committee for Interfaith Relations, and a Fellow of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID).

CAPTION CONTEST



Write the best caption for this photo and win a \$30 Countdown voucher. Send in your ideas by Tuesday, August 9 to Caption Contest 642, NZ Catholic, PO Box 147000, Ponsonby, Auckland 1144. Or email: design@nzcatholic.org.nz Please include your postal address so that your prize, if you win, can be sent to you.

The winner of the Caption Contest from issue 640 (right) was **Paul McKee, Christchurch**.

Some other suggestions were:

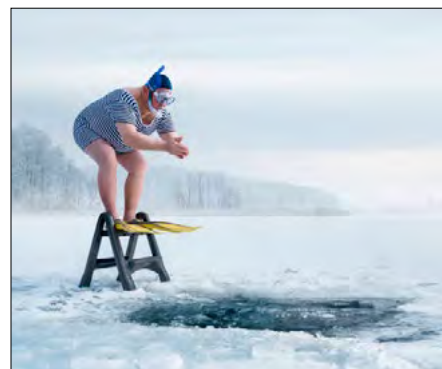
“Join us and tick off ice-diving from your bucket list.” Yeah, right!! — **Karen Reid, Auckland**.

“Cold? No, remember it is the middle of summer here.” — **Paula Buchanan, Auckland**.

“I know I am going to get a chilly reception.” — **Russell Watt, Auckland**.

“Visit Finland and see what crazy things the people get up to.” — **Linda Jennings, Auckland**.

“It’s not going to take long to swim a length of this pool.” — **Grace Jackson, Auckland**.



One way to break the ice!

“Chilly dipping? Yeeeah Nah”. — **Judy Lamb, Whangarei**.

“Father wants to be the coolest priest!” — **Marlene McGowan, Auckland**.