

## Faith and Society Files: Good Neighbours

This study guide on living in a multi faith society is ideal for small groups and has been written in partnership with Joppa. It gives biblical examples and practical suggestions on how we as Christians can build relationships with people from other faiths, and be able to discuss what we both believe in a non-threatening way.



# Contents

Foreword	page 3
Introduction	page 4
Session 1: Getting to know you	page 5
Session 2: Culture and faith	page 8
Session 3: Going deeper	page 10
Session 4: Finding faith	page 12
Session 5: Sharing our faith	page 14
Session 6: Living faith	page 17
Notes for group leaders	page 19
Resources	page 23

# Foreword

The consideration of other religions used to be viewed as a rather exotic fringe activity. Those days have gone. The presence of a multiplicity of religions in our society is something which no-one can ignore, and we in the church have a special responsibility to consider our response.

When Jesus was asked by a lawyer for the definition of the word 'neighbour' he provocatively pointed to someone belonging to another religion. The Jews reserved a special hatred for the Samaritans, but Jesus insists that it was the Samaritan who truly understood what neighbourliness was all about. We desperately need to explore what it means to be good neighbours in our society, and it will often be people of other religions who help us to understand what this means.

We have much to learn. It won't be easy getting to know people whose traditions and beliefs are very different from our own. At times it will be threatening and disturbing. But this is the way of Christ. He calls us, as his followers, to share his grace and his love with everyone, whatever their background or beliefs.

This is a superb resource and I pray that it will spark off many energetic conversations in our churches. JOPPA has served us wonderfully well over the years and I am grateful for all the care and creativity which has been poured into producing this study guide.

**Jonathan Edwards**

*General Secretary, Baptist Union of Great Britain (2006-2013)*

# Introduction

It is increasingly apparent that we now live in the 'global village' which was much talked about from the 1960s onwards but perhaps only in the last twenty years have we really experienced that reality. Many of us travel easily to distant places and many from distant places travel to us. Our society is increasingly diverse and there are pressing questions as to how we live together in one community. The gospel requires us to 'love our neighbours as we love ourselves', but how can we be good neighbours in today's world?

It is the hope of those who have prepared this material that it may encourage us in some small way to open up to our neighbours with both the humility and the confidence which the gospel demands. It has been written by members of the Joppa Group, which for nearly a quarter of a century has been reminding Baptist Christians of the significance of the neighbours from other faith traditions who are now our neighbours, workmates and friends. More recently the Baptist Union has recognised through the Trustees' Strategy document that the issue of inter faith relationships is a vital one for our mission in the context in which many of us now live.

The material here is by no means the last word on a complex question, but it is intended to enable ordinary Christians to reflect on our present context and ask what the Lord requires of us here and now. We hope that it will stimulate discussion, but more importantly encourage people to take action, since it is only really through personal encounter that we truly discover what it means to be a 'good neighbour'.

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# Session 1: Getting to know you

## Getting started:

The Australian soap 'Neighbours' always seems to have new people moving in and the process of 'getting to know you' begins. Quite often the new neighbours are very different from the previous occupants of the house and are viewed with suspicion - they may be poles apart - but time allows people to get to know one another, discover their common humanity and hopefully build positive relationships.

As the words of the theme tune suggest, '*neighbours become good friends!*'

## To think about:

- What happened when you last moved home?
- How did it feel to be a stranger?
- What made you feel welcome or unwelcome?
- What might you do to welcome new people in your street, or in your work or leisure activities?

## Bible story:

Luke 10: 25-37: The Parable of the Good Samaritan

This may be a very familiar story to us but it was profoundly shocking to the first hearers of this tale.

If Jesus told this story in Britain today:

1 Who would Jesus use as:

- The Priest?
- The Levite?
- The Samaritan?

2 What might stop your new characters from helping the injured person?

## To think about:

- Why should we want to get to know our neighbours/neighbourhood?
- What stops us from getting to know people of other faiths?
- What would Jesus do if he lived where you live now?

## Fascinating Facts

According to the 2011 Census, the people in the UK think of themselves:

Christian	59.5%
Muslim	4.4%
Hindu	1.3%
Sikh	0.7%
Buddhist	0.4%
Jewish	0.4%
'Other religion'	0.4%
No religion	25.7%

\* 7.2% did not respond to the question

## Practical suggestions:

The process of getting to know new people is much the same whoever the people are. Yet in today's multi-cultural and multi-faith context that 'getting to know you' process can seem much more complex and full of potential pitfalls.

*When we moved from London to Leicester we found ourselves living in a street where we were the only non-Asian residents. Our neighbours were mostly Muslims. 'Getting to know you' was easy and hard all at the same time. Meals in our home, our usual way of making friends, were impossible so we invited our neighbours out for a meal (thankfully we love curry) and it was great. But when we tried to get the neighbours on the other side to come as well we discovered that the women would not eat with their friends' husbands though they were both happy to eat with my husband. The women did agree to go out with just me!*

## Back to basics:

One of the things that prevent us from getting to know new people is fear: fear that our offers of friendship may be rejected; fear that we might offend.

It helps to overcome our anxieties if we try and get to know more about the other faith and particularly cultural or faith etiquettes that may trip us up. For example we might find out about customs like, physical contact, whether or not to shake hands, relations between the different genders, taking shoes off when you enter a house, observing food and alcohol laws and so on.

## Tips:

- Be confident and relaxed in your own faith.
- Allow the other person to set the agenda and boundaries as they differ from person to person.
- Show hospitality as far as you are able - the offer, even if rejected, is always welcome and appreciated.
- Accept gifts - Give gifts.
- Take note of important religious times: Ramadan, Eid, Diwali, Passover and so on - maybe send a card - what about including new friends on your Christmas card list?
- It takes time and patience to build good friendships.

*A church whose £600 Christian Aid Week collection was stolen had the money replaced by members of a neighbouring mosque. When the congregation was told about the donation, they burst into applause. The friendly relationship between the church and the mosque goes back to the 1970's, when the mosque organisation bought an old church hall, and used the land to build an Islamic Centre. The vicar said, "We just respect one another. They respect our position as Christians, we don't water down our faith, and we respect them."*

**To think about:**

- How can you learn more about other faiths and their customs as a church or as an individual?

*A Christian teacher commented: "I am very concerned about the negative language which sometimes gets used when discussing other faiths. As a teacher I am conscious that the children in my classes represent many different faith groups and I mustn't imply that my beliefs are 'better' or 'normal' and theirs are 'inferior' or 'strange'.*

*Furthermore in my last school, I had more in common with my Teaching Assistant - a devout Sikh woman - than I did with many of my white 'nominal C of E' colleagues."*

**And finally ...**

- What will you do this week as a result of our study?

# Session 2: Culture and faith

## Getting started:

- How do you dress for church? Why? Would you ask young men wearing baseball caps to remove them in church? (Jesus would have followed normal Jewish custom and covered his head to pray.)
- How culturally bound is the food you prefer?
- How would you react to a situation where men and women are asked to sit apart? (Christians in India often follow the common practice of men and women sitting separately.)

## Point to ponder:

Much of what we observe in terms of similarity and difference between peoples of faith is mistakenly taken to be of religious significance, when in reality it is a cultural matter. This is so, not only as we look at the faith of others, but in regard to our own faith. Custom and practice alter over time. A challenge was given about one such issue at the Baptist Assembly meeting in Blackpool in 2008 by Anjum Anwar MBE, a Muslim woman who is the Dialogue Officer for Blackburn Cathedral. When asked about Muslim dress codes for women she replied, "Your scriptures say that a woman's head should be covered in church; you stopped doing it, we didn't!"

## Bible story

John 4:1-30 The woman at the well

## To think about:

- Who would you be shocked to see a church leader talking or eating with?
- Where do you meet people in your day-to-day lives?
- How do we begin to get to know people of other faiths in our area?
- What principles can we see about engagement with people of other faiths from Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well?

## Back to Basics:

Rules such as no physical contact in public places, no cross gender hand shaking or taking your shoes off when you enter a house are all cultural. Conduct around food and drink laws can be bewilderingly difficult to disentangle. For example, matters such as not drinking of alcohol and only eating meat killed according to a prescribed ritual with the appropriate prayers have a religious source, whereas the rule about only using your right hand to eat is cultural. Customs around birth, marriage and death can be fascinating and illuminating, but again they are an integration of cultural and religious customs and are often hard to separate.

*Big business knows that it is vital to prepare their employees thoroughly in cultural awareness. Indeed, HSBC Bank has used it to powerful effect in their television advertisements; perhaps they have something important to teach us here. As you get to know more about another faith, you will begin to discern where behaviour has religious rather than cultural significance. However, both aspects should be respected, even if the finer distinctions need to be drawn out later in dialogue.*

**Tips:**

- Be observant and respectful of the customs of others.
- If you are not sure of the protocol in a particular situation, don't be afraid to ask.
- Don't assume that you know the reasons for a particular behaviour.
- Don't expect every member of a another faith and culture to be aware of all the reasons why they do things in a certain way – do you know all the reasons why you conduct yourself in a particular way in your daily living and in your worship?

*The story is told of a farmer coming to discuss a matter with George Washington. They were brought a cup of tea and the farmer proceeded to pour some of his tea into his saucer and drink it from there. George Washington, in order to make the farmer feel quite comfortable, did the same!*

**To think about:**

- How much do I think about my own cultural patterns?
- How much do I know about the reason why we do what we do in various practices in my own church eg why do we celebrate Holy Communion in the way that we do?

**And finally...**

After this week's study:

- I want to know more about ...
- I think I could do ...

# Session 3: Going deeper

## Getting started:

Have you ever visited a great city and been amazed at the sights and sounds (and maybe even smells!) which you have encountered? Maybe it was a capital city - what is your favourite building in London, Edinburgh or Cardiff? Tell your group what made the greatest impression and why.

Have you been to a great University city like Oxford or Cambridge, or a centre of culture such as Paris or Rome? Share with the group what has most inspired you or overwhelmed you on such visits.

## To think about:

- How do we express our faith, culture and values in art and architecture?
- Why is St Paul's Cathedral such a wonderful symbol of London?
- What impression of Britain might foreign visitors gain from such buildings and monuments?

## Bible story:

Acts 17:16-34 Paul in Athens

- Why does Paul react so strongly to what he sees in Athens (v16)?
- How does he respond (v17-18)?
- When invited to share his ideas, where does Paul begin (v22-23)?
- How does he develop his theme (v28)?
- How does his audience react (v32)?
- What might we learn from Paul's approach?

## Point to ponder:

- How important is the resurrection in our account of what the gospel means (v32)?

## To think about:

- Think about your own faith story – what have been the significant moments for you?
- If you can identify such a moment or moments how far were they related to *ideas* about God, Jesus or church and how far were they about *experiences*?
- In our culture can you argue another person into faith?

*At times of trouble, a Muslim lady would ask for our prayers, and assure us of hers when we needed them. She also once asked, out of the blue, "What does Easter mean?"*

- When might using argument be appropriate?
- What might make other people ask us questions about our faith?

### **Practical suggestions:**

Most of us are not called, and many of us would never have the confidence, to stand up in a great city and proclaim our faith. How can we create spaces where we do feel comfortable to share our faith?

If they are comfortable places for us, we need to ask ourselves 'how comfortable are they likely to be for those to whom we might speak?'

Paul was willing to enter his hearers' world and pay attention to their ideas and culture. He could even cite from their poetry! What can we do to learn from those whose faith is different?

### **And finally ...**

After this week I want to find out more about ...

I can do this by ....

# Session 4: Finding Faith

## Getting started:

Think about how Christians' lives are portrayed in the media, eg Eastenders, The Vicar of Dibley, news programmes and so on. How does this compare with your own experience?

An old poster picturing a judge had the slogan: 'If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?' How would people know you are a Christian?

Anyone who has visited a Sikh gurdwara (place of worship) will be struck by at least two things. One will be the profound respect they have for their sacred texts and the need to bring the words of those texts to the people. On festival days, there is a continuous reading of the whole Scripture, which may take 48 hours.

The second striking feature will be the hospitality that is offered, not just to visitors but to anyone who comes. Women begin coming to the gurdwara in shifts, from 3am to prepare food for the hundreds who pass through their doors each day.

## Back to basics:

- Explaining your beliefs and ways of worshipping with others of another faith will certainly cause you to examine your own behaviour and the principles behind your actions. In what ways might this be helpful to you?
- Do you believe that those who seek to understand other faiths are betraying their Christian principles, or are they demonstrating them?

## Bible story:

Matthew 8: 5-13 The centurion's servant

## To think about:

- Why did Jesus respond as he did?
- What does Jesus mean by describing the centurion as a person of faith?
- Would you help anyone in distress regardless of their faith?
- If a disaster struck a country such as Nepal, would you be happy to provide funds through a Hindu or Buddhist charity? What would be the reason for your decision?
- How far does Christian hospitality extend? Would your church be a place people would turn to if they were afraid, hungry, needing shelter, in distress, seeking asylum, seeking prayer? Would they find sanctuary?

- When we pray publicly, does anyone know? With the support of the millennium fund, church bells have started to ring out again in some Anglican churches. How does this compare with a Muslim call to prayer from the minaret? If you live in an area where either of these calls to worship are very prominent, how do you react?

### **Practical suggestions:**

Meeting others from a different faith community can be done large scale through annual Friendship Walks that call in on different places of worship and through more regular interfaith meetings, or small scale on a family basis.

*Bridgemakers* is such a scheme whereby people who wouldn't normally meet each other share a simple meal together. A family or two friends from one community invite a family or two friends from a different faith community and during the following four months pay them a return visit. The same process is repeated with a different community. Altogether they meet three families in a year (see [www.bridgemakers.org.uk](http://www.bridgemakers.org.uk) for more details).

### **Tips:**

- Listen carefully to others and let them share their story of faith with you.
- Be open to learn from the faith of others.
- Share with others the story of your own faith.
- Work alongside those of all faiths and none when working for social justice and responding to disaster nationally and internationally.
- Buy Fair Trade goods and keep up the pressure on your supermarkets to extend their range.
- Support your local faith forum representatives as they work through local council strategic partnerships for a more cohesive community.
- Open your home to those of another faith.
- Receive hospitality from those of another faith.

### **And finally...**

- This week I have been really challenged by...
- As a result I will...

# Session 5: Sharing our Faith

## Getting started:

What experiences do you have of a door-to-door salesperson? Share any experiences about a sales pitch for a product in which they apparently passionately believe. What makes a good salesperson? What aspects of someone's pitch maybe left you feeling angry or upset?

## To think about:

- The first 'disciples' (learners or followers of Jesus) became 'apostles' (messengers) – people who were 'sent' by Jesus to share their experience of him with all who would listen. Think of something in your own Christian experience you might share with another person
- Drawing on the experience of the salesperson – make a list of the *good* ways to share a passion with someone else

## Back to basics:

Thomas Helwys (d 1612) and the early Baptists defended their own right and the right of Jews and Muslims to practice their faith in freedom:

- Have Baptists always defended that right?
- Do Baptists continue to defend other people's right to practice their faith in the UK?
- How does this balance with the Great Commission in Matthew 28?
- Are there limits to religious liberty?

## To think about:

- How did the early church share its new found passion for Jesus?
- What was Peter's advice to the church? 1 Peter 3:15-16

- 1 What are the most important words in that advice?
- 2 What is gentleness?
- 3 What is respect?

What do you think the principles of dialogue might be?

Why might some Christians object to dialogue with people of another faith?

### **Freedom of Religion:**

*"For our lord the king is but an earthly king, and he has no authority as a king but in earthly causes. And if the king's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord the king can require no more. For men's religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks (ie Muslims), Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure. This is made evident to our lord the king by the scriptures."*

*Thomas Helwys - Founder of the first Baptist Church in England*

*"Dialogue is a sustained conversation between parties who are not saying the same thing and who recognise and respect the differences, the contradictions and the mutual exclusions between their various ways of thinking. The object of this dialogue is understanding and appreciation, leading to further reflection about the implications for one's own position on the convictions and sensitivities of other faith traditions."*

Bishop John V. Taylor

### **Bible Story:**

Acts 10 Peter and Cornelius

Read the story of the encounter between Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10.

- What did Cornelius learn from this encounter?
- What did Peter learn from this encounter?

Read Acts 11:1-18

- What did the early church learn from this encounter?

### **To think about:**

- Do you think dialogue and witness can go together? Why or why not?
- How do you feel about listening to someone from another religion telling you about their faith?

### **Learning from others:**

*"I cannot see dialogue in its fullness without the opportunity for both sides to witness to their faith in trust that the partners recognise each other's integrity ... we must be committed to let the light of Christ shine through our conversation and reflection, without that dialogue remains unfulfilled for the Christian."*

(Bishop of Rochester Michael Nazir-Ali, originally from the minority Christian community in Pakistan)

*"The one thing that offends me is if you water down your faith."*

(Anjum Anwar MBE, a Muslim woman employed at Blackburn Cathedral, speaking at a Baptist Assembly)

*"We indigenous Christians have a poor record when it comes to religious hospitality towards the stranger. Witness the Black Majority Churches, whose original members could find no room among white Christians in the 'Mother Country'. If this is how we treat those who are different, but of our own faith, little wonder we are not interested in, and consider ourselves superior to, those who are different and of another faith."*

(Steve Nolan, Baptist minister writing in the *Baptist Times*)

*"I said to my friend, and he agreed: "I know that you would love me to become a Muslim, and you know that I would be thrilled if from the heart you became a Christian - we know it is not likely to happen, and in that knowledge we can meet each other with complete respect." (A Baptist minister)*

How do you react to these statements?

**To think about:**

- Why do we sometimes find other people's patterns of life so difficult to understand or accept?
- Why might meeting people different to us make us feel vulnerable?
- How might God have been revealed in different times and places to different people (Hebrews 1:1-2)?
- How do we relate this to the Christian belief that Christ is God's ultimate self-revelation to the world?

**And finally ...**

Ask someone of another faith to tell you about what it means to them. Listen and ask questions of clarification but nothing else!

*A Christian RE teacher had been teaching a unit on Judaism to the class. Afterwards one of the pupils told him that she came from a non-practising Jewish family, but that the whole family had been so fascinated by the material from school that they had decided to practice their faith actively from now on.*

*As a Christian the teacher could not decide whether to regard this as a success or a failure!*

*What do you think ...?*

# Session 6: Living Faith

- Share with the group your experiences of other cultures on holiday or through work. What did you find most surprising or challenging?
- Does anyone in your group or church know someone originally from a different faith background? Or is anyone from your church or family or friends married to a person of a different faith? What can we learn from their experience?

## To Think About:

Spend a few minutes discussing what the issues might be both for the people themselves and for the families or communities involved.

### Points to Ponder: Missionary Faiths?

*Not all religions are missionary faiths. Some, like Judaism and Hinduism, have roots in ethnic communities and generally to be a member of that faith one is born into that community. Some, like Sikhs and Zoroastrians, have associations with communities in particular geographical locations. Such people do not generally expect people to convert to their tradition and are surprised that we might expect them to convert from it.*

*Other religions do have a strong missionary tradition and this would be true for example of Muslims and Buddhists. Of course missionary zeal varies considerably in different parts of the world and in different periods of their history.*

*Christians too are people who belong to a missionary faith.*

### **What does that mean for us today?**

- Do you know anyone who has converted from another faith to Christianity?
- How would you feel if someone you knew well, in your family or among your friends, converted from Christianity to another faith?
- What do you think the issues might be both for them and for you and why this is so?

## Bible Story:

Acts 15:1-21 The Council of Jerusalem

- What issue is being faced by the early church in this account?
- What decisions did they come to and why?
- What issues of cultural identity or worship practice might be relevant for us?

- If you were going to write to a convert from another faith about the basic essentials of Christian living what would you include or leave out? Why?

### Points to Ponder:

*What do you think we should teach people in baptismal classes today?*

*How much is essential to the Christian faith?*

*How much is simply cultural packaging, which may or may not be to our taste or of which we may or may not be proud, but which in the end is not fundamental to the Gospel?  
eg smart clothes for certain occasions, removing shoes in certain places.*

*What would our attitude be to, for example, smoking, drinking, co-habitation, or other matters like this?*

- As we have seen in earlier sections much religious practice is closely tied to family life, or to particular cultures and worldviews. Why might some converts from another faith need real support from the church?
- For some converts there may be a real sense of threat or intimidation, for others it might be more about needing a new place to be the person they now are. Does our discussion at the beginning about how we might feel if someone in our family or church converted to another faith help us to understand what is happening in these situations?
- What support might such a person need?
- Is there anything constructive we might say to or do for their family and friends?

### **And finally ...**

Think of a way your group or your church might create an opportunity to build relationships with people of another faith community.

What would need to happen and why?

Who will take the initiative – if not YOU then WHO?

# Notes for Group Leaders

## Session 1: Getting to know you

In this session we need to allow people honestly to share what they feel but also be ready to correct any false impressions they may have gained through the popular press and neighbourhood rumours. The 2001 census results offer some interesting reading:

### 2001 Census Results

	Thousands	%
Christian	42079	71.6
Buddhist	152	0.3
Hindu	559	1.0
Jewish	267	0.5
Muslim	1591	2.7
Sikh	336	0.6
Other religion	179	0.3
All religions	45163	76.8
No religion	9104	15.5
Not stated	4289	7.3
All no religion/not stated	13626	23.2

Of the more than 45 million people who answered the question about their religious identity almost 72% of people across the country self-identified as Christian. What might this mean when - on any given Sunday - only about 7% of the population is likely to be in church?

Conversion might look and feel very different depending upon which faith community is in the majority. What does it feel like to be a Muslim in Manchester or a Hindu in Hendon? What does it feel like to be a Christian in Cairo or Karachi? What social, political and cultural pressures might we need to be aware of in such places?

### **Bible Story** Luke 10: 25-37 The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Jews and Samaritans had been close neighbours, and felt deep enmity, since the return of Jews from exile centuries before the time of Jesus. Generations of suspicion and mistrust coloured their views of each other. This familiar story may help people who are uneasy about what might be a challenging series of studies, but we should not allow familiarity to hide from us the radical challenge of Jesus - that it was a stranger with a different religious practice who offered the best example of the Kingdom of God in action.

## **Session 2: Culture and Faith**

**Bible story** John 4:1-30 The woman at the well

For many this will be another familiar story, and interestingly features another Samaritan, but this time we see what Jesus did – and it was beyond the pale! Yet Jesus does not seem concerned. It was he who approached the woman – he didn't wait but made the first move. He meets her where she is even though he knows of her different faith and her dubious story.

When the disciples return from their shopping trip, they are astounded to find Jesus not only talking with a woman but even worse a Samaritan woman. Indeed the woman herself was surprised, not only that Jesus spoke to her at all, but that he asked her for a drink of water. To receive anything from her hand would have immediately made him unclean. It is likely that she anticipated that his motives were less than honorable. Are we so used to this tale, and so unused to its cultural setting that it fails to shock us?

## **Session 3: Going Deeper**

**Bible story** Acts 17:16-34 Paul in Athens

Paul was a Roman citizen, an educated man fluent in the common language of his day, Greek, and familiar with the leading ideas and values of his society. We don't know whether or not he had visited Athens before but it seems as though Luke thinks it may have been his first visit.

In some ways it is rather surprising that Paul should react so strongly to what he sees there, since every other city he had already visited in his travels around the Roman Empire would have had similar monuments and temples. Perhaps it was that he was very conscious that here in Athens he was at the very centre of learning and culture. The temples, monuments, art and architecture would have been among the best in the known world.

Paul makes his speech from Mars Hill, directly opposite to, and in the shadow of, the great Temple of the Parthenon, the temple to Athena, still today the greatest symbol of Greek culture.

## **Session 4: Finding Faith**

**Bible story** Matthew 8: 5-13 The centurion's servant

As he enters Capernaum, Jesus is met by a Roman centurion, who was not a Jew or one of his followers, but he had heard of Jesus' reputation for healing the sick and in his desperation turned to him for help. He told Jesus that his servant was lying at home paralysed and in great distress.

Jesus, sensitive to his obvious anxiety, said that he would come and heal him.

What follows next is what astounds Jesus. The centurion feels he was unworthy to have Jesus under his roof and asked him just to say the word and his servant would be healed. Being a man in a position of authority himself, he knows that when he gives an order it is carried out. Jesus' reaction to these words is to say that nowhere in Israel has he seen such faith.

Jesus warns those listening that many 'outsiders' will be accepted into the kingdom, while many who think they belong there will be excluded. He tells the centurion to go home; when he arrives he finds his servant fit and well.

Jesus had no qualms about acknowledging this man's faith, and indeed commended him for the strength of his belief. He did not fail to help him because he was not 'one of us'. There is no evidence that the centurion renounced his gods and followed Jesus, but he believed in him enough to come to him when he was in distress, and to trust the power of his authority, and that was enough.

## **Session 5: Sharing our Faith**

**Bible story** Acts 10 & 11 Peter and Cornelius

This long story raises many issues which are central to these studies. It is worth trying to follow the whole sequence, perhaps using a dramatic version of the narrative. In the story we discover Peter having his assumptions and prejudices challenged, the Holy Spirit already at work in the life of a Gentile. It brought changes for everyone, Cornelius and his family, Peter and his companions, and ultimately the whole Christian community. It is often spoken of not simply as the conversion of Cornelius, but as the conversion of Peter to a wider vision of what God was doing.

## **Session 6: Living Faith**

**Bible story** Acts 15:1-21 The Council of Jerusalem

Here we see the early Christian community wrestling with the implications of including gentiles within the company of the church. They were grappling with issues of faith, culture, lifestyle and ethics, very similar to the issues we might face if welcoming people from other faith backgrounds into our church life. We might say that in the end the council decided on a 'light touch' approach, making fairly minimal demands and allowing the new converts the ability to work out for themselves what it might mean for them to follow Jesus.

The following article is from Saint Michael and All Angels' Magazine

*Last September I was asked if our family would like to participate in a thing called 'Bridgemakers'.*

*My standard response was a cagey "What does that mean, exactly?"*

*On the face of it, it seemed quite simple. All you have to do is meet with another family from a different faith group and 'get along'. Initially I thought "it's a nice thing to do but we really don't have the time" and the more I thought about it the more certain the family would not agree.*

*When I asked Colin, Kathryn and Darcie, instead of the pulling of faces I was expecting, it was a resounding "Yes". So our fate was sealed — we had to meet people we knew nothing about and did not know from Adam.*

*David was really good and came round to our house for a proper 'briefing'. Everything went well and we were assigned our family from the Seventh Day Adventist faith. Time went by and Christmas was fast approaching. Something needed to be done quickly or we could just forget about it and time would overtake us and that would be that. So, contact was made and after a bit of to-ing and fro-ing a date was arranged to have lunch together. True to form, that date had to be rearranged — fitting in with each other's timetables was quite a feat.*

*From our side of things we were a bit anxious about the meeting. We knew nothing about Seventh Day Adventists and what on earth would we talk about. We knew we should not really talk about religion, so what was left? Surprise, surprise when we met we discovered the Nicholls were an ordinary family just like us. Nigel and Sophia had two children (boys) and they talked about everyday things as well as life within their church community. A funny thing happened after we left their home — we felt we had left a friend's home.*

*We carried on life as usual, enjoying Christmas and the school holidays and were looking forward to our return visit in the New Year. The date was fixed and in February we enjoyed a family lunch with friends. It was only just short of a couple of hours together, but we chatted away as if we had known each other for years. One of our topics of conversation was the future of the Bridgemakers Project. We all felt like pioneers and thought it was a very worthwhile 'achievement'.*

# Resources

## Websites:

### **BBC Religion**

Facts and figures on all the major religions

[www.bbc.co.uk/religion](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion)

### **Joppa Group**

Baptist Interfaith Network

[www.joppa-uk.org](http://www.joppa-uk.org)

### **The Interfaith Network**

UK Main National Interfaith Organisation

[www.interfaith.org.uk](http://www.interfaith.org.uk)

### **Christian Muslim Forum**

Forum for Christian Muslim relations

[www.christianmuslimforum.org.uk](http://www.christianmuslimforum.org.uk)

### **The Council of Christians and Jews**

Forum for Christian Jewish Dialogue

[www.ccj.org.uk](http://www.ccj.org.uk)

### **St Philip's Centre, Leicester**

Resources and training

[www.stphilipscentre.dioceseofleicester.com](http://www.stphilipscentre.dioceseofleicester.com)

### **Derby Multifaith Centre**

Resource Centre at the University of Derby

[www.multifaithcentre.org](http://www.multifaithcentre.org)

### **St Ethelburga's Centre, London**

Centre for Reconciliation and Peace

[www.stethelburgas.org](http://www.stethelburgas.org)

## Books:

- 1 Good reasonably priced introductions to all the major traditions are to be found in the **Very Short Introduction** series published by Oxford University Press:  
[http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/nav/p/category/academic/series/general/vsi/R/browse+within+this+series/religion+&+bibles/n/4294921803.do?sortBy=bookTitleAscend&thumbby=10&thumbby\\_crawl=10&page=1](http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/nav/p/category/academic/series/general/vsi/R/browse+within+this+series/religion+&+bibles/n/4294921803.do?sortBy=bookTitleAscend&thumbby=10&thumbby_crawl=10&page=1)
- 2 Two SCM Core Texts are useful for ministers or those with some background in theological or religious study:

### **World Religions**

Authors: T Robinson and H Rodrigues

Publisher: SCM Press London (2006)

ISBN: 978 0 33404 014 9

RRP: £23.99

***Christian Approaches to Other Faiths***

Authors: A Race and P Hedges  
Publisher: SCM Press London (2008)  
ISBN: 978 0 33404 114 6  
RRP: £25.00

See [www.scmpress.co.uk](http://www.scmpress.co.uk)

- 3 Oneworld Publications has a number of helpful studies on religions including:

***Inter-Religious Dialogue: A Short Introduction***

Author: M Forward  
Publisher: Oneworld Publications Oxford (2001)  
ISBN: 978 1 85168 275 1  
RRP: £9.99

See [www.oneworld-publications.com/cgi-bin/cart/commerce.cgi?product=Short](http://www.oneworld-publications.com/cgi-bin/cart/commerce.cgi?product=Short)

- 4 Churches Together in England publish a regularly updated resource list available online at:

[www.churches-together.net/Articles/131868/Churches\\_Together\\_in/Working\\_Together/Inter\\_faith/Publications/from\\_Churches\\_Together/Inter\\_Faith\\_Resources.aspx](http://www.churches-together.net/Articles/131868/Churches_Together_in/Working_Together/Inter_faith/Publications/from_Churches_Together/Inter_Faith_Resources.aspx)

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