

Guide for Home-based Interfaith Dinners

Welcome!

Why Dinners?

Food brings people together and with this simple idea in mind, the Niagara Foundation is thrilled to introduce a new program: The Abraham's Tent Initiative. This initiative aims to provide space for people of differing religious and cultural traditions to get-to-know one another in the cozy intimacy of each others' homes. Abraham's Tent dinners seek to build community through interreligious sharing between members of the three Abrahamic faiths in the Chicago area.

Abraham, "Friend of Allah" (c.f. Q4:125) and beloved patriarch for Christians, Muslims and Jews alike, is seen as a leading model of moral and ethical conduct. The biblical tradition illustrates the value of "hospitality" in the story of Abraham at Mamre (Gen. 18:1-33) where Abraham selflessly provides food, shelter and comfort to three unknown travelers in his and his wife Sara's humble tent. Over the centuries, each of the three traditions has developed a unique cultural and theological expression of this value. Now our kitchens and living rooms provide the same space for hosting temporary gatherings of interreligious and intercultural encounter.

As a local interfaith leader, your participation spearheads the grassroots effort to rid our communities of intolerance and fear. Your efforts to foster understanding and respect will erase the fear and build a stronger local community.

Walking in Someone Else's Garden

"Walking in someone else's garden" is a useful metaphor for your first interreligious event. When we step into someone's garden, we are essentially entering someone's sacred space. The faith life of a person is delicate so tread with care. As someone who will explore boundaries of faith and culture, you are not required to "give-up" or "lose" your own identity, nor must you take-on the spiritual attributes and beliefs of another. We often make incorrect assumptions and judge someone's world through the fog of own biases. With that in mind, you will be challenged in attempting to see the world through others' eyes. Truly mutual dialogue requires a person to enter someone else's world with softness, humility and respect.

Consider the new sights, smells, unique landscaping with both familiar and exotic flora. Be aware. What you interpret as a weed may be the most prized blossom in another's garden. Treading softly in someone else's garden presents participants with opportunities for personal and spiritual growth. One's horizons are extended. In the end, both guests and hosts will be invited into a relationship of mutual respect.

Abraham's Tent: Guiding Principles

1. Create a space of equality: all members are respected regardless of faith conviction.
2. Create a space for inclusivity: Encourage all voices to share and participate, but respect people's space and respect a person's decision to choose not to participate.
3. The tent is **NOT** a space for conversion.
4. No one group, tradition, or person holds the truth.
5. Avoid generalizations. Do not substitute labels for complicated realities, avoid arguments, and do not cut-down any group.
6. Respect differences within one's own tradition and the tradition of the "other".
7. Trust your personal experiences but speak only for yourself and not for others in your tradition or the tradition of others.
8. Let-go of the need for an outcome. Don't try to come up with an answer or a solution.
9. Let yourself be vulnerable.
10. Listen, listen, and when there's nothing left to do, listen. Be curious, its natural, ask respectfully.

What Can I Expect?

Expectations as Hosts

- a. Welcome guests with openness and respect.
- b. Make sure to address all of the dietary needs of your guests.
- c. Announce a schedule for the evening allowing those guests that have to leave early to make respectful departure.
- d. If you or your tradition has a ritual component to the meal use it as an opportunity for educating.
- e. Prepare conversation starters ahead of time.
- f. Expect yourself to be asked questions. But don't feel as though you have to be an expert!

Expectations as Guests

- a. Bring an open mind (and of course it wouldn't hurt to bring a gift)
- b. Communicate your dietary restrictions/preferences
- c. Communicate to the host if you will be bringing others (spouses, children, etc.) only after you ask permission from the host.
- d. Treat the homes of the host as a "sacred space".

Example Agenda (only if you need it!)

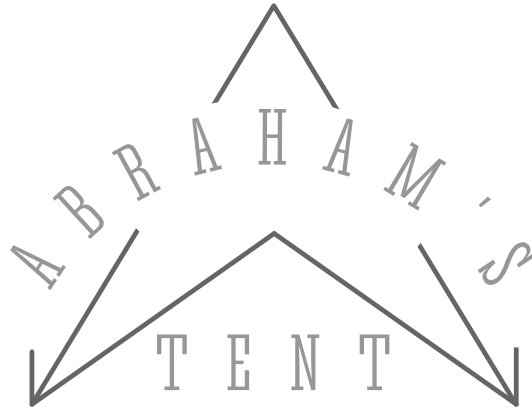
1. Welcome (the host)
2. Introductions (nametags are helpful)
3. Explain the Purpose of Dinner (the host or Niagara staff)
4. Serve Food
5. Blessing/Opening Words: (the host or guest)
6. Review Principles: Discuss the supplied principles or generate your own. Perhaps you'd like to create a covenant statement unique to your group context?
7. Time to explore the included questions
8. Plan for the Future: When will the next meeting be? Who will be hosting? A theme?
9. Closing Words or Prayer

For your first meal you may find that introductions could fill the entire evening. That's great! Don't feel as though you need to rigidly adhere to this supplied "road map".

Dinner Questions:

The following questions may come in handy as conversation starters. Feel free to create your own!

1. Some people feel that they are or have been “led by God.” Can you speak about a time when you ever felt guided or directed by God, or a Higher Power, or something outside yourself? What happened? What was the situation?
2. When in your experience has your spiritual community – or some other form of community – been “the key” to you getting through a difficult period in your life? What did the community provide? How did the community members provide it?
3. Many religions speak of miraculous events that seem outside our normal experience or understanding. How would you define a miracle? Have you seen miracles in your life?
4. Have you ever experienced a significant turning point in your life involving faith or spirituality? What happened? How did your life change – from what to what?
5. Do you feel you have a personal relationship with God, Source or something higher? Or is God or Source more impersonal, like a force or reality? How does this view impact your day-to-day life?
6. Have you experienced unconditional love – either from you to others, or from others to you? What was the situation? How did it impact your life?
7. Has your religious expression or belief system ever been forbidden or prohibited? What was the situation? How did you feel? How did you deal with it?
8. Many people believe that God, or the Divine, is actively involved in the human world. What do you think? In what ways (if any) do you see God or the Divine actively participating in the world?
9. When in your life have you felt the presence of God or the Divine the most?
10. When in your life have you felt farthest from the presence of God or the Divine?
11. What does it mean to have “faith”? Is faith the opposite of “doubt”?
12. If you affirm that God or some Higher Power has a central “message” for human beings, what would you say that is? If not, where do such universal messages come from?



Helpful Resources:

1. MyHalalkitchen.com
2. MyJewishlearning.com
3. Cookinglight.com
4. Niagarafoundation.org

For more information

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Abraham's Tent

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