

**InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious
Community-Building Handbook**

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Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing

Getting on the Same Page

So exactly what is interfaith dialogue? On one level it can be as simple as a person of one faith having a conversation with a person of another, a sharing of ideas, values, images, feelings, or beliefs across faith lines. On another level it can be a good deal more complex and nuanced. The terms themselves—both *interfaith* and *dialogue*—can be understood in several ways. As with many things in life, I have learned *not* to expect people to hear them the way that I intend them to be heard, at least at first. In fact, I start my presentations now with short games that help my audiences “discover” and practice the definitions together.

For starters, most people construe the term *interfaith* more broadly and the term *dialogue* more narrowly than a person who already has some experience in the interfaith field. They understand *dialogue* to be whatever comes out of the mouths of “talking heads”;

interfaith is broadened to mean anything religious encountering anything differently religious. Professionals tend to broaden *dialogue* so that it encompasses a much wider (and more appealing) range of encounters, and they narrow *interfaith* as a frame for specific types of interreligious engagements. Hopefully, some of this nuancing will be elucidated by the different authors of this book, as they share their own viewpoints about what they consider to be an interfaith dialogue. In the spirit of good dialogue, we don’t assume a singular point of view on the issue.

Christians, who still make up more than three-fourths of the U.S. population, are more inclined to talk about “ecumenical” activity or dialogue than members of other groups. The word *ecumenical* comes from the Greek *oikoumene*, which literally means “God’s whole created order.” This causes some confusion, for though the word’s root meaning is broadly inclusive, most people—and that includes those of us in the interfaith movement—construe it in the sense in which it has mostly been used historically, to mean “when Christians talk with other Christians.” A little “definition settling” is called for, and this is as good a place as any to make sure that we understand other key terms to mean the same things. In fact, successful dialogue is dependent on it.

Key Terms

- **Dialogue** is when persons of different viewpoints come together and interact. Their “coming together” could be in the form of conversation, sharing a meal, sharing in an experience such as creating art or participating in a religious observance, or some other form of engagement. As you will see more clearly in the models described throughout this book, our image of dialogue is not and should not be limited to “head talk.” This is a key point. You’ll learn more about the motivations, goals, attitudes, and ground rules for dialogue in the chapters ahead.
- **Ecumenism** is when Christians from different sects or movements within Christianity come together. It is a particularized form of *intrafaith* activity.
- **Intrafaith dialogue** is when persons within a tradition come together with other persons of that faith tradition. Christianity