

*Just*FAITH *Just*Matters



**In the Spirit of St. Francis and the Sultan
Muslims and Christians Working Together for the Common Good**

SAMPLE MATERIAL

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In the Spirit of St. Francis and the Sultan

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In the Spirit of St. Francis and the Sultan

General Overview

Welcome to the JustFaith Ministries JustMatters module, *In the Spirit of St. Francis and the Sultan*. We are grateful for your willingness to facilitate this module. Bringing Christians and Muslims together to work for the common good will be challenging for you, as well as for the participants. The reason for the challenge is sadly clear: the prejudice against Muslims that has been growing since the tragic events of September 11, 2001. (The Council on American-Islamic Relations or CAIR tracks evidence of this growing prejudice. Check their website at www.cair.com.) Yet neither Christians nor Muslims have any basis for submitting to this prejudice, Muslims to suffer it or Christians to be party to it. Both their faiths explicitly call them to act vigorously against all forms of prejudice. Muslims and Christians cannot do otherwise if they are to fulfill the two commandments God has enjoined on them both, to love God and to love the neighbor.

Helping a group of Muslims and Christians fulfill this aim is the responsibility you have undertaken. In the course of the next eight sessions, not only the participants' but also your own thinking about the Christian or Muslim "other" will be challenged. The module will require that everyone make a strong commitment to the skills of dialogue and active listening. Those skills will be in demand in every session, but perhaps especially so in session six, which directly addresses the current climate of anti-Muslim sentiment, as that climate is shaped by media and political interests. None of us, whether Christian or Muslim, can claim to have been unaffected by such influence.

As with other JustFaith programs, this module is not intended to be an exhaustive, factual analysis of an issue or, in this case, of Muslim-Christian similarities and differences. Rather, it is more of an immersion into the faith dynamic that will allow Muslims and Christians to work effectively and joyfully together for the common good.

This specific module is also an immersion into the two faiths from the "inside." As much as possible, the Christian and Muslim members should be encouraged to teach each other about their respective faiths. Muslims can help Christians understand Islam far better than any book could help them, and Christians can help Muslims in the same way, with an understanding of Christianity. This module does not depend, in other words, on "outside experts."

Logistics



The module is for Christians and Muslims to come together to share some of their separate beliefs and faith traditions. Each session is approximately 2 ½ hours in length. As with all JustFaith Ministries programs, a sample list of Group Guidelines is provided in order to set some ground rules or guidelines for discussion and dialogue.

Given that the program and its success is based on dialogue and on helping participants learn together and from one another, **we recommend that the group be limited in size to no more than 14 people – 7 Christians and 7 Muslims. It is important for the group to be well balanced in this way and not heavily weighted with one faith group.**

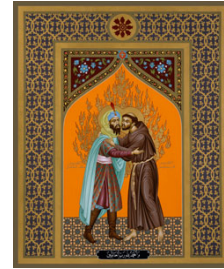
The group will have an immersion experience at each other's places of worship, both at a mosque and at a church. Just as no two mosques are the same, so also are no two Christian churches the same. A particular gathering's ethnic and cultural characteristics will influence the tone of the service, and while Christian worship practices differ far more greatly among themselves than Muslim ones do, there can still be slight differences even in Muslim practice, depending on cultural factors or on whether the group identifies itself as Sunni or Shi'a. So to choose one particular gathering for their colleagues to visit will be a challenge for both Muslims and Christians. Probably the best way out of this dilemma is to go with familiarity and convenience.

The visits will be followed up by a de-briefing during one of the sessions. Guidelines for these visits are laid out in detail as are instructions for debriefing of the visits.

Important to Note: The module will almost certainly **not** be possible during the month of Ramadan, since Muslims, after sundown, would need to break the fast with a large meal in their own community. Christian facilitators will need to discuss this in advance with their Muslim counterpart.

During the final session of the module, there will be an opportunity to talk about what to do with the information learned and shared during the course of the module and to discuss whether the group will continue to meet and, if so, with what focus. This is an important and intentional conversation. Participants will discuss what they have learned during the module and what they plan to do with what they have learned.





Getting Started. Finding Common Symbols

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Minutes</i>
Welcome	5 minutes
Opening Ceremony	10 minutes
Introductions	40 minutes
Group Dialogue Guidelines	10 minutes
Break	15 minutes
Business and Announcements	30 minutes
Discussion of Reading	40 minutes
Closing Ceremony	5 minutes
TOTAL	155 minutes

Note to Facilitators

The first session of all JustMatters modules focuses on putting the participants at ease. This almost always is an enjoyable process, and this present module may require extraordinary efforts of hospitality on your part. This is so not because the Muslim and Christian participants will be any less friendly or committed to the modules' goals than other JustMatters module participants. The need for extra-sensitive facilitation derives from the fact that the participants belong to different religions and probably also to different cultures of origin. Anticipating the kinds of awkwardnesses that may arise in such a situation will be a challenge both for you and for the participants themselves. The authors have tried to help you meet this challenge by giving you explicit guidelines for group introductions.

They also help you guide the participants, not only in this first session but also in subsequent ones, through another sticky question: the question of whether they can pray together as one community. The authors believe that the question has to be answered by the participants themselves. So as not to force them into a premature decision, the authors have provided, for each session, both an opening and closing "ceremony" centering on a symbol shared by both faiths. The ceremony format does not involve prayer as such. It instead focuses the participants on concrete signs both of their similarities and differences. By recognizing and honoring these signs, the group can learn to be

encouraged by what they understand in common and to relax around those beliefs about which they differ. Yes, praying together may flow from the ceremony experience. Or it may not. The thoughtfulness and mutual respect with which the participants address the issue of prayer is what's most important. Nurturing an atmosphere supportive of such thoughtfulness and respect will be one of your key responsibilities.

The participants themselves will help you. The goal they share — the goal of embarking on what we will refer to later in these sessions as a common praxis or jihad — demands their cooperativeness. That goal has taken on new urgency given the growing atmosphere of anti-Muslim sentiment. Ultimately, though, the goal has been fixed, not by people or politics, but by God. This is the goal of fulfilling the prophetic commandment enjoined on Muslims and Christians alike: to love God above all things and to love the neighbor as oneself.

For Session One, you will need to supply the items needed for the opening and closing ceremonies. (This responsibility can be shared for the ceremonies in subsequent sessions.) If you can identify, prior to Session One, volunteer readers for the roles of Muslim and Christian readers in the two ceremonies, arrange to meet with this pair a few minutes before the session to familiarize them with their parts.

Session One Outline and Notes

Welcome (5 minutes)

Begin the session with a brief welcome, saying something like this: “Welcome to the *In the Spirit of St. Francis and the Sultan* study and discussion group! You’re all aware that we’re breaking new ground here— always an exciting action— and at what might seem an unpropitious time: when anti-Muslim feelings in the U.S. are increasing. Yet, Christians and Muslims have the responsibility to face the risk and danger, and face it together, if they’re to (1) fulfill the commandments God has given them to love both God and neighbor and (2) do their part not just to dispel our country’s growing Islamophobia but also to provide positive leadership in building a better and more just world for everyone.”

Opening Ceremony (10 minutes)

Note that while all other JustFaith Ministries JustMatters modules begin with an “Opening Prayer,” ours begins instead with an “Opening Ceremony.” We have made this change in order to allow the group itself to determine whether and how they might pray together. Why is this an issue? This is an issue because in other JustMatters modules, a common Christian faith is assumed among the participants. The very point of the present gathering is that the participants are members of two different faiths. Yet, not only do creed and worship divide Christians and Muslims; history divides them too, a history of blessing and violence mixed. The present also is problematic, as the US is (as of this writing) involved in military operations in three Muslim-dominant lands and continues in a hostile relation with a fourth.



We are not saying or implying, however, that common prayer between Muslims and Christians is impossible. In fact, we hope it will become possible for the members of this group. But common prayer should not be entered into precipitously or unadvisedly. We will devote Session Two to an examination of the issues involved in the group's coming to a decision about whether to embrace common prayer or not. Meanwhile, and throughout the eight sessions of this module, we provide scenarios for what we call "ceremonies": scripts that bring Muslims and Christians together in relation to symbols shared by both religions — without assuming or pretending that they understand these shared symbols in the same way.

Some groups may want to stay with these ceremonies throughout the entire module and avoid the clearly sensitive issue of common prayer. Others may find themselves able, after conscientious reflection and discussion following Session Two, to begin to include a common prayer in the rest of the sessions. Accordingly, we will provide such groups a sample "Common Prayer" to use after each session beginning with Session Three. (Session Three would be the earliest occasion on which common prayer would be recommended.)

A key role as facilitator throughout all eight sessions is to be as sensitive as possible to the direction the members of your group want to take with respect to whether to embrace common prayer or not. We will say more about the role in the Facilitator's Guide to Sessions Two and Three.

Opening Ceremony

You will need: a table spread with a white cloth; two handsome hardback copies of both the Arabic Qur'an and the Bible standing upright in metal book-holders arranged on either side of a pillar candle; matches; either some small stones, some sand scattered on a large cardboard (for easy clean-up) or a couple of long, dark cloths (i.e. a couple of old curtains). The point is to suggest a pathway through a desert.

The table is placed along a wall, the candle and the scriptures arranged on either side. The candle is lit. The symbolic path is laid in front of the table and as if leading toward it. The entire group, including the facilitator, stand at the opposite side of the room, facing the table, the symbolic pathway directly in front of them. The group's Muslims stand on one side of the facilitator, Christians on the other. The facilitator asks for two volunteers, one from among the Muslims and one from among the Christians, to be readers.

The facilitator goes forward to light the candle, returns, then, facing the table, says:
We come together, Muslims and Christians, both in eagerness and in constraint: eager to know how we might fulfill God's command that we love Him and love our neighbor but constrained by our differences.

Muslim reader:
We are divided by theology.

Christian reader:
We are divided by history.



Muslim reader:

Yet God calls us together, so that we might all grow more deeply in holiness. Listen to the Qur'an: "We have made you different, we have made you male and female, we have made you different tribes and nations, so that you might come to intimate knowledge of each other; the most generous of you in God's eyes are those most God-conscious; for God is all knowing, most wise." (Sura al-Hujuraat 49:13)

Christian reader:

Yes: God calls us together, so that we can become one in Him. Listen to the New Testament: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it." (Ephesians 2:13-16 NRSV)

Muslim reader:

We experience attraction to each other, but we experience reserve as well.

Christian reader:

We yearn to be one, yet our differences are real.

Muslim reader:

Will we become baffled or frustrated by what seem contradictions between attraction and reserve, similarity and difference?

Christian reader:

Perpetually pulled forward yet perpetually pushed back?

Facilitator:

Or can we trust in the image of the PATH to help us move through the seeming contradiction of similarity and difference towards the light?

Muslim reader:

We Muslims ask God to "lead us along the straight path."

Christian reader:

We Christians cherish the words of the twenty-third psalm which say: "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake."

Facilitator:

Let us walk forward together along the path to the light in confidence that God walks with us and will help us accomplish our goal of loving Him and our neighbor. We ask for no greater unity than that.

All Muslims:

Amin.

All Christians:



Amen.

The facilitator leads the way towards the lighted candle on the table across the symbolic pathway. The Muslims and Christians fall in step behind him/her, alternating Muslim and Christian. The facilitator stops in front of the candle while the group behind him/her form a semicircle from right to left, alternating Muslim-Christian, all facing the lighted candle.

Facilitator: (after pause)

We stand before another powerful symbol of both our faiths, a light, and before the holy scriptures given us by God for our guidance. Let us silently ask God's help that our work together during the coming weeks will enable us to do God's will more faithfully. And let us also pray that God will give us guidance in knowing whether and how we might someday pray to Him together, in one voice.

All:

Amin/Amen.

The facilitator puts out the candle. Participants return to their seats.

Introductions (40 minutes)

As in all JustMatters modules, participants in this module, *In the Spirit of St. Francis and the Sultan*, are urged to take time to get to know each other. This module's difference from most others, however, is that *the entire* module can be seen as a getting to know you and as an introduction. In most JustMatters modules, that is, the introductions lead almost immediately to the introduction of the common topic, be it immigration or prison reform or some other issue of importance. In this case, however, the module's focus is group formation itself, and specifically the process of formation of a social justice community comprised of adherents of two different faiths.

This difference alone would be challenging enough. But in addition the facilitator needs to keep in mind that the Muslims who are present have special reasons for approaching these introductions cautiously. If they are immigrants, they may feel shy or modest about their command of English as well as self-conscious about cultural differences from their Christian counterparts (in dress, for example, or in gender relations or in manners). They may be uncomfortable with American-style informality. The chief reason for their caution is likely to be their awareness of the increasing suspicion with which they and their religion are viewed by the general public. The very purpose of this module is to help dispel this suspicion! This purpose represents a goal to be achieved, not a reality to be relied on. The Muslims in the group must be given every opportunity to express their anxieties, here and throughout the module, without in the least being pushed to do so, or even seeming to be pushed to do so. In this situation, the facilitator must exhibit unusual sensitivity.

Despite these caveats, these first introductions can begin simply. The facilitator is to ask the following three questions of each member of the group, encouraging him or her to answer only as much as he or she feels comfortable in answering. **Note:** The size of the group will determine how much time each participant will get to introduce him or herself

– e.g. if there are twelve people in the group, each person will have only about three minutes to speak.

Invite participants to answer the following questions. Read all the questions through twice. Tell the group how much time each person will get to respond to the questions, and then go first in order to model the idea of sharing a *brief* response.

1. What would you like to say about yourself personally (family, background, employment, etc.)?
2. Why did you choose to participate in this module?
3. What key difficulty or difficulties do you anticipate in forming community with those of a different religion? What benefits?

Group Dialogue Guidelines (10 minutes)

Quickly review guidelines with everyone and then ask the participants if they can all agree to use these guidelines for discussion and dialogue throughout the program. If not, take a few minutes to modify them to fit the group's goals.

Break (15 minutes)

The facilitator is encouraged to have a few refreshments and a beverage or two available. The facilitator might also want to have a sign up sheet for others to bring refreshments for the next seven sessions.

Have the Participant Registration form (copied from online link) and a pen available and ask each participant to complete their information at this time. (Facilitators are to send the completed form to the JustFaith Ministries office next week.)

Business and Announcements (30 minutes)

The Business and Announcements component of this first session is likely to be lengthy and involved. Facilitators need to be sure to keep track of time for this segment.

Discussion of Reading Assignment (40 minutes)

If possible, divide the whole group into five smaller groups, taking care that each of the five groups is balanced between Muslims and Christians, and give each group one of the questions from the first chapter to discuss. If the whole group consists of fewer than ten members, you will need to assign fewer than five groups, giving more than one question to one or two of the groups. The point is to provide an opportunity for people to gather in small, mixed groups of Muslims and Christians to work together on responses to Chapter One's Discussion Questions. (We will divide the group similarly in subsequent sessions in order to elicit responses to the Discussion Questions at the end of each of the assigned chapters.)

Small groups: 5-10 minutes

Assign one or at most two questions to each of the groups. Allow five to ten minutes for the small groups to decide together on their answers. Urge them to keep their answers brief, so that all groups have an equal chance to report back.

Large group: 30 minutes



But once they've done so, encourage them, as a whole group, to respond to what they've read and heard each other report. What additional information and insight do members of the whole group wish to contribute, based on their reading of Chapter One?

Closing Ceremony (5 minutes)

Once again the facilitator and the Muslim and Christian participants gather, this time in front of the table. The facilitator relights the candle, the participants, arranged as before in a semicircle around him, alternating Muslim and Christian. The Muslim and Christian volunteer readers (the same ones as before) have their scripts.

Facilitator:

Where did we start from this evening?

Muslim reader:

We started from our own separate understanding of God.

Christian reader:

We started from our own separate understanding of our common history.

Facilitator:

And where did our path this evening take us?

Muslim reader:

It took us to a place where we could share some food and hopes and dreams.

Christian reader:

Where we could begin to know each other as creations of the One God?

Facilitator:

We have come far enough for one evening. Let us leave together along the same path we came in on, confident that God is guiding us step by step towards the goal we both most deeply seek, to love Him with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourself.

Muslims:

Amin.

Christians:

Amen.

The participants file out along the symbolic path in the order along which they entered during the Opening Ceremony. The facilitator is last in line.