



REACHING OUT IN LOVE:  
FROM CHRISTIAN UNITY TO INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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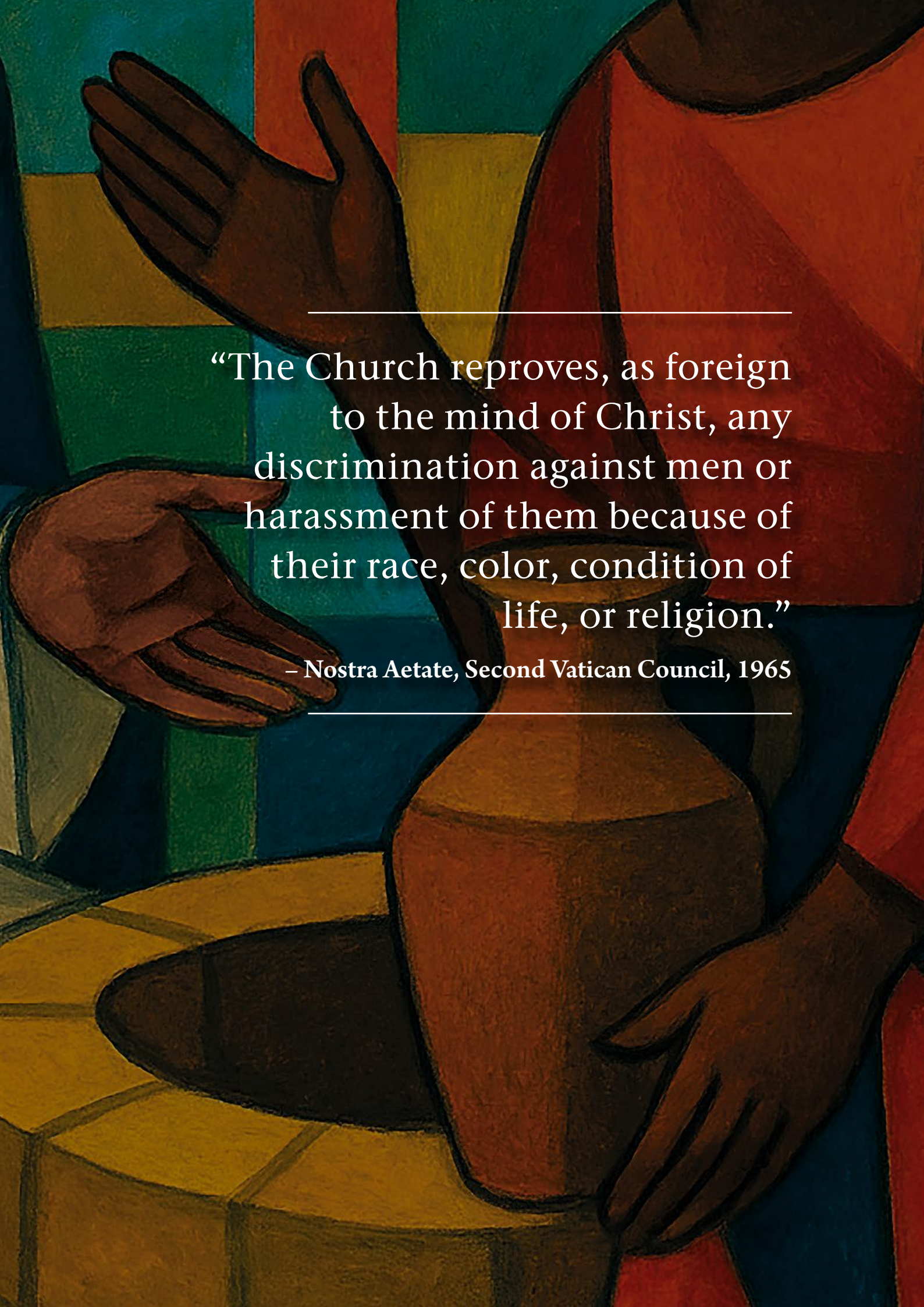
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“The Church reprovves, as foreign  
to the mind of Christ, any  
discrimination against men or  
harassment of them because of  
their race, color, condition of  
life, or religion.”

– Nostra Aetate, Second Vatican Council, 1965

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# INTRODUCTION

The churches have played a vital role in the promotion of good relations between different faiths. This can be seen, for example, in *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council, which stressed the common human bond between people of different faiths, and through the interreligious outreach of the World Council of Churches. In our context, the British Council of Churches and its successor body, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), have had a long-standing commitment to the promotion of interreligious dialogue. Through this resource we seek to build on more than five decades of experience in facilitating CTBI member churches to engage collectively in interreligious encounter and dialogue as an integral element of how we live out the call to Christian unity in a society that is becoming increasingly diverse and multicultural.

The increase in religious pluralism in Britain and Ireland can sometimes be apprehended with a sense of loss: loss of significance and status, a marginalisation of the Christian identity and tradition that previously had a defining influence on so many aspects of community life. Viewed in a different way, however, the increasing recognition and visibility of religious pluralism can be embraced as an opportunity for authentic Christian witness in a way that conveys our connection to the whole of humanity, enshrined in a vision of every human person as made in the image and likeness of God. Our hope is that this resource will provide a support for the development of this kind of collective witness and engagement, particularly at local level where it can have the greatest impact.

Sadly, a long list of tragic events in recent times have impacted ecumenical work, underlining the urgent necessity of this outreach. Where different faith communities exist separate from one another, suspicion and hostility can grow in the gaps between people and we miss critical opportunities to stand together for the good of the whole community. Recent years have seen an alarming increase in racially-motivated riots, targeting migrant communities and/or people seeking asylum. Many of these have had explicit anti-Muslim elements, and often people of different religious communities have felt vulnerable or threatened because distinctive aspects of their appearance become a focus of hostility.

Of particular concern is the appropriation and manipulation of Christian identity and symbols as part of movements targeting other faith communities and other minorities with hatred and violence. A February 2025 conference on the Church and the Far Right, in which CTBI was a partner, recommended investment in the development of interreligious dialogue by churches as a priority response to this challenge.

In our current interreligious networks we are experiencing increasing pressure on relationships as a result of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the rising Antisemitism and Islamophobia, along with other national and local impacts of global conflicts that have a religious dimension.

This list is far from exhaustive but it paints a compelling picture of the need to develop our capacity and skills base in the area of interreligious dialogue, expanding our networks of relationships as we do so – from the local community level through to the national and international contexts. We are working to do this in a context where the space for respectful dialogue on matters of diversity appears to be shrinking at an alarming rate. The growth of social media allows us to be very selective about the content we are exposed to, with those choices further reinforced by the algorithms that condition our engagement on the different platforms. This means that we now often have to proactively make the case for dialogue itself to encourage people to break these patterns and have the courage to open themselves up to different experiences and ideas. This work is an important element of the contribution we seek to make to peace-building and reconciliation in society.

As an ecumenical body, CTBI draws on the learning from the experience of the Christian churches on these islands in the development of our inter church dialogue and relationship-building as a foundation for this work. Definitions of interreligious dialogue and inter faith dialogue vary. This resource makes a distinction between interreligious dialogue at the community level and inter faith dialogue on a more personal and general level, focussing primarily on the community context. Every community across Britain and Ireland has at least one church in its midst – that is an almost unrivalled presence! This resource seeks to increase the confidence of local church communities to offer hospitality, and also to receive it, from neighbours of other faiths. Across Britain and Ireland there have been many successful initiatives that have brought faiths together at local level providing models of good practice. These experiences have taught us that interreligious dialogue significantly enhances the potential for local faith leaders to engage with communities and advocate on their behalf with government and other authorities.

Forming friendships and collaborative partnerships are important and valuable steps. This course emphasises the distinctive contribution that an intentional focus on dialogue can make, deepening those relationships and supporting all to live out their faith at the service of the whole community.

## HOW MIGHT THIS TOOLKIT SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIS WORK?

The toolkit is aimed at Christians seeking to initiate or develop interreligious dialogue in their local communities and/or other contexts in which they work. It is explicitly grounded in our calling as followers of Christ and the values that flow from our faith and seeks to build on the learning from the dialogue of difference that has been developed in our ecumenical journey. It emphasises that, in engaging in this work, we are building on a long tradition of Christian thought and practice in which we can find inspiration and guidance.

The modules listed below have been designed to provide a strong foundation for engagement, learning from existing good practice and addressing some of the most common barriers to encounter and dialogue, drawing on the experience of CTBI over decades of investment in interreligious dialogue, which is currently supported by the Inter Faith Theology Advisory Group and the Churches Forum for Interreligious Relations. In addition, we are grateful for the support of the KAICIID International Dialogue Centre in the development of this training.

The course comprises the following modules:

- The Christian call to unity empowers and helps equip us for dialogue
- Planning for effective dialogue
- Can we pray with people of other faiths?
- Mind your language: negotiating our words in a multi-faith context
- Growing peace, not importing conflict
- Dialogue deepens and enriches faith

Each module is grounded in our Christian faith through Scripture reflection. In the discussion we will share learning, and ideas that may assist in the planning of dialogue. Case studies will illustrate key themes through lived reality, followed by questions to help you reflect on how you might apply learning from this module to your own context and experience.

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The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming”. “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

– John 4:25-26

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# MODULE ONE:

THE CHRISTIAN CALL TO UNITY EMPOWERS  
AND HELPS EQUIP US FOR DIALOGUE

## OVERVIEW

This module will help you begin to think about the following aspects of interreligious dialogue:

- Understanding what distinguishes dialogue from other forms of interaction.
- Offering a definition of dialogue relevant to your particular context.
- Setting clear intentions for dialogue.

## INTRODUCTION

CTBI's approach to dialogue continues to reflect the four principles adopted by its predecessor, the British Council of Churches, in 1981:

- Dialogue begins when people meet each other.
- Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust.
- Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community.
- Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness.<sup>1</sup>

This approach is reflected in the ecumenical dialogue that underpins all that we do as CTBI, creating opportunities for encounter in a way that allows participants to get to know each other on a deep level, forming friendships and relationships of trust, then building on these relationships to open up focussed dialogue on a wide range of issues that are of shared concern, leading, where possible, to collective action. Through our communications outreach we seek to share the story of this work and what we are learning on the journey to help model for others the kind of dialogue we want to see at all levels of society.

In 1977 the Assembly of the British Council of Churches (BCC) instructed the Executive to (i) increase awareness of the facts and the implications of the religiously plural character of the world community and (ii) to promote creative Christian responses. Since that time the BCC and CTBI as its successor have undertaken research and outreach work to apply the learning from our ecumenical dialogue to the interreligious context, and support our member churches in the engagement with other faith communities.

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1 British Council of Churches, *Relations with people of other faiths. Guidelines for dialogue in Britain*, London: British Council of Churches, 1981.

The publication of this resource reflects the growing interest from our members in the promotion of ecumenical engagement in interreligious dialogue and relationship-building at local level, recognising that these relationships can have transformative impact in the lives of local communities.

The term dialogue can sometimes be used too lightly, applied to any kind of interaction between two or more people, or can be used in too limited a way reflecting a perception that dialogue always requires a very formal, structured approach.

The Catholic tradition outlines the following models of interreligious dialogue, illustrating the variety of different approaches and methods of engagement that are possible:

- **The Dialogue of Life**, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit with one another;
- **The Dialogue of Action**, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people;
- **The Dialogue of Theological Exchange**, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages;
- **The Dialogue of Religious Experience**, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches”.<sup>2</sup>

Recognising and embracing that diversity, this resource advocates an approach to dialogue based on careful preparation and clearly stated intentions, while also being open to a wide range of different expressions and methodologies that can be contextualised to reflect different local realities and priorities.

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2 Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (19 May 1991) par. 42. Available at [www.vatican.va/](http://www.vatican.va/)

## BIBLICAL REFLECTION:

### John 4.1-26

The story in the gospel of John where Jesus converses with a Samaritan woman establishes some important theological pointers as we reflect upon dialogue. The disciples have gone into the town to buy food and Jesus comes to a well where there is a solitary woman drawing water and he says to her “give me a drink”. This very human request for refreshment opens the door to an interreligious conversation about holy places and where God is to be encountered. The differences between Jesus and this woman are striking: first of all there is the racial element, as we know Jews and Samaritans did not associate with one another because of ancient enmities. Secondly there is the difference in terms of gender: it would have been highly unusual in this society for any male religious leader to have any conversation with a woman and what is significant about this encounter is the way in which he engages with her without being dismissive of her points of view or patronising to her more generally. Within the conversation, Jesus reveals to her who he is saying “I am he who is speaking to you”, and this may even be the first time we hear one of the many “I am” sayings whereby Jesus points to who he is (such as “I am the Good Shepherd”, “I am the True Vine” etc.) Dialogue therefore is not the sole prerogative of the scholarly and those beyond moral reproach. In this passage Jesus, the word made flesh, is revealed through a dialogue across difference at many levels.

We speak of the Church as the body of Christ (*Ephesians* 1:23) and how it is to be Christ’s presence in the world. We also speak of how God desires the reconciliation of all creation to God’s very self. A very important part of this task of mission is to build bridges with people of other faiths and foster greater understanding and social harmony. In this task of creating and sustaining friendships with others we are doing something more than a social activity or serving a political agenda. It is something much deeper and is rooted in a faith in Jesus Christ who came for the whole world and not just the Church. The resource *Generous love: the truth of the Gospel and the call to dialogue* produced by the Anglican Communion expresses it in these terms:

“Those we called other are no longer over against us, but present to us and us to them, human beings whose energy connects with ours and ours with theirs, those who are fellow guests in God’s house with us. So, we come to know our neighbours of different faiths in a new way, both as fellow human beings, and also as those who seek, as we do, to orientate their lives towards the One who is the source of all life. We will listen to and receive from our neighbours even while we speak and give to them, and in this mutuality of encounter we can express God’s gracious presence in a new way.”<sup>3</sup>

3 Anglican Communion Network for Inter Faith Concerns, *Generous love: the truth of the Gospel and the call to dialogue*, London: The Anglican Consultative Council, 2008.

## DISCUSSION

Interreligious dialogue is a process where people – well-formed in and true to their own religious and/or cultural identities – encounter the other by engaging in active, compassionate, and non-judgemental listening to grow in mutual understanding and to discover new understanding together.<sup>4</sup>

The above definition, offered by the KAICIID International Dialogue Centre, offers a helpful place to start in our exploration of what dialogue can offer to the work of local churches at the service of their communities.

Not every conversation or discussion can be considered a dialogue. Dialogue requires a commitment to respectful listening and an openness to learning, this will often be supported by a clearly stated intention and careful preparation. Dialogue can be facilitated in a wide range of ways – participants can be seated, or moving around, they can use images or music as well as words, but despite the diversity of expression possible, authentic dialogue is likely to have a degree of structure to ensure fairness and safety for all participants, and yet may also emerge out of more informal interactions. Dialogue can share many features with debates – for example where participants take turns to respond to questions – but unlike a debate the goal of dialogue is not to win an argument but rather to engage in deep listening in the hope of uncovering new understanding which may be transformative. Academic conferences or seminars may also share some of the features of dialogue, but the speaker-audience dynamic is different from the relationship between participants in a dialogue.

All of these forms of interaction can have their place in the engagement of local church communities with their neighbours of other faiths, as well as more formal negotiations (e.g. for contractual arrangements) or mediation (in situations of conflict). In this module you are invited to consider what dialogue could bring to these relationships if initiating for the first time, or to reflect on the contribution of any current dialogue engagements. Through dialogue, faith communities commit to going on a learning journey together, deepening mutual understanding as a foundation for shared action. The relationship-building that ensues can enable collective responses in times of crisis and help prevent misunderstandings and pressures on relationships.

While setting clear intentions for what we hope to achieve, it is important to manage our expectations. Dialogue is a process where progress is unlikely to be neat and linear, because our human reality and the ways in which we negotiate life in community are complex. In the modules that follow we will examine together how best to prepare, anticipate challenges and respond to any difficulties that may arise while protecting the relationships and connections on which this work rests.

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4 David Rosen and Andrew Boyd, KAICIID Fellowship Training Materials (2025).

## CASE STUDY

For our first case study we will travel far from our immediate context to Sri Lanka, a society facing many challenges in the aftermath of decades of violent conflict and deeply rooted inequalities. Interreligious dialogue is an essential way of life for a Christian minority that exists in the space between Buddhist and Hindu communities engaged in a destructive conflict over land and identity. Christians cross boundaries of ethnicity, geography, language and culture, giving them the opportunity to help build bridges and advocate for those most impacted by social exclusion and human rights abuses. A CTBI-supported project entitled 'A Reconciled Land' which concluded in 2025 sought to support this community-building work and learn from the experience of Christians in Sri Lanka.

In 2023 as part of the project a Christian-Buddhist dialogue on the theology of land took place in the Thulana Research Centre for Encounter and Dialogue to explore what the different religious traditions had to say about land, ecology, and the challenge of sharing space in the aftermath of violent conflict. Scholars from the different religious traditions contributed alongside students. A representative of the landless community of tea plantation workers shared testimonies from one of the most marginalised and disenfranchised groups in Sri Lankan society. Through the dialogue participants engaged in self-critical reflection on how the actions of their religious communities were perceived by others, and how communities such as the plantation workers were being impacted by their failure to act together for justice.

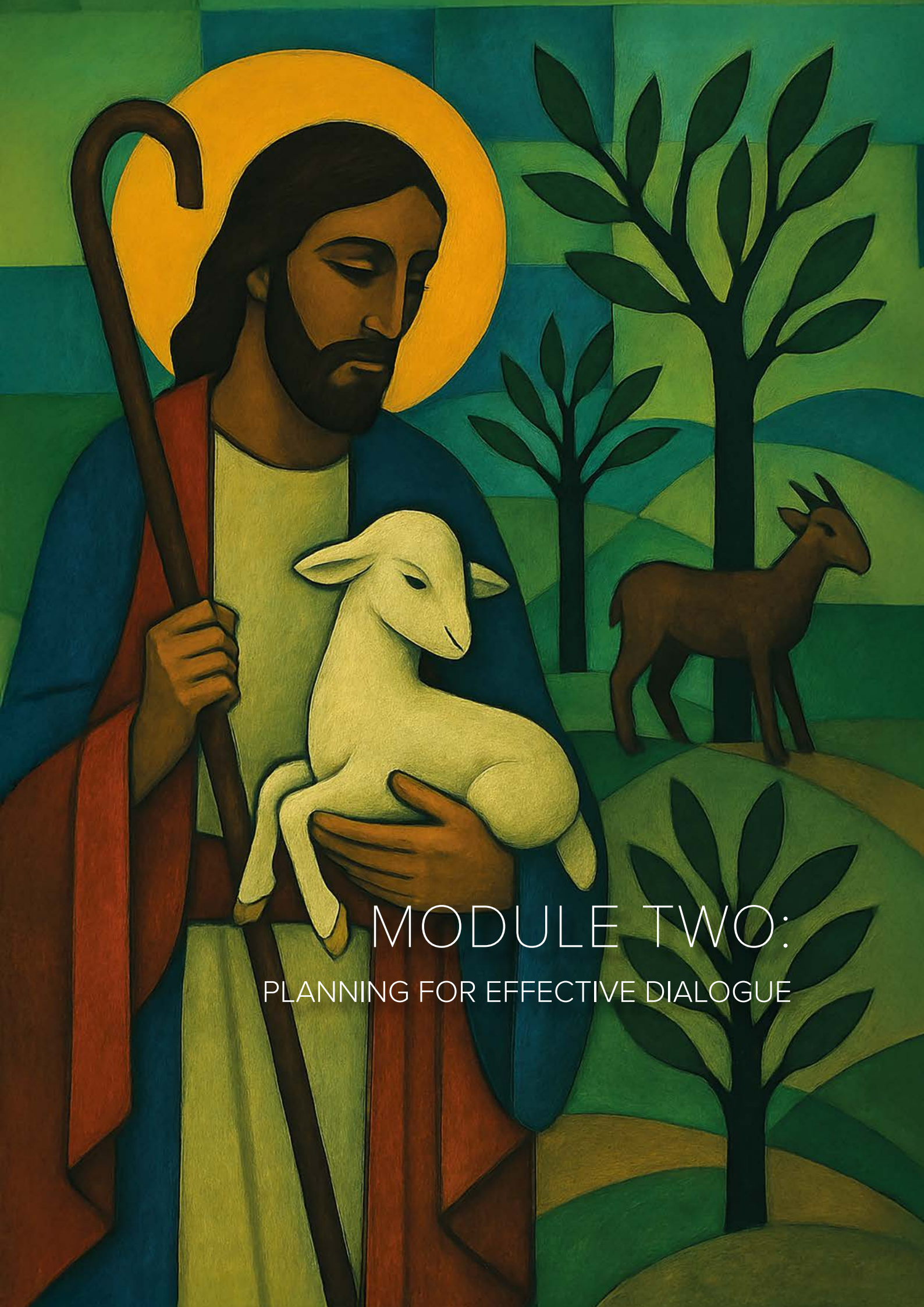
This kind of dialogue would be very risky, if not impossible, in a wider public square that was deeply polarised. It was possible in the Thulana Centre because of the long-term investment of the founder, Catholic priest Fr Aloysius Pieris, to the development of Christian-Buddhist relations through the promotion of dialogue that is grounded in spirituality and philosophy while engaging with the social and ethical challenges facing Sri Lankan society. This is evident from the artwork surrounding the centre, where Buddhist sculptors and artists have been invited to engage with Christian Scripture and depict important biblical scenes. The commitment to study and learning is reflected in the centre's extensive library which offers a rich resource for understanding Sri Lanka's religious past, while a memorial to lives lost in the conflict is a reminder of the pain that overshadows the present, making this kind of work urgent and necessary.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

The following questions may help you to think about how you apply this learning in your own context.

- What do you consider to be the priority issues in your context where faith communities might contribute through dialogue about shared concerns for the local community, or the whole of humanity, and how faith values shape the approach to those concerns?
- Consider doing a simple mapping exercise of the other religious communities in your local area or other contexts where you work using the knowledge of the group and online and other available sources to identify places of worship, existing and potential new relationships, including any local inter religious networks and groups. Where are the spaces that faith communities meet currently?
- Are there existing structures that you could support, or does the situation require the creation of something new?





MODULE TWO:  
PLANNING FOR EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE

## OVERVIEW

Now that we understand what distinguishes interreligious dialogue from other forms of engagement and what it can contribute to the life and mission of Christian communities, this module is designed to help you prepare the ground for effective dialogue, whether that is initiating new relationships or deepening existing relationships.

This module will help you begin to think about the following aspects of interreligious dialogue:

- Creating conditions conducive to effective dialogue.
- Evaluating and measuring progress.

## INTRODUCTION

In preparing for dialogue we are seeking to create the conditions in which relationships of trust can develop and flourish. We strive to ensure that dialogue participants feel welcome and supported to contribute in a way that is true to themselves. Our primary focus in this context is likely to be on showing respect to the different religious identities represented, yet this is only part of the rich tapestry of multilayered identities each participant will bring to the experience. Recognising this complexity and preparing to navigate the challenges that may arise – such as, for example, tensions arising from different expectations of the role of women in religious communities – can help to remove or minimise some of the barriers to authentic participation at an early stage.

This preparatory work is often described in terms of creating *safe* spaces, but if the goal of the dialogue is to achieve meaningful engagement with issues that are important, challenging or even painful for communities, then you may find that you wish to be more ambitious, seeking to go beyond safety to get permission from the group to go on a courageous journey together. For instance, within Interfaith Glasgow, a conversation around the very difficult and fraught issue of the Palestine-Israel conflict led to publication of their resource “Creating Brave Spaces.”<sup>5</sup>

Above all, it is important to remember that dialogue is a process. We endeavour to establish good foundations at the outset and plan for regular evaluation, or checking in, with participants to learn as we go and adapt where necessary.

<sup>5</sup> Interfaith Glasgow, ‘Creating Brave Spaces’, 2023 [https://interfaithglasgow.org/publications/?dm\\_i=74W9,H9VB,173N54,266PK,1](https://interfaithglasgow.org/publications/?dm_i=74W9,H9VB,173N54,266PK,1)

## BIBLICAL REFLECTION:

### Matthew 25: 31-40

In our interreligious dialogue we seek to share a vision of the Kingdom of God in which all can find belonging and peace and joy in right relationships. Christ explained to his followers that the realisation of this vision is to be found in compassionate attention, outreach, care and compassion to those who find themselves excluded or pushed to the margins. It also speaks of how we recognize Christ in our neighbour regardless of who they are.

In this, Jesus stands in the same tradition as the books of Ruth and Jonah in the Old Testament that were challenging the narrow visions that we find in Ezra and Nehemiah. How might reflection on this passage inspire our approach to the creation of spaces for dialogue?

## DISCUSSION

The KAICIID international dialogue centre lists ten core principles of dialogue<sup>6</sup>:

- Relationship comes first.
- Establish a safe space.
- Establish a community agreement (set ground rules).
- The main purpose of dialogue is mutual learning.
- Practice active and compassionate listening.
- Be honest: articulate feelings, confront perceptions, take risks.
- Do not quit or avoid difficult issues.
- Address difficult questions gradually in approach and departure.
- Expect to be transformed.
- Bring transformation to others.

Giving priority to relationships requires us to resist the temptation to jump too quickly into substantive discussions leading to agreed actions, but rather to give adequate attention to the process that will hold the group together. It can be challenging to make the case for this investment of time in a context where the resources of religious communities are over-stretched and many members are time-poor.

We have all heard disparaging comments about “talking shops,” but time spent at the beginning of the process establishing strong foundations, allowing participants to get to know each other and clarifying expectations is likely to enable the group to move more quickly to in-depth engagement and stay on track.

<sup>6</sup> KAICIID Fellowship Training Materials (2025).

### Zones of Dialogue tool

The KAICIID training programme uses the following Zones of Dialogue tool to help participants reflect on, and evaluate the impact of their experiences:



It is suggested that the stretch zone is most conducive to learning. In this space we can experience the discomfort of vulnerability and/or exposure to concepts, ideas and experiences outside of our normal reality, while still having a sense of being grounded and trusting in the process. In the panic zone we are likely to experience barriers to learning and connection in the form of stress. We may feel a sense of disconnection or alienation from the group. Some exposure to the panic zone may be helpful as we explore our limits, and can offer useful insights, but if it is a regular occurrence it can be an indication that something is wrong with the process.

It can be tempting to create the conditions that will allow all participants to remain in their comfort zone for the duration of the time spent together, but this is unlikely to maximise the creative potential of the group as comfort will often be an indication that participants are focussing on the known and the familiar and therefore less likely to experience transformation. Some time spent in the comfort zone as part of any dialogue experience can be helpful and affirming, and can be an indication of friendships and deepening relationships.

The following considerations may help you to create the conditions in which participants will spend a significant proportion of the dialogue in the stretch zone, secure in their identity but open to the challenge of learning from others.

### Outreach/Invitation

Whether as host or guest it is important to ensure that the purpose of the dialogue is clear in the invitation, to manage expectations and facilitate planning. The physical space in which dialogue takes place can have a significant impact in a range of ways including location (for example, whether people are being asked to come into a neighbourhood that is unfamiliar to them) and who is hosting (which can impact power dynamics). In Module 3 we will consider guiding principles for visits to places of worship as host and guest. When reaching out to another religious community for the first time it may be helpful to choose together a neutral venue which does not belong to any of the participating faith groups. How people are welcomed sets the tone for the gathering.

Where possible having a list of names in advance (and an understanding of how people wish to be addressed) can make it easier to greet people and be prepared to receive them. Name badges or name cards on tables can also help the group to call each other by name and feel more connected. An essential element when planning for the hospitality is consideration of dietary requirements arising from religious beliefs and practice to ensure that everyone has similar access to refreshments and to avoid, where possible, serving something that could make some participants feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. Timing is another critical element, taking account of when different religious communities meet for prayer or worship and any other limitations arising from religious practice and the marking of religious festivals.

### Introductions

The first round of introductions can be a very vulnerable experience for a group meeting for the first time, perhaps pushing some participants into the 'panic zone'. The goal is to enable each participant to feel welcomed, valued and affirmed in their identity at the outset. Where participants are attending as a group there can be a tendency to look to a leader to speak for the group in a way that can imbalance the dialogue, and it may be helpful to break into small group encounters to encourage everyone to participate. If opting for an 'ice-breaker' type exercise it is important to ensure that any questions used are inclusive of all cultures represented. A question such as, 'what has brought you here today?', can be effective as it is sufficiently personal to allow you to learn something about participants without straying into areas that people might not be comfortable talking about.

### Community agreement

Before moving to work together on the community agreement or ground rules that will guide how you engage with one another in dialogue, it can be helpful to hear from each participant about any hopes, fears, expectations or concerns about the dialogue process. This can be done verbally through roundtable sharing, or in writing using 'Post It' notes.

An important question to consider is: what is the overarching objective for the dialogue? Is it to build relationships, to respond to a particular problem or societal challenge, to establish a foundation for collaboration? The specific question(s) to be considered can be decided and refined later in the process, but it is vital to ensure at this point that you have a strong consensus regarding the overall direction of travel. Ground rules for dialogue suggested by the KAICIID centre<sup>7</sup> include:

- Confidentiality
- Respect differences
- Be true to your own beliefs without being false to others
  - No advice-giving
- Fairness of time and space
  - No interruptions
  - Right to pass
- Avoid generalisations
  - Speak for yourself
  - Ask, do not assume

You may find these helpful areas to consider when establishing your own ground rules. What practices and reassurance will be required to create the conditions that will give the group permission to go on a learning journey together?

Confidentiality is often an important consideration in interreligious dialogue and it may be useful to spend some time unpacking this aspect as participants may be taking a risk in participating in this form of outreach if their religious community as a whole is apprehensive or less than fully supportive.

There may also be challenges about the extent to which people can be considered to be speaking in a personal or a representative capacity. The usual practice of Chatham House rules – sharing the content of dialogue without attributing comments to particular speakers – may be insufficient to give reassurance in a context where religious, cultural and other differences could make people easy to identify. Discussion about photographs, social media and any other proposals for public communications may also be helpful here.

A commitment to self-reflection and feedback as part of the process can help ensure that any issues can be addressed and maximise the opportunities for learning.

### **Defining the focus**

It is important to ensure that the group as a whole has ownership of the agenda, and that the questions to be considered are, as far as possible, inclusive, meaningful to all and with the potential to have real impact in terms of the overarching objectives/intentions for the process.

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7 KAICIID Fellowship Training Materials (2025)

The following case study illustrates the kind of tensions that can arise when participants approach a dialogue with different objectives. When a group of Hindus and Christians came together for a conversation it became clear that there were differing agendas in the room. The Christians were driven by a desire to learn more about Hinduism and ways in which they could cooperate on shared interests. Some of the Hindu participants wished to address different questions. They were deeply troubled by Christian support for missionary work in India. There were differing expectations as to the purpose of dialogue, whether it was to “get to the bottom” of an intractable and neuralgic issue with a view to reaching a common agreement, or whether it was more generally concerned with mutual learning and understanding diversity and difference. Through a process of wrestling with difficult issues and careful listening, relationships were deepened and differing points of view were understood, even if they were not fully shared.

For dialogues aimed at relationship-building in a broad sense questions such as the following, developed by the Inter Faith Network for the UK<sup>8</sup> could offer a helpful place to start:

- What does it mean to live well together?
- How do we discern and agree values held in common that underpin our shared society?
- How do we live out, with commitment and integrity, our faith/beliefs in a diverse society and in a society where religion is often misunderstood?
- How do we negotiate our differences effectively and courteously?
- What resources can we draw on from our religious traditions for positive engagement with our wider society, and how can these resources be more widely shared both within our own communities and more widely?
- How can we engage with those from within our communities who do not wish to work positively with other communities or our wider society?

If your goal is to facilitate a collective response or collaborative action on a particular problem, you may find it helpful to use an analytical tool or exercise with the group to identify potential questions to work on, such as the Problem Tree method.<sup>9</sup>

You may wish to have the group vote on the question(s) for consideration to test the consensus.

8 Inter Faith Network for the UK, *Living Well Together* (2011) <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/uploads/questions-for-ifw2011.pdf>

9 An overview of how this works is provided by the think-tank ODI Global, ‘Planning Tools: Problem tree analysis’ (13 January 2009) <https://odi.org/en/publications/planning-tools-problem-tree-analysis/>

### Facilitation and inclusion

The facilitation plan will flow from the principles outlined in the community agreement or ground rules. It should have sufficient structure to give reassurance and ensure fairness to all participants, for example, keeping to the agenda and timings, while also not being overly rigid to allow space for creativity and for unexpected ideas to emerge from the wisdom of the group and, from a Christian perspective, for the work of the Spirit.

The facilitator will play an important role in ensuring the dynamics of the group are supportive to all participants, taking into account that diversity is about much more than just religious identity and that important identity-based differences will cross religious boundaries.

Areas to consider include:

- racial and ethnic differences, and in particular the impact of racism;
- gender;
- age;
- different family backgrounds and situations;
- different roles – for example whether people are participating as employees or volunteers;
- the role of “converts” from one faith to another
- different educational backgrounds;
- differences in employment and income;
- different communication and learning styles;
- fluency in English.

These and other factors can impact the extent to which all participants feel supported and empowered to engage in dialogue, and the risk that a small number of participants might dominate. A related consideration is the extent to which the group is balanced in terms of representation of the participating faith communities and/or reflective of the wider community.

### Feedback and learning

Taking time at the end of each dialogue session to encourage shared learning and identify any changes that could enhance participation will be worthwhile. Inviting participants to engage in self-reflection on their own learning, how they will apply that learning, and what has challenged them from the experience can be a useful starting point. It may be helpful to offer a variety of ways for people to give feedback on their experience, such as roundtable sharing, written feedback or online forms (with the latter two offering the option for confidential feedback).

## CASE STUDY

The Dublin City Inter Faith Forum has its origins in an initiative of the Irish Council of Churches which had been working on supporting the integration of migrants and people seeking asylum in local church communities. One of the recommendations of this project was the need for greater investment in interreligious dialogue to tackle racism, religiously-motivated discrimination and other barriers to belonging. Dublin City Council and the Lord Mayor's Office were approached to host a series of encounters between representatives of different faith communities and the Forum was established. To support and guide the work a Charter was agreed which states:

We, as representatives of our respective faiths, communities and organisations, members of Dublin City Interfaith Forum, commit to the following aims:

- To commit to, and freely practice, our religious beliefs, customs and practices and accept the freedom of others to do likewise.
- To dedicate ourselves to the values of peace, justice, solidarity and defence of the dignity of each human being as a valued member of our shared society.
- To promote dialogue between the different communities of belief co-existing in our city, we believe this to be fundamental to guaranteeing the necessary conditions for living together in peace, justice and solidarity.
- To share our experiences, and strengthen our collaboration and partnership, so we will jointly be able to build a better society, city and country.
- To encourage dialogue between people of different beliefs and faiths in all spheres of life, to eradicate misunderstanding, intolerance and exclusion, and extend openness and understanding between our different faith communities.
- To focus our efforts on encouraging the young towards real acceptance of religious diversity by developing programmes which reflect the joint fundamental values of our faiths while maintaining our own individual beliefs.
- To develop our appreciation of religious differences and diversity to focus on our similarities, share values and common respect for humanity and planet.
- To create social conditions that will allow all to share peace, joy and hope.

A report on the launch of the Charter for the Council of Europe 'Inter cultural cities' project in 2016 drew particular attention to the importance placed on evaluation and learning from past experience by the Forum in order to deepen and develop the work of inclusion.<sup>10</sup>

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

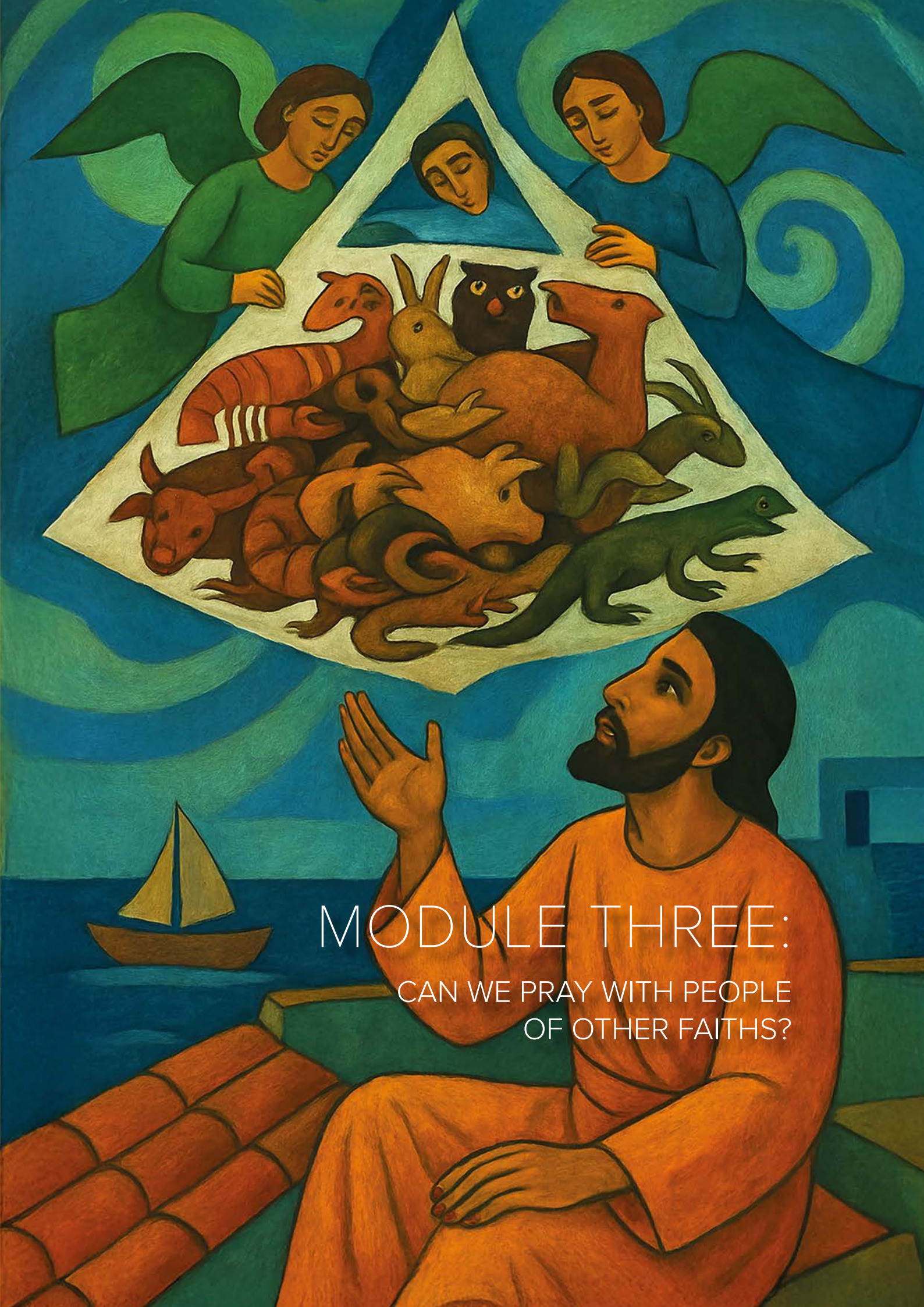
- How might you approach and explore questions of identity in an interreligious group?
- How could you help ensure flexibility in the process to make changes as necessary to improve inclusion and participation?
- What challenges might you anticipate in communicating about your work beyond the group?

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<sup>10</sup> Council of Europe, 'Launch of Dublin City Interfaith Charter', 20 December 2016 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/-/launch-of-dublin-city-interfaith-charter>







MODULE THREE:  
CAN WE PRAY WITH PEOPLE  
OF OTHER FAITHS?

## OVERVIEW

This module will help you begin to think about the following aspects of interreligious dialogue:

- How to engage with questions around prayer and worship as part of interreligious dialogue.
- Planning for interreligious encounter and dialogue in places of worship.

## INTRODUCTION

Worship and prayer are at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. This is something we share with many other faith communities, yet, paradoxically, this is for many people a definitive example of what cannot be shared in interreligious encounter and dialogue. Witnessing to our faith with authenticity and integrity requires us to engage with the spiritual dimension of the challenges we face, but accommodating vastly different beliefs in shared space can be difficult. In this module we will not attempt to offer easy answers, but rather seek to encourage you to ask meaningful questions and take the courageous steps that will allow for in-depth, rather than superficial, engagement with questions around prayer and worship. In particular, we encourage you to think about how visits to places of worship can contribute to dialogue processes by providing deep insights into, and a sense of connection with, different religious communities.

## BIBLICAL REFLECTION:

### Acts 10:1-16

The story of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles is one that is set in a context of mind-boggling religious diversity. Although Christianity begins within Judaism, it very soon had to navigate itself through a very colourful and often daunting world of the Roman Empire in the first century. With it came great challenge – the edges and boundaries were often blurred, and various people come and knock at the door and ask “what about me?” The story of Peter and Cornelius is one such example where boundaries and limits are frequently questioned and challenged, not least by those who came knocking at the door.

Prayer is an obvious example – it is common to many different religious traditions and sometimes these approaches can enrich our understand of what Christian prayer is about (for example the strong commitment with Islam to regular praying) and at other times challenge us to think whether authentic prayer is possible when shared with other traditions. In a similar way to the Apostle Peter, we are presented with different spiritual fruits and foods, that we might discern how to respond to others in faithfulness.

## DISCUSSION

Religious diversity raises an important question: if we worship alongside people from other faiths, are we worshipping the same God? This is not an easy question to answer and there will be different views on this among Christians according to theological conviction or the tradition to which we belong. Furthermore, the answer may depend on the religion. Christianity has traditionally spoken of God as known through Jesus Christ and yet also a mystery beyond our understanding. This last point is something that Christianity shares with other faiths too. Many involved in inter faith work will answer this by saying “we do not know” and do not necessarily feel compelled to provide a definitive answer. But great care must be taken not to place anybody in a position where they feel uncomfortable or compromised. Therefore, creating opportunities of spiritual solidarity needs very careful thought and a good deal of wisdom and care.

CTBI has published a resource entitled *Praying Together in Multi Faith Contexts: Some Ecumenical Reflections* which explores different ways of approaching interreligious engagement on questions of prayer and worship.<sup>11</sup> It gives an overview of key developments in the ecumenical conversations around worship in an inter faith context, exploring different approaches to liturgical hospitality and the possible significance of shared silence.

The focus of this module will be the ways in which questions and decisions around prayer and worship can impact interreligious dialogue, for example in considering whether space for prayer or worship might form part of the dialogue process, or any actions arising from it, or in planning for visits to places of worship.

As previously stated, there are no easy answers to the questions but, if approached in a spirit of dialogue, they can offer opportunities for deeper understanding and stronger relationships. An important starting point might be to consider, as noted above, the significance of prayer and worship in different religious traditions. When exploring how to incorporate elements of prayer or worship into your interreligious dialogue, the following principles may offer a helpful starting point for consideration:

- Careful explanation at the start so everyone understands what will happen and why.
- Making the planning group as inclusive as possible.
- Ensuring that no-one is asked to engage in any ritual or activity which they feel might compromise them.

<sup>11</sup> CTBI, *Praying Together in Multi Faith Contexts: Some Ecumenical Reflections*, (2022) <https://ctbi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Praying-Together-in-Multi-Faith-Contexts-Some-Ecumenical-Reflections.pdf>

### Visits to places of worship

Visits to places of worship provide valuable insights into the life of a religious community and a unique opportunity for understanding and connection. Navigating sacred spaces in a way that is respectful and inclusive can present significant challenges for both host and guest. The following steps can help ensure that all participants can enjoy a supportive learning experience:

- Preparatory conversation – ensuring both hosts and guests have a shared understanding of the purpose of the visit;
- Understanding the space – sharing information about the place of worship in advance can help guests to prepare, particularly if there are rules or practices around how people move around the sacred space that would be helpful to know in advance.
- Welcome – explaining in advance what is expected in terms of attire and when, for example, participants might be asked to cover their heads and/or remove shoes, for example, or when people might be asked to keep silent, can help people to feel more confident when entering a new environment. It can also be helpful to discuss how people will be greeted (whether, for example, handshakes are appropriate, and being sensitive to issues of how men and women interact within different faith communities).

If participants are to be invited to observe and/or join in prayer or worship activity it would be helpful to discuss this in advance. Without this preparation guests can face an unhelpful dilemma of having to choose between the refusal of hospitality or engaging in an activity they feel might compromise their faith. It is important to recognise that even within the same religious community people will have different boundaries.

Any sharing of food or drink as part of the hospitality should include planning for dietary requirements arising from religious observance.

## CASE STUDY

Consider the following experience of interreligious dialogue in a university context:

“When I was at theological college there was regular contact with a nearby Muslim college. We had visited them and learned about Islam, took our shoes off as we entered the mosque, and respectfully listened as they explained the uniqueness of the Islamic faith. When it was the turn of Muslim staff and students to visit us in our college, two of the Christian students moved the cross that was sitting on the altar in the Chapel and put it discreetly away in the vestry: they wanted Muslims to feel welcome in their Chapel and were concerned that the symbol of the cross would be problematic to them. When the visitors came into the Chapel they were told about different aspects of the worship space and how they related to Christian faith and liturgy – the stained-glass windows, the purpose of the altar, lectern and pulpit. When it came to questions, one Muslim visitor asked why this Chapel did not have a cross within it? With embarrassment it was explained that it had been quietly put away next door. The response was one of consternation – they could not understand why Christians would downplay a central aspect of their faith on an occasion of Christian-Muslim encounter and dialogue”.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

- In planning for interreligious encounter and dialogue what steps might you take to minimise the risk of conflict or controversy about questions of prayer and worship?
- What kind of information would you need to give someone visiting your place of worship for the first time?
- Can you think of an occasion when you had a positive experience of sharing of prayer or worship in an inter faith context? What was significant about the inclusion of this element in the event/initiative? What aspects of the planning and organisation made this a positive experience for you?

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“If I am not doing the works of  
my Father, then do not believe me.  
But if I do them, even though you do  
not believe me, believe the works, so  
that you may know and understand  
that the Father is in me and I am  
in the Father.”

– John 10:37-38.

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## MODULE FOUR:

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE: NEGOTIATING OUR  
WORDS IN A MULTI-FAITH CONTEXT

## OVERVIEW

This module will help you begin to think about the following aspects of inter religious dialogue:

- Consider the implications of language, and in particular, the impact of prejudice as part of your planning.
- Anticipate challenges around language in community agreements/ ground rules at the beginning of a dialogue.

## INTRODUCTION

Language is immensely powerful and has the potential to do good or cause harm. When we consider how language has changed over time in response to the work of racial and gender justice, for example, we see how words and phrases that were once considered to be acceptable or innocuous are now known to be highly prejudiced and offensive. Deeply held differences around language are an unavoidable element of the reality in which our dialogue will take place. Intolerance around language can be a characteristic of the kind of social polarisation we seek to overcome through our interreligious dialogue, creating spaces in which, by contrast, we can embrace cultural diversity and complexity of identity.

At the same time, there are limits on what is acceptable. Labels and prejudicial judgements on groups of people that are considered to be “hate speech” are clearly unacceptable. As facilitators of dialogue we have a responsibility to take steps to protect participants from language that is hurtful or harmful, seeking instead to create an environment that is conducive to learning together in a spirit of compassionate curiosity. Sadly, there is much work still to be done in developing knowledge and understanding of different religious traditions in today’s society and therefore we can anticipate challenges, and the need to encourage self-critical reflection among participants as part of the dialogue process.

## BIBLICAL REFLECTION:

### John 10:22-39

Christianity has its roots in Judaism. The earliest Christians were Jews who were subsequently joined by gentiles from around the Roman Empire. The conflict between the early church and those sections in Judaism who rejected this new religious development frames much of how the New Testament was written. But between this time and the present day are centuries of anti-Judaism that have blamed the Jews collectively for the death of Jesus, even though it was the Romans that executed him.

When we read passages such as this from the Gospel of John (and elsewhere) it is easy to fall into a characterization of Judaism and Christianity being at odds with one another, even though Jesus himself was Jewish, as were his disciples. This is a good illustration of how we must be vigilant in the way we read and interpret scripture, and for those who prepare sermons and Bible studies this is especially important. It might be helpful to be mindful of modern-day Jewish readings of the gospels that have suggested that Jesus himself may have been a trained Pharisee and these frequent arguments are indicative of the vigorous theological debates that took place between religious scholars who held opinions with great passion.

## DISCUSSION

The respect for diversity we seek to promote in our interreligious dialogue extends to the use of language, encouraging participants to notice how their use of language or choice of words may differ from that of other participants, and to explore the significance of that in a spirit of respectful and compassionate curiosity, rather than seeking to debate or dominate by defining the context in their own terms. A helpful first step in this regard, and one that might be included in any community agreement or ground rules (see Module 2) is to respect how people define themselves, their identity – personal and community – and their reality.

It can also be helpful to explore together at an early stage the impact of prejudice and stereotypes. This might be done, for example, by inviting representatives of different religious traditions to share examples of misconceptions or generalisations about their religious community, how that compares to the reality, and the impact of these stereotypes or prejudices.

The facilitator(s) may wish to remind participants of the importance of not generalising from limited experience, and notice the common temptation to see complexity in ourselves (for example the awareness that not all Christians think alike) but assume greater simplicity in others.

It may be useful to give consideration in advance to how you will respond to challenges that may arise, for example, from inappropriate use of language by a participant. Where possible, raising the awareness of the whole group rather than 'calling out' individuals who may then experience shame and alienation, is preferable.

Setting aside time for reflection at the end of the dialogue session can provide space in which to do this.

Providing regular breaks also gives the opportunity to address any issues that have arisen in one-to-one or smaller group conversations.

There are a number of issues for Christians to consider when reflecting on the language of interreligious dialogue. In the British and Irish contexts we are accustomed to a public square that has been shaped culturally by Christianity. This can make us less sensitive to the ways in which we could be dominating the space and defining it in our terms – or allowing others to do so – in ways that alienate others, for example, referring to local faith communities as ‘parishes’.

It is important to recognise also the examples of prejudice and supremacy that have historically been part of our language, connected in some cases to the legacy of colonialism and the Eurocentrism that has resulted. Sensitivity to this history can be a helpful element of our critical self-reflection as part of the learning journey.

To give some examples: consider, for example, how we have updated our language in the area of overseas mission. A popular mission hymn from the 19<sup>th</sup> century that was still being sung until relatively recently, serves as an example. Written by Reginald Heber (1783-1826), author of many well-known hymns such as “Holy, holy, holy! Lord God almighty”, and “Brightest and best are the sons of the morning”, it includes these words:

From Greenland’s icy mountains,  
From India’s coral strand;  
Where Afric’s sunny fountains  
Roll down their golden sand:  
From many an ancient river,  
From many a palmy plain,  
They call us to deliver  
Their land from error’s chain.<sup>12</sup>

Such words are unlikely to be used today, regardless of our theology of mission! They belong to a moment in time when Western churches equated the Great Commission with the cultural superiority of Europe and saw the need to conquer and control other cultures, often suppressing their religious traditions.

Perhaps the most obvious context where language can be challenging is in relation to Judaism. This is because Christianity grew out of Judaism and came to see itself as the replacement thereof.

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<sup>12</sup> Reginald Herber (1819) ‘From Greenland’s icy mountains’ [https://hymnary.org/text/from\\_greenlands\\_icy\\_mountains](https://hymnary.org/text/from_greenlands_icy_mountains)

The Church was often spoken of as the new Israel which by implication suggested that there was no need of a continued flourishing in Judaism because it had been replaced by Christianity. At its most extreme example Jews were blamed for the death of Christ and were deemed to be cursed for eternity.

The language of the New Testament, whilst written in the context of the early church's struggle to develop its own identity in relation to Judaism, can seem in the 21st century to be problematic at times. So, text such as "let his blood be on us and on our children" has a chilling resonance in our time, living as we do in a post-Holocaust world. In addition, without knowing it, this form of anti-Judaism can seep into Christian worship and spirituality without us realising. Consider this example from the hymn *Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending*:

Ev'ry eye shall now behold him,  
 Robed in dreadful majesty;  
 Those who set at naught and sold him,  
 Pierced and nailed him to a tree,  
 Deeply wailing,  
 Deeply wailing,  
 Deeply wailing,  
 Shall the true Messiah see.<sup>13</sup>

Both examples collectively blame the Jews for the crucifixion of Christ and stand within a long tradition of latent (and in some respects), unintentional anti-Judaism. A critical theological task has been undertaken by theologians since the Holocaust in re-evaluating Christian theology and the way in which the New Testament has been interpreted as being in open hostility to the Jewish people. The eminent Scottish theologian Thomas Torrance goes a stage further:

"The time has surely come for us to enlist the aid of the Jews in helping us to interpret Jesus as he is actually presented to us in the Jewish scriptures. We desperately need Jewish eyes to help us see what we cannot see because of our gentile lenses, that is the culture-conditioned habits of thought and interpretation which we bring to Jesus, and which makes us read into him the kind of observational images which have played such a dominant role in our literary culture and, until recent decades, our scientific culture as well."<sup>14</sup>

13 Charles Wesley (1758) 'Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending' [https://hymnary.org/text/lo\\_he\\_comes\\_with\\_clouds\\_descending\\_once](https://hymnary.org/text/lo_he_comes_with_clouds_descending_once)

14 Torrance, Thomas F. *The Mediation of Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983, p. 29.

More broadly it is tempting to compare the worst of another religion with the best of ours. We might instinctively regard our own faith as primarily concerned with love and forgiveness and assume that this is unique to Christianity. We might be prone to thinking that Christianity takes a much higher road than others and the failure of many Christians to follow this way – often to devastating effect – can be occluded in our minds.

We might also for instance slip into broad theological generalisations about other faiths from within a particular Christian theological conviction. For instance, people of certain Protestant traditions with the emphasis upon Gospel over law or justification by faith alone, might be tempted to describe traditions such as Islam being too law-orientated or Sikhism as too much salvation by works: the reality is much more complex than that, and therefore it is wise to hold back the language of generalisation.

In our interreligious dialogue we are not seeking to eliminate difference or to sidestep conflicts about the past, present or future, but rather to allow as much freedom as possible within the limits of respect for the dignity of all. A rigid tightly controlled dialogue can feel very safe but can result in superficial engagement. As Professor Patrice Brodeur has cautioned: “Dialogue can become so mechanical that it excludes the essential spirituality and becomes inauthentic.”<sup>15</sup> With the right foundations we can ensure that our dialogue is both protective and productive.

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<sup>15</sup> Lecture, KAICIID Fellowship training programme (2025).

## CASE STUDY

In May 2022 the Church of Scotland, together with representatives of the Jewish community, published a Jewish-Christian Glossary to explain key terms in both religious traditions and serve as a resource to encourage and support dialogue.<sup>16</sup> This resource is a helpful contribution to interreligious dialogue, made all the more meaningful by its origin in a conflict that threatened to damage relationships. On 22 May 2014 Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis addressed the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, and spoke of the hurt in the Jewish community arising from the adoption at the previous year's Assembly of a report entitled *The inheritance of Abraham? A report on the 'promised land'* which challenged the scriptural basis for the claim of a privileged relationship between the Jewish people and the land of Israel. Responding to the ensuing controversy the Chief Rabbi appealed for "a deeper appreciation of each other's traditions" arguing that "[f]or a real and meaningful relationship we need to internalise how the other views itself."<sup>17</sup>

An interreligious dialogue group was established to consider these questions and in May 2023 the Chief Rabbi returned to the General Assembly for the launch of the glossary resource stating: "We were determined to engage in a process of healing and we achieved that through dialogue... Because the most important ingredient of constructive dialogue is not what you say, but it's how you listen. We listened, you listened, and together, we restored a good relationship ... We've still got some way to go. We've still got some work to do. There are still some painful issues, but we continue to engage with warmth and in friendship on this sacred journey because we cherish the value of unity and peace and we don't ever more want to find ourselves in a position of painful divisiveness".<sup>18</sup>

16 Church of Scotland and Office of the Chief Rabbi, A Christian-Jewish Glossary (2023) [https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/108745/ocr23-01\\_a-jewish-christian-glossary\\_a4\\_v4.pdf](https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/108745/ocr23-01_a-jewish-christian-glossary_a4_v4.pdf)

17 Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, 'Chief Rabbi address the General Assembly' (22 May 2014) [https://www.scojec.org/news/2014/14v\\_chief\\_rabbi/chief\\_rabbi.html](https://www.scojec.org/news/2014/14v_chief_rabbi/chief_rabbi.html)

18 Church of Scotland, 'Chief Rabbi tells the General Assembly of journey towards healing through dialogue' (25 May 2023) <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news-and-events/news/archive/2023/chief-rabbi-tells-the-general-assembly-of-journey-towards-healing-through-dialogue>

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

- Think of a time when you experienced or witnessed prejudice about your faith. How did that make you feel? What would have made that situation better?
- Can you think of a time when you felt vulnerable in an encounter with another religious tradition because of lack of knowledge or experience? What could you and/or others have done to help prevent this? How could you apply this learning in your future work?
- Which aspects of the language of interreligious dialogue are you most nervous or apprehensive about? What would help build your confidence?

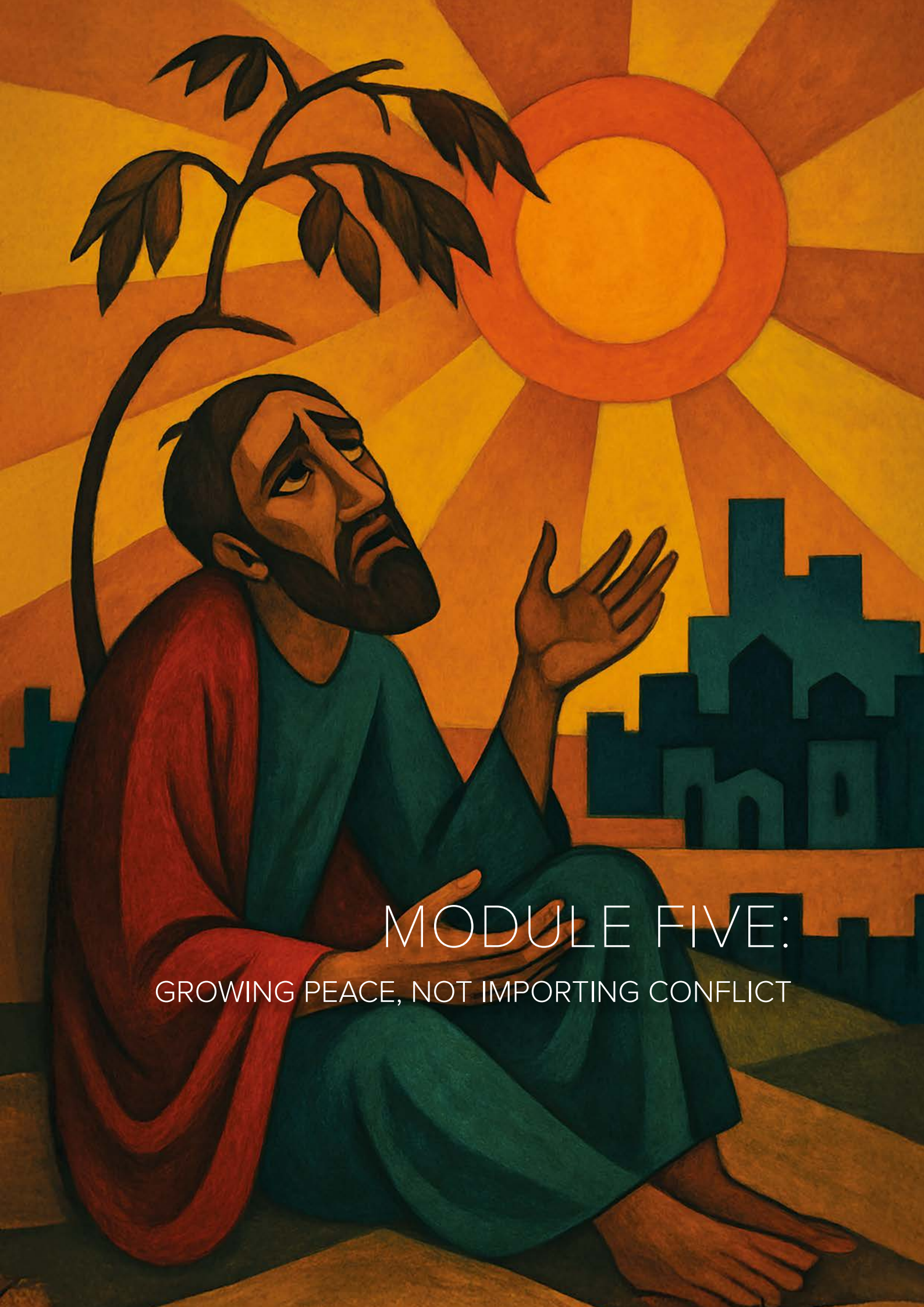


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Then the Lord said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

– Jonah 4:10-11

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MODULE FIVE:  
GROWING PEACE, NOT IMPORTING CONFLICT

## OVERVIEW

This module will help you begin to think about the following aspects of inter religious dialogue:

- How to keep a vision for peace at the heart of your interreligious encounter and dialogue.
- How to deal with the tensions that can arise as a result of conflicts in the wider international context.
- How to communicate about your journeying together in friendship and hope with your neighbours of different faiths in the midst of tensions and pressures on relationships.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the challenging aspects to interreligious relations at the present time is the way in which events overseas can impact upon community relations across Britain and Ireland. Reports of violence and human rights violations in other parts of the world will understandably provoke strong reactions and a desire to act in solidarity with those who are being victimised. Different religious communities can sometimes identify with different sides in an international context because of their religious, cultural and other identity-based connections. This includes differing perspectives on how to respond to the plight of Christians in other parts of the world who suffer discrimination or persecution by a dominant religious power: some might even see “dialogue” as a betrayal of them, whilst others may warn of the dangers of viewing a religion or faith through the behaviour of extremist governments or political players. In this section we will explore how we might navigate some of these challenges in our interreligious dialogue.

We can easily think of examples of this kind of conflict. The most obvious at present is the Israel-Palestine conflict, but we can think of many more in recent years such as the impact of the dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir on Hindu-Muslim relations, and the religious dimensions of conflicts in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Syria, to name but a few.

In this section we offer some basic guidelines on how best to uphold our commitment to peace and our vision of reconciliation, in dialogue and relationship with people of other faiths, especially where we find it difficult to identify common ground.

## BIBLICAL REFLECTION

**Jonah 4:1-11; Hebrews 12:14-17**

In our time we are hearing much language of division and there are voices that seek to weaponize international events with a view to undermining community relations at home. Yet this is strongly challenged by the book of Jonah: God has compassion for all people and this should be reflected in the way we live our lives. Like Jonah we too are called to rise above any kind of resentment and to see our fellow human beings as made in the image of God and therefore under the compassion of God. Likewise the letter to the Hebrews exhorts us to pursue peace with everyone and eschew all kinds of bitterness. Therefore within our own communities there is a strong Christian vocation to maintain good relations even when our hearts are breaking or our veins rush with anger when we see so much injustice and suffering in other parts of the world.

## DISCUSSION

The title of the 2023 CTBI resource on the Israel-Palestine conflict ‘Torn in Two’ reflects the painful tension we experience as we endeavour to resist being drawn into the pressure to pick a side in conflict, seeking instead to advocate for a just peace and for the rights of all victims and survivors of violence and oppression.<sup>19</sup> In a CTBI-facilitated ecumenical workshop for Christian university chaplains on the theme of ‘looking forward and living together amidst difference’ in 2024 participants reflected on the challenge of navigating fragmenting inter faith relations on university campuses, using the following guiding questions:

- What gives you hope in the work that you do?
- Where do you feel you can have the most impact?
- What are the main limitations or barriers to this work?
- Based on these reflections, what actions might be taken?

These questions may be helpful to you as you consider how to approach pressures on relationships in your context. Throughout the conversations with the chaplains a recurring theme was that of friendship. Participants spoke of the pain of experiencing growing distance in friendships with colleagues of other faiths who advocated positions they found unacceptable. At the same time there was an awareness of the transformative power of friendship in the work of peace – a friendship that does not require agreement on all matters, or approval of everything the other person says or does, but conveys a concern for their wellbeing and a desire to keep the door always open for dialogue.

<sup>19</sup> CTBI, ‘Torn in Two’, (2023) <https://ctbiarchive.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Torn-In-Two-Responding-to-Conflict-in-IsraelPalestine-FINAL.pdf>

### Acknowledge the tensions

Advice from those experienced in interreligious dialogue, from different faith backgrounds, is consistent in warning against attempts to sidestep or minimise the challenges presented by international conflicts. These form a critical element of the context in which interreligious dialogue takes place and participants cannot be expected to set their feelings, concerns and experiences to the side even when the focus may be on a different issue. Acknowledging the tensions that exist, with honesty and integrity, while being clear and realistic about the purpose of your dialogue, is more likely to alleviate than exacerbate tensions. Reminding yourselves that it is not within your power to resolve these issues, but that you can make a contribution through better understanding, and exploring what actions might be possible together, may be helpful.

An awareness of the tensions that exist and the conflict that may arise may also inform your approach to facilitation as you consider what experience and/or skillsets might be helpful, and what preparation – such as preparatory conversations or briefing notes – might be required. Ensuring that the agenda draws attention to common ground and shared values, whether about this issue or other topics under consideration, may help convey a balanced perspective about your relationships in which the human reality of conflict is a part, but is far from the whole story.

### Dealing with conflict

Anticipating the potential for conflicts of this nature and taking steps to prepare can help to build confidence and trust. The preparations might include consideration of how you will deal with disagreement and differences of opinion as part of any community agreement or ground rules for dialogue (see Module 2), as well as reflection on issues of language (see Module 4). The power of silence as part of this process – for example, spending time together in silent reflection and/or having a roundtable sharing of personal reflections that are received into silence rather than debate – might be considered.

Accounts of Christian persecution overseas can sometimes be weaponized in political and ideological discourse that aim to divide different faith communities. It is helpful therefore to balance a strong Christian solidarity with the Church where it is persecuted with a commitment to good local relationships that does not see another faith tradition as monolithic nor blaming all the followers of one religion for the violence committed in their name.

It would be important to acknowledge the potential for both personal and community trauma as part of the experiences participants bring to the table in these discussions and agree together how best to show care and sensitivity to trauma as a group.

### Recognising religious extremism as a shared problem

Religious extremism (by which we refer to those who seek to justify violence to further a religious objective or who support the persecution of another faith) is both a barrier to interreligious relations and also for many people an important factor in motivating them to reach out to people of other faiths. There can be a temptation to focus on the religious extremism of the other, which in our case often includes the persecution of Christians, and have blindspots when it comes to violent extremism with connections to our own religious community. The rise in exclusivist Christian nationalism and the appropriation of Christian identity and symbols by groups seeking to intimidate and attack those they deem to be 'outsiders' are stark reminders that Christianity is not immune to this problem and helps us to empathise with those of other faiths when they experience pain and prejudice as a result of the misappropriation or abuse of their faith.<sup>20</sup>

### Solidarity

We may not always agree on how best to respond to global conflicts and violence, but we can lament the harm and loss of life they cause and express our solidarity with those who are experiencing fear and loss in the aftermath of violence. This kind of outreach can help sustain the conditions for continued journeying together in friendship despite our differences.

### Communicating a commitment to peace

Seeking shared language about a commitment to peace and identifying ways to communicate this together can help create a space conducive to relational engagement with the challenges of war and conflict and may form part of a contribution from your interreligious dialogue to the wider community.

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20 The 2024 David Goodbourn Lecture given by Canon Dr Clare Amos on the theme "All because of religion!" Religion, violence and the imperative of tranfiguration' can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLpeLAGICTo>

## CASE STUDY

### **Peace in every step, silent walking vigil for peace.**

On 21 January 2024 Quakers in Britain partnered with the Buddhist organisation Plum Village UK to organise a silent walking vigil in London. It was a faith-led and faith-filled response to the escalating violence in so many parts of the world, expressing the desire for peace and solidarity with all those suffering as a result of these conflicts, with the invitation to participate extended to people of all faiths as well as those who do not identify with a faith community. Faced with widening and deepening polarisation, representatives of different faiths came together in a reflective silence that was interspersed by appeals for peace from the different religious traditions. The Christian contribution made a connection with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and its theme for that year which took inspiration from the story of the Good Samaritan, with speaker Rowena Loverance sharing that, “it is a story about crossing boundaries that reminds us of the bonds that unite the whole human family”.<sup>21</sup> Reflecting on the impact of the initiative, John Cooper, Director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation stated:

“There was a real power in the silence that we all experienced. Different faiths, ages and backgrounds all united in a shared wish to break out of a world of violence into a world of peace. One of the most powerful elements of the walk was the deepening of the silence. You could hear everyone drop silent as we filled the road and set off on our walk. The silence deepened as we walked past government offices where decisions over war and peace are made.

In the middle of one of the world’s busiest cities, we walked silently for peace. We may have been fueled by different faiths, yet our unity of purpose and shared sense of silence sent a strong message. As I walked along I watched time after time as people quietly asked what we were protesting about. “A walk for peace” would come the reply and, after a pause, the people would smile, nod or give us thumbs up. In an era of noise, war and busyness, our sacred walk was respected and valued by all who encountered it.”<sup>22</sup>

The impact spread beyond the faith communities with coverage in media outlets including ITV London News, BBC Radio London and *The Guardian*.

21 Quakers in Britain, ‘Peace in every step: thousands join silent peace walk’, 22 January 2024 <https://www.quaker.org.uk/news-and-events/news/peace-is-every-step-thousands-join-silent-peace-walk>

22 Churches Together in England, ‘Peace in every step – the silent peace walk’, 22 January 2024 <https://cte.org.uk/peace-is-every-step-walk-report/>

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

Think about an international conflict that is impacting neighbours of other faiths in your local community. Consider the ways in which they might be experiencing trauma, such as bereavement, concern for family members, re-traumatisation from past personal experience or collective trauma from attacks on their religious community.

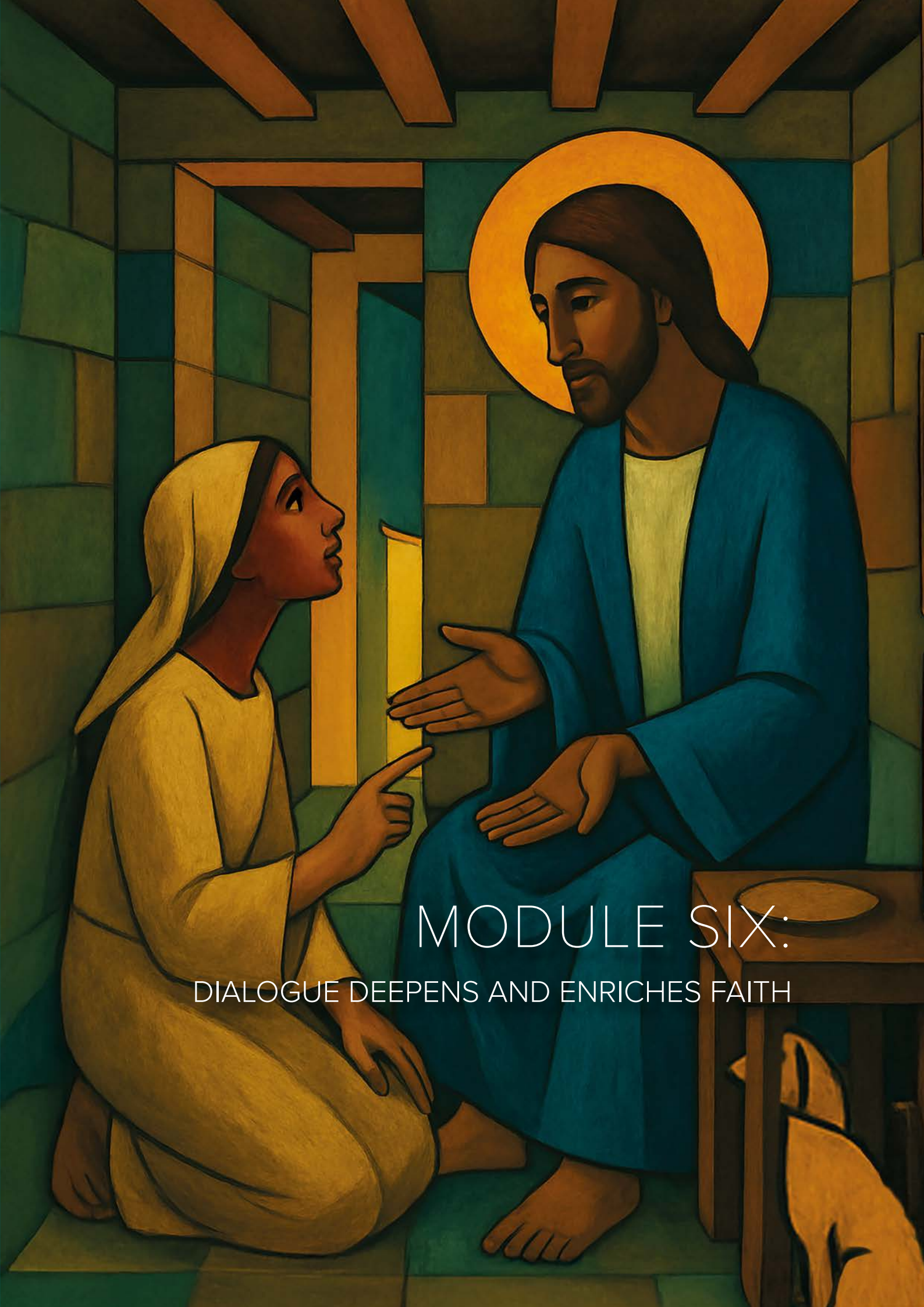
- How might a group show care and sensitivity to this trauma in interreligious dialogue?
- How might you set a hopeful tone for dialogue in a context of violent conflict? Could you, for example, invite participants to share something of what their faith tradition teaches about peace and then identify common themes and shared values as a foundation for the conversation?
- Consider what might help you prepare yourself to engage in deep listening where views expressed may be in conflict with your values: this might include spending time in prayer or Scripture reflection, taking time to set clear intentions for the engagement, or reading different perspectives on the conflict to provide insights into others' hopes and fears about the situation.

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But she answered him,  
“Sir, even the dogs under the  
table eat the children’s crumbs.”  
Then he said to her, “For saying that,  
you may go – the demon has left  
your daughter.” So she went home,  
found the child lying on the bed,  
and the demon gone.

– Mark 7:28-30

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# MODULE SIX:

DIALOGUE DEEPENS AND ENRICHES FAITH

## OVERVIEW

This module will help you begin to think about the following aspects of interreligious dialogue:

- How to identify and build on opportunities to strengthen your personal faith through dialogue with other religions.
- How to communicate about the relationship between mission and interreligious dialogue.
- How to collaborate with other religious communities around shared values.

## INTRODUCTION

Having considered the challenges and opportunities of interreligious dialogue for Christian communities, this final module seeks to help you reflect on how we deepen our faith through encounter and dialogue with others and communicate about the relationship between mission and interreligious dialogue in the life of the Church. This was the theme of the CTBI Lent Course for 2017 *Returning Home: Christian Faith in Encounter with Other Faiths*.<sup>23</sup> The course invited participants to consider the encounter with other faiths as a journey into the wilderness in which we follow in the footsteps of Christ, before proceeding to highlight important areas of common ground for dialogues with other faiths, namely: reverence for the name of God (Sikhism); the practice of fasting (Islam); resistance to materialism (Buddhism); and the Jewish identity of Christ. The following example from the course illustrates the potential contribution interreligious dialogue can make to furthering the work of Christian unity.

An ongoing and deepening dialogue with another faith can not only increase one's respect for that faith but sometimes yield an unexpected fresh insight into the faith of Christian sisters and brothers of a different Christian tradition to my own. Let me explain: Coming from an evangelical background I was always puzzled and perplexed as to why devotion to Mary was so important to Catholic and Orthodox Christians: surely our devotion was to Jesus alone? Yet through my dialogue with Muslims I had grown to respect why Muslims honoured their prophet Muhammad, even though I could not honour him in the same way as they do. I learnt that Muhammad is often described in Islam as the 'bearer of the word (Qur'an)' and that is why he is honoured in Islam with the words 'peace be upon him'. In Christianity it is Mary who is the 'bearer of the Word', this time the Logos, the Word made flesh.

<sup>23</sup> CTBI, *Returning Home: Christian Faith in Encounter with Other Faiths* (2017) <https://ctbiarchive.org/lent-2017/>. This course was prepared by the Methodist-United Reformed Church Inter Faith Reference Group.

It was through my dialogue with Muslims, understanding why they honour Muhammad as the ‘bearer of the word’ that I have been helped to understand why Mary is so important for my fellow Christians. This is how I came to appreciate, understand and respect Marian devotion by my Christian sisters and brothers, even though it was not something I was likely to incorporate into my own spirituality or practice of prayer: a respectful dialogue with Muslims had also helped me by growing closer to my fellow Christians.

## BIBLICAL REFLECTION:

### Mark 7:24-30

Our encounters with people of other faiths can open our eyes to fresh insights and shed new light on truths within our own faith tradition that have become less obvious through familiarity. Many people with a long experience in interreligious dialogue will say that this has helped them to be a more faithful Christian and has enabled them to go deeper. Jesus’ encounter with a Syrophenician woman is a well-known story where Jesus is challenged regarding the mercy of God and to whom it bestowed. Is it only for the “children” and everyone else must be content with the “crumbs” like the pet dog, hovering in the kitchen whilst a meal is prepared? Or, is the mercy and love of God bestowed in equal measure on all people and all creation? The Bible points us to the latter of these and in our encounter with people of other faiths we can learn new and profound insights into what that means for us and for our neighbours.

## DISCUSSION

A stumbling block for many with regard to interreligious dialogue is a concern that the ultimate goal will be a unity of faiths where all differences are subsumed into one common religious vision. This is sometimes referred to as syncretism, where different faiths or beliefs are blended together. A suspicion therefore arises that those who are engaged in dialogue with people of other faiths are less committed to distinctive Christian faith and are therefore less than committed to a confident proclamation of the Gospel. Well-intentioned concern about a Christian triumphalism that is disrespectful of other faiths and cultures can sometimes lead to a downplaying of Christian distinctiveness in interreligious dialogue but, as we have seen throughout this course, this can be a barrier to effective engagement.

As demonstrated in the example cited above, the experience of many Christians who engaged in dialogue and cooperation with people of other faiths is that they grew more confident in their faith and in their Christian identity. Furthermore, authentic interreligious dialogue requires strong foundations. This is reflected, for example, in the mission statement of the London Inter Faith Centre “true to self and open to others”.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The London Inter Faith Centre was a Christian-hosted place of engagement, study and interaction between people of different faiths, beliefs and ideologies. It closed in 2020.

But there are many questions to be considered. Here are just a few:

- Does openness to others mean some degree of risk?
- Are there limits to being open if we are being true to ourselves – how do we dialogue with beliefs that appear to be contrary or even inimical to what we believe?
- Is not the Christian duty to seek conversion rather than dialogue? Or, can openness and dialogue be a witness in and of itself?

At the level of the global Church questions such as these have long been the focus of ecumenical dialogue between the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and in 2011, together with the World Evangelical Alliance, they issued guidance entitled ‘Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World’.<sup>25</sup> The document offers twelve guiding principles to support Christians in navigating the challenges and tensions alluded to above. These principles can be helpful in setting clear intentions for your interreligious dialogue (as discussed in Module 1). Consider, for example, the reflection on the final principle ‘building interreligious relationships’:

Christians should continue to build relationships of respect and trust with people of different religions so as to facilitate deeper mutual understanding, reconciliation and cooperation for the common good.

Showing how we can see the face of God in people of different faiths and backgrounds is a powerful witness to our faith. Seeing that faith reflected back to us through the eyes of another can bring new insights to our own faith journey, as well as helping us to share our faith effectively in a diverse public square. This is reinforced when faith communities can communicate together about shared values at the service of society.

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<sup>25</sup> World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and World Evangelical Alliance, ‘Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World’ (2011) <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world>

## CASE STUDY

In August 2024 cities across Britain and Ireland experienced riots targeting migrants, people seeking asylum and minority religious communities. Through CTBI's Churches' Refugee Network confidential listening took place with Christian leaders working in communities impacted by this violence. One of the most important learnings from this experience was that, where strong local interfaith networks existed, they made a significant contribution to community safety and relations. We heard how representatives of different religious communities were supported to come together, to support one another and stand in solidarity with those who were at risk of attack. By exchanging messages and statements issued by their religious communities they were able to challenge distortions and misrepresentations of their faith, thereby protecting relationships.

From this foundation of trust they were able to convene wider meetings with representatives of the business community, police, political and other civic leaders and use their trusted role in the society to counter misinformation and to organise community responses where assistance was needed. The Christian leaders participating in these networks felt supported by these interreligious relationships in living out their call to be peacemakers and in demonstrating their Christian love for their neighbours. Where these relationships did not exist some Christian leaders expressed a sense of feeling unsure where to begin, and a concern that opportunities to demonstrate the Church's commitment to peace had been missed.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

- Think of examples you have encountered of criticism of 'religion' broadly in the public square. How could religious leaders together better engage with this criticism?
- What kinds of supports or practices could help you to be attentive to the impact of encounter with other religions on your own faith?
- What experiences could you draw on to help reassure other Christians who are concerned that interreligious dialogue could compromise their faith or weaken their witness to Christ?

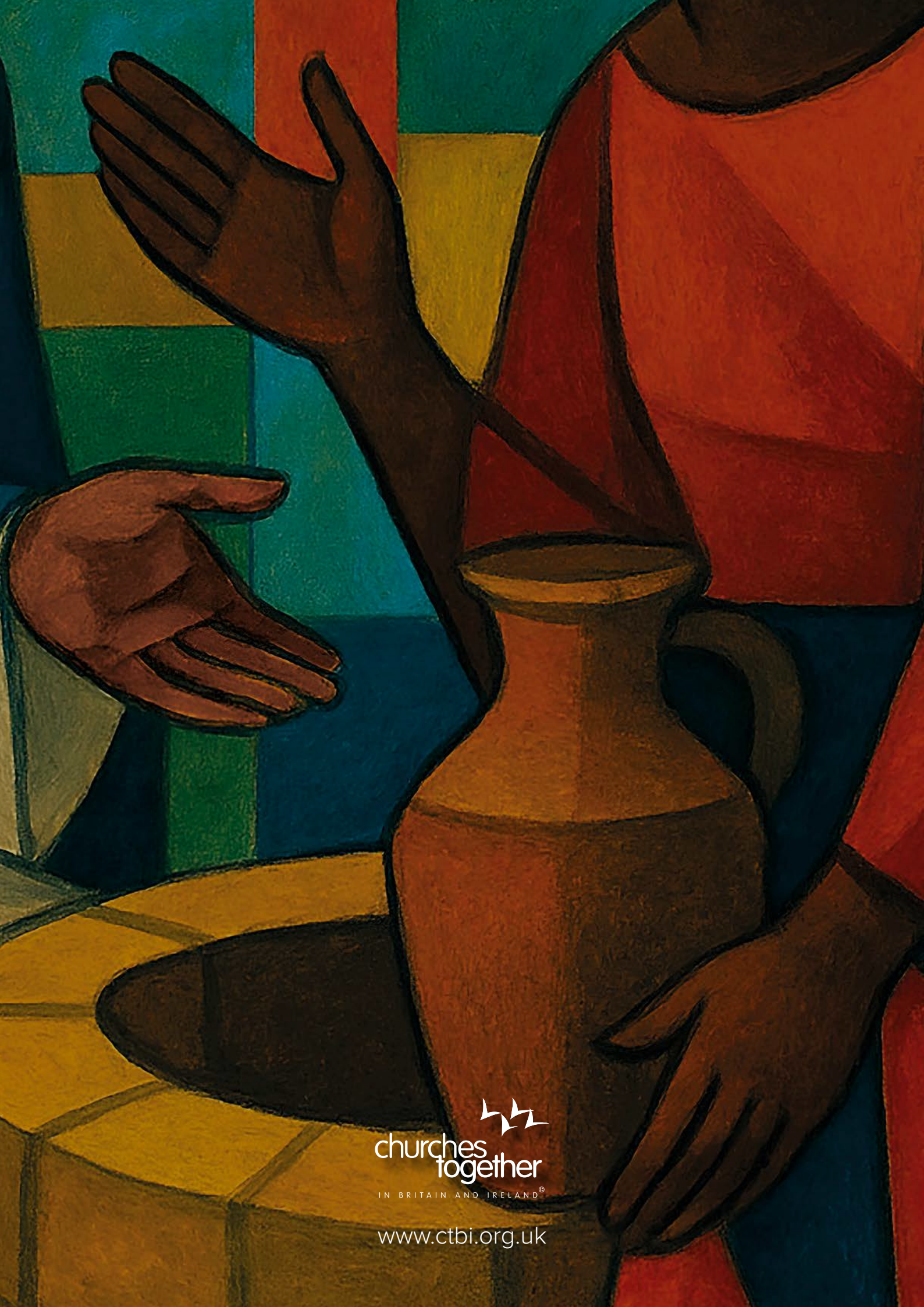
## USING THIS TOOLKIT

We hope you have found this resource helpful. It is not intended to provide a blueprint or a roadmap to follow step by step, but rather a range of ideas, questions and signposts to further information that can be adapted and used in your context as appropriate. In the modules we have provided details of resources that are available from individual churches, as well as ecumenical and inter faith bodies, to provide additional material for reflection. This list is far from exhaustive. In the Inter Faith Theology Advisory Group section of the CTBI website you can find further resources and information about the latest publications and initiatives in this area [ctbi.org.uk/networks-and-working-groups/inter-faith-theology-advisory-group/](http://ctbi.org.uk/networks-and-working-groups/inter-faith-theology-advisory-group/)

## PRAYER

O God beyond our imagining,  
Greater than the vastness of the universe,  
Yet more intimate to us than we can possibly conceive.  
Your love is stronger than any suffering or torment,  
Your arms stronger than any crippling anxiety,  
Your touch warmly comforting amidst tears.  
We come into your presence,  
Eager to unload all the things that trouble us,  
And eager to partner with you in the weaving of hope.  
We come with prayers for your suffering children in places of conflict and war:  
All the places where tears and blood soak the very soil that ought to bring  
forth flowers.  
We pray for all those afraid as the language of hatred pervades political  
language.  
Open our hearts, we pray,  
To our neighbour whose religion is different and strange to ours,  
That we might receive blessings from them;  
May we see them as partners in peace building,  
Dutiful friends in searching for flowers of hope amidst stoney ground,  
Allies in the struggle for justice.  
And be with us as we witness to your love which knows no bounds.  
Amen.





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