

Guidelines for Discussing the Middle East: Assistance for Christians and Jews in Dialogue

(from “Thinking and Working Together: Study and Action Suggestions for Jewish and Christian Congregations,” a resource prepared by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the National Council of Churches of Christ, 1993)

1. Keep in mind the original agreement about the basis for your discussion or dialogue. If you have agreed on a particular purpose, do not allow a small group, an individual, or people of only one of the two faith communities to redirect discussion to a different purpose without prior agreement of the whole group. For example, if you planned to talk about Jewish and Christian spirituality, do not begin discussion of the political situation in the Middle East without a conscious group decision to do so.
2. If you decide to have a serious discussion about the Middle East, make available useful materials for the whole group.
3. Do not expect agreement. Christians and Jews have different theological traditions, community membership, histories, and expectations about the Middle East. Work toward greater agreement, as possible. Place emphasis on peace and justice and self-identity of all parties before you begin to speak prematurely about “reconciliation.”
4. Pledge to maintain an atmosphere of trust and respect in which discussion will be open and honest. Maintain styles of speaking that demonstrate respect. Do not ask questions or make statements in a way that intimidates others or makes them feel they are being judged. Express judgment toward ideas but not persons.
5. Agree that you will not use statements made in trustful, respectful discussion to speak harshly or take action against others after your meetings are finished.
6. Study information from various positions. In addition to sharing facts, talk about personal experiences. Respect experiences of one another as having integrity.
7. At times of disagreement, state what you heard being said by the previous speaker who has expressed a different viewpoint before you respond with your own ideas. Do not proceed until the previous speaker has agreed that your re-statement reflects his/her statement accurately. Wait for clarification, if necessary.
8. Indicate points of agreement before beginning to describe points of disagreement with those who have spoken earlier.
9. It will be more valuable to clarify your concerns, experiences, and convictions than to attempt to persuade others to your particular viewpoint. Seek the same clarity from your dialogue partners.