Where Do We Begin?
A Guide for NFTY Temple Youth Groups
to Foster Dialogue with Our Christian Neighbors

We must reach out to our neighbors
and listen for God’s presence in their voices…”

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President, Union for Reform Judaism
Presidential Address, 2003 UAHC Biennial

Introduction
Temple Youth Groups (TYGs) across the continent engage in a wide array of programs and experiences. We regularly hear about successful Social Action programs, inspiring Study Theme programs, and moving T’fillot. Yet, we do not often enough hear about successful Interreligious dialogue and programming.

To be clear, the recent debate surrounding Mel Gibson’s The Passion is not a reason enough to “step-up” our commitment to Jewish-Christian programming. This controversial movie, however, serves as a catalyst and presents us with the challenge for fostering better communication and education toward the goal of mutual understanding. In this age where we experience pockets of xenophobia, growing antisemitism, and interreligious ignorance, we as Reform Jews have a responsibility to “step-up” our role in fostering healthy interreligious relations.

At the 2003 Union for Reform Judaism Biennial, President Rabbi Eric Yoffie presented one of his Presidential Initiatives, Open Doors, Open Minds: Synagogues and Churches Studying Together. This guide for Jewish–Christian Dialogue provides extensive programmatic resources for congregational members, regardless of age. The guide features seven program components, each of which may be run as a separate program. Youth groups are encouraged to pick and choose the programs that most appropriately suite their needs and goals.

In order to make this initiative more inviting for youth groups, we have created this resource, which highlights some of the pieces found in the Open Doors, Open Minds piece, as well as providing other discussion and activity pieces appropriate for the Temple Youth Group setting. Each of the program ideas below requires an experienced facilitator—one who is able to wrestle with some of the more complex theological issues involved in Jewish-Christian affairs.


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Goals
• To provide the opportunity for NFTY youth groups to engage in dialogue with a neighboring Christian youth group
• To explore the importance of one’s heritage
• To explore the similarities and differences in the Ten Commandments and Shabbat in the Jewish and Christian traditions

Objectives
At the end of the program, participants will have
• Heard about and shared different family heritages
• Heard about and shared different religious upbringings and practices
• Explored the personal meanings of various Jewish and Christian symbols and stereotypes
• Learn the basic differences as to how each religious group interprets the Ten Commandments
• Learn the basic differences as to how each religious group interprets and practices the Sabbath
• Decide upon “where to go from here”

Materials
Paper
Pens or pencils
3 x 5 index cards
Copies of the Ten Commandments from the Hebrew Bible and from the New Testament
Copies of “Some Principles for Interreligious Dialogue”
Copies of “Stereotypes”

Before the Program
It is important for any group engaging in dialogue with another, to understand first the “rules of the road.” Attached to this resource page is a document entitled, “Some Principles for Interreligious Dialogue,” as found in the Open Doors, Open Minds materials. The principles in this document will provide participants with a sense of the goals and expectations of interreligious dialogue. For a more thorough preparation-process, consider reading – or exploring the various essays within – Irreconcilable Differences? (editors: Sandmel, Catalano, Leighton).

Procedure
I. Ice-Breakers

Any experienced youth-grouper knows the importance of ice-breakers to begin an event. They help individuals feel more comfortable with new faces, and can turn strangers into acquaintances. Accordingly, in programs that are designed to create partners out of strangers, ice-breakers are all the more essential.

A. Names and Family History
Naming can be a religiously significant in both Judaism and Christianity.

1. Invite the participants to share with the group their names and their significances—religiously, culturally, and/or ancestrally.
2. Bring a large world-map into the room. Invite participants to tell of their family histories, pointing out on the map where their families originated.

B. Religious Upbringing and Practice

Of course, Jews and Christians practice different religions, but it is equally true that every individual practices his or her religion differently: no two Jews or Christians are alike.

1. Ask each participant to share his or her own religious upbringing and his or her current affiliation and practice.
2. How would you describe your own relationship with your religion?
3. How is your religious observance linked to or different from that of earlier generations? That of Jews or Christians around you?

II. Symbols and Stereotypes

Words sometimes fail to describe accurately our understanding of the way of the world. For this reason, we turn to symbols, metaphors, and artistic representations to convey our understanding of the world. Judaism and Christianity are both filled with symbols, and discussing these symbols can be a rich educational exercise.

Often, in our attempts to make the inherently complex simple, we reduce such symbols to generalizations, caricatures, or stereotypes. At times these stereotypes and generalizations are harmless or helpful; other times, they can cause much greater harm and hurt. In the context of Jewish-Christian dialogue, discussing these can be a hugely worthwhile activity.

A. Symbols

1. Ask participants to draw or write down on a small paper the religious symbol they treasure most. Participants will share this symbol with the group and explain its significance. Participants should be encouraged to ask questions throughout the discussion.
2. See below for an appropriate Wrap-Up Activity.

B. Stereotypes Brainstorm/Discussion
1. Attached to this program is an excerpt of an essay by Christian scholar, Martin Marty, entitled, “Knowing Others.” The group should read this excerpt (either out loud or silently, depending on the facilitator’s preference).
2. What are the symbols, metaphors, and stereotypes that you have heard used for Jews?
3. What are the possible causes of these representations?
4. How accurate are they?
5. Do you agree with Marty’s analysis of common Jewish stereotypes?
6. How can Jews “help in this conversation” today?
7. See below for an appropriate Wrap-Up activity.

III. Encountering the Text

Jewish and Christian study traditions are considerably different. Section 3 of Open Doors, Open Minds is entitled “Encountering the Text.” Indeed, there is a great deal that we can learn by approaching a text that is sacred in both of our traditions. Through engaging in study-sessions on topics or religious components that we share, we are able to learn about our differences, while celebrating our similarities.

C. The Ten Commandments

1. The Ten Commandments are a familiar and foundational text for both of our communities. Christians and Jews can find much within this text upon which they agree in casual conversation. Yet, Jews and Christians have differences in their views of the Ten Commandments. In fact, they do not even number them in the same way!
2. To supplement the thorough information provided in the Initiative, we offer the following discussion questions:

   a. When was the first time you learned about the Ten Commandments? Can you recite them?
   b. What do they mean in your life? Which are they closer to: “suggested guidelines” or “laws”?
   c. Would you say the Ten Commandments are “rules and regulations” or “compassionate guidelines”?
   d. Jews typically “count” as Commandment #1, “I am the Eternal your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.” Christians tend to count it as the prologue to the “Top Ten.” How does this change their meaning, from one interpretation to another?

D. The Sabbath

1. Jews and Christians will agree, observance of the Sabbath is one of the great gifts that the Bible has given to humanity. It is an opportunity to cease creating, to stop doing, and it gives us a chance to stop and simply “be.” The
observance of the Sabbath is the only “ritually religious” behavior that the Ten Commandments mandate. Jews and Christians, however, observe the Sabbath differently. This is another key difference that lends itself to engaging and interesting dialogue.

2. We offer the following discussion questions:

   a. What are the differences and similarities between Jewish and Christian Sabbaths? (These may be listed on a dry-erase/ poster board)
   b. How do Christians celebrate Sabbath? How do Jews celebrate Sabbath?
   c. How does the Sabbath impact our lives?

IV. Closing Activities

However the program concludes, it should do so powerfully and productively. We recommend one or more of the following exercises, followed by a “where do we go from here?” open-ended question for the group itself to answer.

A. Campus Committee Role-play

Your discussion group is now a College Campus Committee, which oversees the building of new structures on campus. The college recently built a Christian Chapel adjacent to the campus Jewish synagogue. The two houses of worship share a courtyard. The president of the college asks the committee to design the concept of a sculpture, which will inspire both Christian and Jewish students to respect each other’s traditions and work together in this world. The committee must create the concept of this structure and present it to the college president (played by the facilitator).

B. Transforming Stereotypes

   1. Complete the following sentence, individually, on a “3X5” card:

       ▪ For Christian Participants: “One thing I admire about Jews is…”
       ▪ For Jewish Participants: “One thing I admire about Christians is…”

       Facilitator can gather the cards and read them aloud, before adding any final words.

C. Let’s Do This Again!

The facilitator leads a brief discussion on the importance of continuing such programs, asking the group to briefly discuss the question, “Where do we go from here?”
Rabbi Yoffie calls upon Reform Jews to engage in programs which allow us to “hear God’s presence” in the voice of others. This takes a great deal of time and effort. Thank you for taking the time and effort to begin this sacred work!
Some Principles for Interreligious Dialogue

http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/education/dialogue_principles.htm]

1. Enter into dialogue so that you can learn and grow; not to change the other.

2. Be conscious of the need to allow people the space to enter the discussion. Some people are more sheepish about offering their thoughts, but will be encouraged to do so if more outspoken persons avoid dominating the exchange.

3. Everyone must be honest and sincere, even if that means revealing discomforts with your own tradition or that of the other. Everyone must assume that everyone else is being equally honest and sincere.

4. Everyone must be permitted to define their own religious experience and identity, and this must be respected by others.

5. Proselytizing or seeking to "convert" the conversation partner is not permitted in an interreligious dialogue setting. Participants should feel free to express their own faith traditions and beliefs, but not try to persuade others to assent to them.

6. Don’t feel that you are the spokesperson for your entire faith tradition or that you ought somehow to know everything there is to know about it. Admit any confusion or uncertainty you might have if a puzzling question arises.

7. Don’t assume in advance where points of agreement or disagreement will exist.

8. Everyone should be willing to be self-critical.

9. All should strive to experience the other’s faith "from within" and be prepared to view themselves differently as a result of an "outside" perspective.

10. Trust is a must.
Stereotypes
Excerpt from “Knowing Others”

Stereotypes are handy, but dangerous. They are images we inherit from those around us or that we create in our minds. With them we do not have to think about others as persons. We make “things” out of people, and then arrange our emotions to react to our creations. It is easy to love those for whom we create positive images, or to hate those for whom we inherit or invent negative images. If we are to see each other as unique persons, then, we are forced to rethink what the stereotypes are and examine them.

Negative stereotypes? Many of these have nothing to do with religion. You’ve heard some of them. Jews are alleged to be “pushy” and “moneygrubbers.” They are said to “control the media, run the banks, be fanatic about Israel, mess up foreign policy.” These negative stereotypes are diminishing. We have learned that in America Jews have never “run the banks.” They are not all pushy and not alone pushy. Psychologists have to tell us why many people still use these stereotypes, against evidence.

My hunch is that American Christians tend to find two stereotypes most convenient. One is that religious Jews are too “legalistic.” That is, some Christians think observant Jews live by “law” and not “love,” that they busy themselves with trivial rules about what to eat and how to observe the Sabbath, that if they try to be religious, they have no way to experience God except through petty commandments and a life of scrupulous obedience, that they miss the big picture of God’s love and goodness and grace. We should discuss how this stereotype got started, why it lives on, what it means, what to do about it. Jews in this conversation can help us here.

(Marty, “Knowing Others.” Getting Acquainted. Interfaith Circles. Interfaith Resources.)