

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Eight real-life scenarios with accompanying discussion questions

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About this Resource

This resource, prepared by the Aspen Institute Justice & Society Program and the George Washington Institute for Religious Freedom, describes eight real-life scenarios in which religious diversity creates challenges in youth development settings. It deals with topics such as outreach to religious minority groups; inclusive holiday celebrations; discussions about religion in educational settings; and potential tensions between values such as religious identity and inclusion, or accommodation of minorities and integration.

Its purpose is to assist youth development professionals—educators, coaches, activity leaders, mentors, camp counsellors, etc.—in considering the implications of America’s increasing religious diversity and developing effective strategies for engaging that diversity as an asset, rather than allowing it to be a cause of social discord and fragmentation in their facilities and programs.

The staff responses presented in the following scenarios do not necessarily represent best practices. They are not meant to prescribe the “right” way to act in challenging situations. Rather, this resource illuminates ways in which religious diversity is an issue in youth development settings, and challenges staff to think about how religious diversity affects their own work and how to constructively engage it. This is not a guidebook, but a conversation starter.

Interviews with staff and volunteers at various Boys & Girls Clubs and YMCAs across the United States, conducted by the Aspen Institute Justice & Society Program, provided the primary source of content for these eight scenarios. Additional content was gathered through interviews with interfaith leaders in West Michigan. All of the scenarios are based on actual events described by youth development professionals. However, to protect the privacy of the individuals who shared their stories, the names of all people and places described in this document have been replaced with pseudonyms.

I. A Matter of Trust

TOPIC: OUTREACH TO RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS

The Scenario: The Willow Creek Boys & Girls Club is located down the street from a public housing development where many recent immigrants live. Over the span of a few years, this area receives an influx of Somali refugees, most of whom practice a traditional form of Islam. The Club's leaders are eager to welcome Somali youth into their facility, which provides a safe place for immigrant children to play, improve their English, and integrate into American society. However, many Somali parents in the neighborhood are not comfortable allowing their children—especially girls—to attend the Club. Some do not know if the Club is a safe place for their children to spend time; others fear that allowing the Club may undermine their religious beliefs, traditions, or values.

Issues and Challenges:

- In what ways does your organization make an effort to attract diverse constituents such as immigrants?
- Have you ever encountered suspicion or hostility from parents who distrusted your intentions, or those of your organization? If so, how did you respond?

Willow Creek's Response: Corrie Anderson, Director of the Willow Creek Club, has adopted a number of strategies for bringing Somali youth into the Club:

- Recognizing that adult men hold considerable decision-making authority within the patriarchal Somali culture, Ms. Anderson invites Somali men from the neighborhood to use the Club's facilities for informal soccer games one night per week. When the weather is good and games can be held outdoors, she encourages them to bring their families along. She hopes this will help the Somali community view the Club as a safe, healthy place to spend time.
- Ms. Anderson also reaches out to Somali women. Recognizing that some are unable to take part in mixed-gender social activities for religious or cultural reasons, she invites several Somali women to take part in a women's retreat at the Club's campground. This provides an opportunity for them to build relationships with women from the non-Somali community, including Club employees such as herself.
- Ms. Anderson seeks to bring Somalis into leadership and staff positions. She hires a teenage Somali girl participating in the JobCorps program as her front desk manager. She also makes a special effort to bring a female Somali police officer to the Club for the Police Activities League program. Both of these women are Muslims who come from immigrant families and wear the *hijab* (headscarf).

Reflection Questions:

- Is Ms. Anderson right to accept the Somali men's patriarchal control of their families, or should she encourage the Somali women and girls to adopt America's more egalitarian expectations?

II. Christian... and Inclusive?

TOPIC: INCLUSION AT A RELIGIOUSLY AFFILIATED INSTITUTION

The Issue: The City YMCA has over twenty branches scattered throughout a large, metropolitan area. It uses the following mission statement: “To put Christian principles into practice through programs that build a healthy spirit, mind and body for all.” Some non-Christian members and staff within the organization feel that the reference to “Christian principles” is exclusionary. They object to practices such as displaying Christian symbols at YMCA camps; singing Christmas carols at a YMCA event; and opening meetings with a “mission moment,” which often includes a Biblical quotation or an explicitly Christian prayer. However, others feel that these practices are an important reflection of the YMCA’s evangelical Protestant heritage; the organization was founded in the 19th century as the Young Men’s Christian Association. Indeed, some are concerned that the City YMCA is drifting away from its evangelical Protestant roots, and wish it would offer more opportunities for its Christian members to celebrate and grow in their faith. Both sides perceive a tension, or even an outright conflict, between the City YMCA’s mission to promote “Christian principles” and its commitment to offer services “for all.”

Issues and Challenges:

- What is your organization’s mission? Has this mission changed over time? Do you feel that your current mission statement accurately reflects the goals you pursue through your work?
- Do you feel that your organization’s mission is compatible with welcoming people of all religious (or nonreligious) views?

City YMCA’s Response: The CEO of the City YMCA, Chris Jacoby, believes his organization’s Christian identity and its commitment to inclusion are not necessarily in conflict. He and his leadership team take steps to promote an approach that they see as both Christian and inclusive:

- Mr. Jacoby and his senior leadership team attempt to strengthen their organization’s Christian identity by offering chaplaincy services and Bible studies. At the same time, they make a special effort to be inclusive of members who identify with other faiths or belief systems. For example, they provide space for Muslim students from a local high school to pray during the school day and offer special swimming classes for women who cannot participate in mixed-gender classes for religious reasons.
- Rather than doing away with the practice of opening meetings with “mission moments,” Mr. Jacoby makes it clear that they are an opportunity for staff members to engage the organization’s mission from their individual perspectives, whether Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, nonreligious, or something else. Rather than eliminating any expression of individual identity, he hopes this will encourage YMCA employees to get to know each other and create an inclusive atmosphere for people of all faiths and belief systems.

Reflection Questions:

- Do you think it is a good idea for employees to openly discuss their individual identities in the workplace, or is it better to avoid such topics?
- Have you ever experienced a conflict between your personal faith or spiritual commitment and the mission of your organization? If so, how did you try to resolve it?
- What does an atmosphere that is welcoming of all look like?

III. What's Faith Got to Do with It, Anyway?

TOPIC: ENGAGING RELIGION AT A NON-SECTARIAN INSTITUTION

The Issue: The College YMCA, situated on the edge of the campus of a large public university, serves a religiously and ethnically diverse student body. The College YMCA does not offer workout facilities; instead, it is a forum for learning and collective action on social issues such as economic justice, environmental protection, and civil rights. The College YMCA does not define itself as Christian, but as nonsectarian; the phrase “putting Christian principles into practice” was removed from its mission statement more than two decades ago in favor of more universal language. There is some debate within the College YMCA community about how the organization can best fulfill its mission to “nurture the mind and spirit” (emphasis added) given its status as a nonsectarian organization. Some feel that in order to do this, the College YMCA should move back toward its original Christian identity; others tend to ignore the spiritual dimension of the YMCA’s mission, and wish to relegate religion entirely to the private sphere.

Issues and Challenges:

- Does the idea of “nurturing mind and spirit” exclude nonreligious people such as atheists, agnostics and secular humanists? Why or why not?

College YMCA’s Response: The College YMCA chooses neither to promote a single religious (or non-religious) viewpoint, nor to ignore religion altogether. Instead, its Associate Director, Janet Moore, is tasked with developing programs about the intersection of faith and social issues. Ms. Moore recognizes that, for many of the College YMCA’s members, the motivation to learn about and act on social issues comes from religious beliefs and values. The College YMCA does not hold worship services—the task of churches, synagogues, mosques, etc.—nor does it serve as a forum for theological debate—the task of universities and seminaries. Instead, the College YMCA provides a place for young people to explore, share, and discuss their beliefs with one another, with the goal of promoting better understanding across identity divides. For example:

- During the academic year, the College YMCA organizes a weekly lecture series. One semester, Ms. Moore arranges to have “Faith in Action” as its theme. Each week, she brings a leader from a different religious tradition to explain the religious roots of his or her social activism.
- Ms. Moore plays a leadership role in an interfaith group of campus ministry professionals who collaborate on issues of common concern. She also provides support to a student interfaith group that meets at the College YMCA. Because of Ms. Moore’s interfaith connections, the College YMCA helps to organize and host interfaith gatherings in times of crisis, e.g., the occurrence of a hate crime or a religiously motivated act of terrorism.

Reflection Questions:

- Would you describe your organization as religiously affiliated (like the City YMCA) or non-sectarian (like the Campus YMCA)?
- Do you see opportunities for your organization to promote better understanding across identity divides?
- How can the College YMCA reconcile its heritage as a Christian organization with its current focus on advocacy and community organizing?

IV. Three Santas, No Ham

TOPIC: HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS IN A RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE COMMUNITY

The Issue: The Meadowtown Boys & Girls Club serves a very diverse constituency, including a Latino community that is largely Catholic; African Americans affiliated with evangelical Christian denominations, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church; Middle Eastern refugees, many of them Muslims; Eastern Europeans, including a community of evangelical Christians who fled Soviet persecution during the 1970s and 80s; and smaller numbers of Buddhists, Wiccans, atheists and agnostics. This tremendous diversity creates a challenge for Boys & Girls Club staff planning holiday celebrations. On the one hand, the Meadowtown Club's leaders do not want to exclude or alienate the significant portion of their members who don't celebrate holidays such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. On the other hand, they don't want to deprive members who *do* celebrate these holidays of fun and meaningful traditions.

Issues and Challenges:

- How are holidays observed in your organization? Do you recognize the holidays of every ethnic or religious group represented in your organization? Why or why not?

The Meadowtown Response: Alicia Mendez, Director of the Meadowtown Club, creates nonsectarian, seasonal holiday celebrations that allow for the expression of multiple traditions. For example, Ms. Mendez organizes a Winter Holiday Celebration in December. She includes traditional Christmas activities at the party, but arranges them in a way that makes it comfortable for families that don't celebrate Christmas to participate, too.

- Ms. Mendez does not set up picture-taking with Santa Claus in the central room where the celebration takes place, but in one of the Club's side rooms. This lessens the pressure on families to participate; those that wish can easily and inconspicuously opt out. Because of the Club's significant ethnic diversity, three Santa Clauses—one African American, one Latino, and one white—are made available for pictures.
- Gift-giving is a part of the celebration. However, Ms. Mendez offers parents who don't celebrate Christmas but want their kids to receive donated gifts the option of requesting the items unwrapped and in advance of the holiday. Thus, all parents' beliefs are respected, and children whose families don't celebrate Christmas aren't excluded from receiving a new book or toy.
- The Club makes a special effort to provide inclusive food options, even if they don't fit with traditional holiday fare. The Club's chef proposes serving ham, but Ms. Mendez points out that Muslim and Jewish families abstain from pork; the chef then proposes seafood, which is also problematic for some groups. After considering the dietary preferences of the community, Ms. Mendez and her colleagues decide to offer beef, turkey, and vegetarian options.

Reflection Questions:

- Is it possible to accommodate *all* religious and cultural differences or, as a practical matter, is it sufficient to focus on celebrating the holidays of the major faith groups in your facility?
- What role does food play in your organization's programs and activities? Can you maintain the spirit of a religious holiday celebration if you exclude its traditional foods to accommodate members of other faiths?

V. Accommodation vs. Integration

TOPIC: BALANCING ACCOMMODATION AND INTEGRATION

The Issue: The Fort Wheaton Boys & Girls Club serves a significant number of immigrants from Pakistan, most of whom are traditionally observant Muslims. The Club makes a concerted effort to accommodate the needs of its Pakistani youth: it removes all pork products from its menu; takes Muslim holidays, such as Ramadan, into consideration when scheduling events; and offers a women-only workout class specifically geared toward Pakistani girls who do not exercise alongside boys for religious reasons. The Club's CEO, Aaron Siekmeier, is generally pleased with these efforts. However, he sometimes worries that some of his staff may be so focused on accommodating the Pakistani community that they lose sight of the Boys & Girls Club's core values of inclusion and integration.

Issues and Challenges:

- Can well-intentioned efforts to be sensitive to the religious and cultural practices of the Pakistani community—or any other recent immigrant group—actually undermine the values of inclusion and integration? If so, how?
- Should the ethnic and religious composition of your organization's staff reflect that of your constituents? Why or why not?

The Fort Wheaton Response: Mr. Siekmeier and his staff determine that accommodation and integration are both important priorities for their organization:

- They decide that it is appropriate for the Fort Wheaton Club to accommodate religious and cultural dietary needs and holidays, and to make a special effort to welcome recent immigrant children as members.
- However, when some leaders from the Pakistani community approach Mr. Siekmeier and ask that the Club create a special Pakistani-only camping trip, he declines. He reasons that although this program might succeed in attracting new Pakistani participants, it would exclude children from other backgrounds and would leave in place, or perhaps even intensify, ethnic and religious barriers.
- Part of the Club's mission is to promote interracial, intercultural, and interreligious integration. Mr. Siekmeier believes that the Club's general programs in sports, music, reading, and art will help Pakistani Muslim youth get to know kids from other backgrounds and integrate into American culture, rather than remaining isolated.

Reflection Questions:

- Do you agree with Mr. Siekmeier's decision not to offer a Pakistani-only camping trip? Why or why not?
- What kinds of programs are most likely to attract youth participation across cultural lines?

VI. Encountering “the Other”

TOPIC: DEVELOPING INTERFAITH LITERACY IN A RELIGIOUSLY HOMOGENEOUS COMMUNITY

The Issue: Westlake Bible Institute, a small evangelical Christian college in the Midwest, has essentially no religious diversity. Evangelical Christians, most of them from conservative denominations, make up its entire faculty and student body. The school’s provost, Dr. Robert Van Dyke, expresses concern that students have little knowledge about non-Christian belief systems and few opportunities to interact with people from other religions and cultures. A task force of five professors finds this to be accurate, citing examples of students speaking harshly about people from other faith traditions and posting bigoted comments on social media. Westlake’s top administrators want to expose their students to some degree of religious diversity, but they are concerned about the potential for syncretism (blending elements of several religious traditions) and universalism (the belief that all people will go to heaven), both of which go against their evangelical Christian beliefs.

Issues and Challenges:

- Can we hold our own strong faith beliefs as true ones and still respect the different faith beliefs of others, even when they conflict with our own?
- Does studying the beliefs of other faiths strengthen or weaken our own?

The Westlake Response: Dr. Van Dyke and his task force develop an intercultural immersion requirement according to which every student must take one course about a non-Christian religion or culture, engage in at least 25 hours of direct interaction with people from that tradition, and take part in guided reflection on the experience. One of the intercultural courses deals with Islam. Taught by Professor Jackie Smithson, this course includes a tour of a local mosque, conversations with the imam, and activities with the Muslims Students Association at a nearby public university.

- Professor Smithson makes it clear that her course does not aim to get Christians and Muslims to agree on religious doctrine. Rather, it encourages them to learn about each other and recognize their common humanity. Professor Smithson sees this as a priority not despite her Christian faith, but because of it: “We need to respect, listen to, and hear people who are ‘other’ because it’s integral to who we are as Christians,” she says. She hopes the course will equip her students, many of whom will go on to become Christian pastors and church leaders, to communicate, collaborate, and live harmoniously with people who do not share their beliefs.
- First-person interactions with Muslims challenge Westlake Bible Institute students’ negative stereotypes and fears about people of other religions. In a final reflection, one student writes, “Before this class, I harbored a lot of anger toward Muslims. God has completely changed me. I now see individual people, created in the image of God, who are just trying to live their lives. They are a lot like me.”

Reflection Questions:

- What kinds of interreligious educational programs would work in your organization? What “pushback” or challenges might you expect to get if you were to initiate such an effort?

VII. Caught in the Middle

TOPIC: MANAGING TEEN-PARENT DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT RELIGION

The Issue: The Greensides Boys & Girls Club serves a religiously diverse population, including sizable evangelical Christian, Roman Catholic, and Muslim communities. The parents of some of the Muslim girls who belong to this Boys & Girls Club require their teenage daughters to wear the *hijab* (headscarf) whenever they are outside the home. Two fifteen year-old girls begin to defy their parents' wishes by taking off their headscarves while they are at the Club. Jacqueline Sykes, Director of the Greensides Club, receives a call from the mother of one of these girls, who asks whether or not her daughter, Kameela, has been wearing the *hijab*. Ms. Sykes finds herself in an awkward position. On the one hand, she appreciates Kameela's desire for autonomy and self-expression, and does not want to violate her privacy or lose her trust. On the other hand, she does not want to undermine Kameela's parents' authority or disrespect their religious beliefs.

Issues and Challenges:

- Is it your organization's role to serve as an agent for parents when you care for their minor children, or should your organization's own values prevail?
- At what age should young people have the freedom to make choices that their parents do not agree with?
- Does your organization offer any strategies for mediating disagreements between youth and parents?

Ms. Sykes's Response: Ms. Sykes informs Kameela's mother that her daughter has been removing her *hijab* when she arrives at the Club. The mother asks Ms. Sykes to make sure that this does not happen anymore. Ms. Sykes agrees to have a conversation with Kameela, but tells the mother that this is ultimately an issue that she needs to resolve with her daughter.

- After she gets off the phone, Ms. Sykes speaks to Kameela in private. She informs the girl about what her mother said on the call, and listens to Kameela's explanation of why she no longer wants to wear the *hijab*—namely, because she feels it is preventing her from fitting in with her non-Muslim peers. Ms. Sykes tells Kameela that she understands how she feels, and that this is a something she needs to discuss with her parents and resolve with them.
- After giving the matter some thought, Ms. Sykes decides that it is not her responsibility to make Kameela wear the *hijab* at the Club. However, she also decides that Kameela's parents have a right to know what their daughter is wearing. She communicates this to all involved.
- Kameela discusses the issue with her parents, and they take a firm stance: she will not be allowed to spend time at the Club anymore if she continues to remove her headscarf. Knowing that they will find out if she disobeys, Kameela goes back to wearing her headscarf.

Reflection Questions:

- Did Ms. Sykes's policy of informing parents about their children's personal choices violate Kameela's rights as an individual, or uphold her parents' rights to raise their child?
- Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? If so, how did you handle it?

VIII. When is Religion Out of Bounds?

TOPIC: TRAINING STAFF TO APPROPRIATELY DISCUSS RELIGION

The Issue: The Eastonville Boys & Girls Club serves an overwhelmingly African American community in a densely populated urban area. Nearly all of the families it serves are affiliated with historically black Protestant churches, although a few are Catholic, Muslim, or nonreligious. The Eastonville Club's staff and the families it serves know that the Club does not promote any religion and accepts all comers regardless of their religious views. However, many of the staff – even the Club's director, Terrance Mabry – are uncertain about how to handle the topic of religion when it arises. For example, during Black History Month, which is a major event for the Club, staff wonder about how to discuss Christianity's role in African American history and culture, such as black Protestant churches' involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Should discussions about Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. avoid the overtly Christian content of his speeches and writings? Is it appropriate for children at the Club to learn and perform traditional African American spirituals that contain Christian language?

Issues and Challenges:

- In what settings, or during which activities, does the topic of religion come up at your organization?
- What is the difference between teaching the history and traditions of a religion and promoting its beliefs?
- If Eastonville Boys and Girls Club teaches about the history of the African-American church should it provide “equal time” to other faiths represented at the Club? What about other faiths that are not represented at the Club?

Mr. Mabry's Response: Faced with questions from his staff, Mr. Mabry contacts the CEO of his metro-area Boys & Girls Club, who tells him that Clubs use roughly the same standards as public schools. Mr. Mabry then consults a high school history teacher, who explains that informing and educating students *about* religion is an important educational objective, but that she must do this from a neutral perspective, without promoting (or putting down) any religious or nonreligious viewpoint. She points Mr. Mabry to [Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools](#), published by the non-profit First Amendment Center. Using this resource, he is able to provide guidance to his staff:

- The *Guide* states, “Study about religion is important in order for students to be properly educated about history and cultures.” Mabry determines that it would be misleading to attempt to omit Christianity from discussion about African American history and the Civil Rights movement.
- The *Guide* indicates that in public schools, “Religion must be taught objectively and neutrally.” Mabry decides that it is acceptable for Club members to learn and perform spirituals as part of Black History Month, since they are an important part of African American heritage and identity, but he tells his staff to present the songs' religious content as neutrally as possible.

Reflection Questions:

- Would you feel able to discuss religion in a neutral way at your workplace? Would you be comfortable leading a discussion about religions other than your own? Why or why not?