BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

STRENGTHENING INCLUSION
Engaging Communities of Diverse Faiths and Beliefs in Your YMCA

YMCA OF THE USA
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INTRODUCTION

“The YMCA is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind, and body for all.”

As a faith-founded organization that has been a leading and early champion of inclusion, strengthening the inclusion of diverse faiths, beliefs, and religions is a natural core Y competency.

The purpose of this manual, the fourth in the Strengthening Inclusion series, is to provide practical tools and guidance to YMCAs seeking to strengthen inclusion of communities of diverse faiths by adapting the five core inclusion strategies and highlighting the experience of YMCAs in this area.

Historically, the Y has been a place for inclusion. At a time when the Protestant church was splintering, the first YMCA, established in 1844, was exceptional for bringing together people of different denominations behind a common cause: to strengthen character through service. From today’s perspective, the early Y looks exclusive, and it was: the people it brought together were exclusively white men of Evangelical Protestant faiths in London. But what shouldn’t be lost is how unique and inclusive this cross-denominational effort was for its time and place.

This “built-in drive for inclusivity” has shaped the Y since its formation, according to YMCA archivist and historian Ryan Bean (personal communication, December 1, 2015). As the YMCA Movement came to the United States and American society evolved, the Movement encountered stress points, when the Y’s values (internal) were considered to be at odds with its desire to serve (external). During the American Civil War, for example, the Y debated whether Christians should own slaves. And during World War I, when the Y was called upon to support servicemen (and their taste for tobacco), the Y debated whether distributing tobacco was consistent with its Christian values.

As the Y struggled with fundamental questions of identity, it also considered the question of service and reach: Y leaders at the time asked themselves whether the historically Christian-only message would help them reach and serve more and, in so doing, enable the Y to have a greater impact on character. This question continues to be pondered by YMCAs across the country as they seek to ensure that the Y welcomes everyone.
Today we may be in the midst of another stress point in the Y’s evolution in the United States. This manual is written in the context of an impassioned debate within the Y Movement on Christian emphasis and diversity and inclusion, but this manual does not contribute to or advance that debate. This manual aims to help YMCAs strengthen the inclusion of people of all faiths and to be a Movement that is welcoming—as our mission statement states resoundingly—for all.

By strengthening inclusion of communities of diverse faiths and beliefs (including those who may not explicitly identify with a faith tradition), YMCAs have a unique opportunity to be meeting places of a variety of faiths and views. At the Y, we know that in our diverse and increasingly complex world, we are stronger when all individuals, regardless of their faith background (and other dimensions of diversity), have the opportunity to be included, feel safe, and access the support to reach their full potential.

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

The purpose of Strengthening Inclusion: Engaging Communities of Diverse Faiths and Beliefs in Your YMCA is to promote inquiry, exploration, collaboration, and action toward effectively engaging communities of all belief, faith, and religion backgrounds. This effort is a part of recognizing our changing demographics, as well as our changing understanding of and commitment to engaging all dimensions of diversity at the YMCA.

This resource came about because the Y strives to include all and recognizes the importance of our historical relationship with Christianity and our identity as a Christian-based organization. In fact, the Ninth Conference in London approved the first Y logo, which featured a reference to Bible verse John 17:21: “That they may all be one…as We are one.” That this was the first Christian principle the Y elevated to speak to inclusion at the YMCA cannot be seen as accidental. Rather, it spoke to the spirit of the YMCA as a global Movement in service for all.

The YMCA is an organization founded upon Christian principles to be put into action to build healthy spirit, mind, and body for all. That “spirit” and “mind” are the first characteristics listed reiterates the historical importance of faith in the work of the Y and is emblematic of the work the YMCA was called upon to do to fulfill its modern-day promise to “strengthen the foundations of community.” Even the Y’s third area of focus—Social Responsibility—is rooted in the Y’s historical work as a bridge-building organization connecting and nurturing diverse segments of society.

“We are the agency that is a quilt, from cradle to grave. We are the crossroads of our community. We need to focus on our intersections, where we have shared passions. We could be a Christian and an atheist, for example, but we have a shared interest in addressing hunger.”

— Shawyn Patterson Howard
Former CEO
Yonkers Family YMCA (N.Y.)
Although it has long been popularly known as simply "the Y," the Y's official title—the Young Men’s Christian Association—represented an inclusive approach to groups historically divided, neglected, or underserved. Each word of the title underscored the YMCA’s inclusive approach:

- **Young**—an allusion to the group entering the workforce in Britain with increasing energy, yet bereft of meaningful ways to channel it
- **Men**—an indication that workers of all economic backgrounds and incomes were united
- **Christian**—at the time, a term that, in other contexts, would have always specified a particular denomination or sect
- **Association**—a term indicating a group whose members were connected in common cause rather than through common background. At the time of its inception, the full name of the YMCA was a revolutionary call for inclusion in an environment where inclusion was not popular.

Since the YMCA’s founding in 1844, communities nationally and globally have drastically evolved. Once-homogenous communities are now richly diverse across not only racial and ethnic dimensions, but also dimensions that include ability, age, cultural background, gender, heritage, language use, and sexual orientation. Perhaps most importantly to the YMCA Movement, profound shifts in society since 1844 can be traced to changes in the practice of faith and beliefs. Some have interpreted the growing diversity within society as an excuse for increased division; others have suggested that unity is possible only when dimensions of diversity are ignored or erased. Yet we believe that the earlier expression of the Y’s mission—"that they may all be one"—still embodies the Y’s core values of inclusion and challenges us to collectively recognize and more deeply engage all of our dimensions so that we all may reach our fullest potential and ultimately strengthen the foundations of community, together.
Today, as earlier, the Y is called to be an **inclusive space and a convener of dialogue, of meaningful connection, and of relationship-building**—a place where all dimensions of diversity and perspectives are welcome and valued. As communities continue to evolve, the “for all” rooted in faith has also evolved and broadened in meaning. This resource is intended to help you learn more about the diversity present within the dimension of faith and belief and to provide YMCAs the information and guidance they need to continue to live out Y’s mission of being “for all.”
A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

This manual is dedicated to the inclusion of communities of diverse faiths, belief systems, and religions, in recognition that the three are not always the same. For space considerations, however, we have shortened “diverse faiths, belief systems, and religions” to “faiths and beliefs.”

We also include in our understanding of communities of diverse faith backgrounds, belief systems, and religions those who self-identify as not belonging to a particular faith or religion. Demographers and many of those who self-identify with this growing segment of American society refer to this group as “the nones.”

In the section “Demographics,” we adopt the Pew Research Center’s terminology and taxonomy for describing religious groups. For example, Pew classifies American Christians into eight major categories, each comprising numerous families and denominations: Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Historically Black Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox Christian, Jehovah’s Witness, and Other Christian. You can explore these and other religious categories and their makeups at www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study.

GETTING STARTED

_**Strengthening Inclusion: Engaging Communities of Diverse Faiths and Beliefs in Your YMCA**_ will help your YMCA better understand, reach out to, and include at all levels people of diverse faiths and beliefs. The information in this guide and the rich experiences of YMCAs across the country are best understood when accompanied by a tailored, hands-on, participatory workshop available from YMCA of the USA (Y-USA). Another resource that may be helpful in addressing questions and hosting conversations in your community around any topic is _**Building Bridges: Creating Safe Spaces for Healing and Dialogue**_, a guide that is available on Link and from Y-USA’s Diversity & Inclusion team. Additionally, there are specific tools and supports related to cultural awareness and engaging specific communities such as newcomer/immigrant, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander communities.

We also encourage you to connect with YMCA colleagues at other associations across the country to learn more about what they’re doing and to continue the dialogue. For more information on the accompanying workshop and other resources on engagement and building community, see the later section “Resources and Links,” visit the Diversity, Inclusion, and Global Engagement community on Link, or contact the Y-USA Diversity & Inclusion team at 1-800-872-9622.

“The path to inclusion starts with a good, solid plan, not just the manual. I hope the day comes when there is no manual, when it is just what you do.”

— David Byrd
President and CEO
YMCA of Greater Kansas City
What is the religious landscape in the United States today? And do our Ys reflect the diversity in that landscape? Are we truly serving our neighbors? Are we convening conversations as a bridge-builder across communities of diverse faiths and beliefs, and living up to our full mission of putting Christian principles into practice to truly serve all?

For Ys, these are important questions. If strengthening community is our cause, who are the people in our communities? Who are we making our promise to? And is this promise being heard by the diversity of religious and nonreligious groups living in our communities?

In the context of faith and religion especially, Ys seeking to answer these questions may be more restricted by resources that chronicle and track community demographics, since most national, regional, and even local agencies that track other dimensions of diversity do not consistently track the dimension of diversity related to faith and belief.

This section describes the demographics of the religious landscape in the United States. We cover the major religious groups in the United States; explore differences that may exist due to factors such as citizenship status, geography, and race/ethnicity; and look at how those dimensions are changing and, in some instances, how our understanding of those dimensions is changing. In the later section “Major Religions,” we point to resources you can use to gain a better understanding of the diverse faiths, beliefs, and religions in your community. In the section “Major Religions,” we provide very basic information about the five largest religious groups after Christianity, briefly explaining beliefs, key holidays, and how members of these faiths worship.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?
Explore the results of the Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape Study:
www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/
A limited body of research exists on the demographics of faith in the United States. Therefore, we have chosen to provide demographic information for only the five largest religious groups in America. Although many religious groups are not represented explicitly in the following pages, our intent is not to overlook the importance of religious groups with fewer recorded members. Instead, our goal is to provide basic information in a supportive, meaningful, and effective way. To provide brief introductions on all faiths, beliefs, and religions in the United States would take a manual many times longer than this one, which, by design, is intended to present concise information in an easy-to-access format. Please keep in mind, however, that despite the focus on the five largest religious groups after Christianity, the five strategies to strengthen inclusion outlined in this manual are widely transferable across all underserved communities, even if they are not mentioned explicitly in this manual.

A NOTE ABOUT RELIGIOUS DATA

Religious data is not exactly comparable to other demographic data because the U.S. Census Bureau does not collect data on religious affiliation. Public law prohibits the census from asking mandatory questions about Americans’ religious affiliations (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). However, other private surveying bodies, like the Pew Research Center and Gallup, are able to collect rich information through nationally representative surveys on Americans’ religious affiliations, practices, and beliefs. We use these alternate sources here to paint a picture of today’s religious landscape.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR RELIGIOUS GROUPS AND HOW BIG ARE THEY?

The majority of people in the United States identify as Christian. In its 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study, the Pew Research Center found that over 70 percent of Americans were Christian, 6 percent belonged to other non-Christian faiths (the largest among them Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism), and 23 percent reported no religious affiliation (Pew Research Center, 2016). A Gallup poll of the same year found roughly similar results, though with a larger proportion of Christians (76%) and a smaller proportion of religiously unaffiliated (16%; Newport, 2014). According to Pew’s data, Protestants—including Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, and Historically Black Protestants—make up nearly half of the U.S. population (47%), and one in five Americans is Catholic (21%).
A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Since the founding of this nation in 1776, Christians have represented an increasing share of America’s religious fabric and today comprise the vast majority of Americans. As the U.S. population grows and shifts in demographic representation occur, the overall religious makeup is changing as well. Among Christians, a decline in those who self-identify as Christian has occurred largely among Mainline Protestants and Catholics. Evangelical Protestants have grown in number, and the number of Historically Black Protestants has remained stable.

During this same period, non-Christian faiths grew, but only by 1 percent, from 5 percent in 2007 to 6 percent in 2014. Among these non-Christian faiths, Muslim faiths are growing the fastest, though from a very small base: from 0.4 percent in 2007 to 0.9 percent in 2014.

FAST FACTS

A small number of Americans (4.3% of the population) who were not raised in a religion now identify with one, but the number moving the other way—those who grew up with a religious affiliation and have chosen to become unaffiliated—outnumbers the former by four to one.
DRIVERS BEHIND THE CHANGING RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

Driving today’s shifting religious landscape is the growth of the religiously unaffiliated, a group that is sometimes referred to as the “nones.” This group grew from 16 percent of the U.S. population in 2007 to 23 percent in 2014. Almost one in four Americans does not identify with a religious group. “Nones” are individuals who reported having no religious affiliation, being “nothing in particular,” or being atheist or agnostic. This group often includes individuals who decline to identify a faith or belief tradition, or whose faith or belief traditions are not provided as options in data collection media. That being said, nones may identify as being spiritual or having strong personal faith.

GENERATIONAL SHIFTS

Generational diversity is the most important factor explaining this demographic shift, according to Pew. Many individuals under the age of 35 have much lower rates of religious affiliation than older generations. And while statistics show that people tend to become slightly more religious as they age, this is not the case with Millennials (those born between 1981–1996): older Millennials are becoming even more secular as they age. As a result, older, more religious generations are being replaced by less religious younger generations.

Millennials are not alone in choosing not to affiliate. More Generation Xers (those born in 1965–1980) than Millennials report being “nothing in particular,” and members of older generations are leaving their prior religious affiliation at an increasing rate for “nothing in particular.”

While age is not the only dimension of diversity to assess individuals’ participation in and relationship to faith and belief, it can often play a critical role.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

How religious is your state? Find out by going to the Pew Research Center Fact Tank: www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/29/how-religious-is-your-state/

DEFINING TERMS

For the purposes of religious identification, Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary (http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com/) defines “agnostic” and “atheist” as follows:

- **Agnostic**: “One who is not committed to believing in either the existence or the nonexistence of God or a god.”
- **Atheist**: “A person who does not believe in the existence of a god or any gods.”
The term “the black church” evolved from the phrase “the Negro church,” the title of a pioneering sociological study of African American Protestant churches at the turn of the century by W.E.B. Du Bois. In its origins, the phrase was largely an academic category. Many African Americans did not think of themselves as belonging to the Negro church, but rather described themselves according to denominational affiliations such as Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Saint (of the Sanctified Church tradition), and so on. Black/African American Christians were never monolithic; they have always been diverse and their churches highly decentralized (Mellowes, 2010).

Today the black church includes nondenominational, predominantly black congregations and is also widely understood to include the following seven major black Protestant denominations: the National Baptist Convention, the National Baptist Convention of America, the Progressive National Convention, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Church of God in Christ.

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HOW RELIGIOUS IS THE U.S. POPULATION?

Overall religiosity, or religious commitment, is declining. Using measures such as belief in God, daily prayer, and regular attendance at church or other religious services, Pew’s surveys show that the American public is becoming slightly less religious.

Once again, this decline in overall self-identified religious commitment is being driven by the rise of the religiously unaffiliated. It is not only the number of religiously unaffiliated that has grown, but, as a group, their beliefs and practices have also become more secular.

INDIVIDUAL LEVELS OF RELIGIOSITY

Does the fact that overall religiosity is declining mean that individuals are, on average, becoming less religiously committed? Not necessarily. The Pew survey found that the religious commitment of those who say they belong to a religious group stayed the same or, on some measures, became stronger.

Four in ten (41%) of those who say they belong to a religious group rely mainly on their religious beliefs for guidance on questions about right and wrong, up from 34 percent in 2007. Two-thirds (66%) now say that religion is “very important” in their lives (up from 64% in 2007). In addition, the proportions of the religiously affiliated who report they regularly (meaning at least weekly) read scripture, participate in prayer or scripture study groups, and share their faith with others have all increased between 2007 and 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2015a).

Some indicators suggest that religious practice among the religiously affiliated is becoming more social or interactive—and more interfaith. One in four people (26%) say they “share their faith with nonbelievers or people from other religious backgrounds at least once a week,” up from 23 percent in 2007.

PERCEPTIONS OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Despite the decline in overall religiosity, the vast majority of Americans continue to see religious institutions as valuable. Nearly nine out of 10 adults (89%) say religious institutions “bring people together and strengthen community bonds”; 87 percent say religious institutions “play an important role in helping the poor and needy”; and 75 percent say they “protect and strengthen morality in society” (Pew Research Center, 2015a).

FAST FACTS

The most religious states are Alabama and Mississippi, where more than three-quarters of adults identify as “highly religious.” The least religious states, where just one in three adults identifies as “highly religious” are New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Vermont.
TAKING A CLOSER LOOK: DIVERSITY IN THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

Shifts in the religious landscape are not happening in just one religion or with any one demographic group. They are playing out across the diverse spectrum of American society, among women and men, among married and unmarried, among people of all education levels, and among all major racial groups.

For example, while the religiously unaffiliated are more likely to identify as white (24%) than as black (18%) or Hispanic (20%), the rise of the religiously unaffiliated is occurring in all of these groups. And while women tend to be more religious than men (Pew Research Center, 2016b), the rate of increase of the unaffiliated among men and women is roughly the same.

At the same time, many religious groups in the United States are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of race and ethnicity (Lipka, 2015a). The most diverse religious group today is Seventh-day Adventists, followed, in order, by Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists, the unaffiliated (as a group), and then Catholics (Pew Research Center, 2015a).

Religious intermarriage adds another layer of diversity within the communities of those the Y serves. Intermarriage is increasing; today the intermarriage rates are more than double the intermarriage rates prior to 1960. Almost four in 10 (39%) of those who married since 2010 married someone from a different religious group (in which “unaffiliated” is considered a group; Pew Research Center, 2015b).

Immigrants and newcomers are more religiously diverse than the overall population, but this diversity reflects similar patterns: the vast majority are Christian (68%), 20 percent are unaffiliated, and 12 percent are from non-Christian faiths, the largest among these being Hindu (4%) and Muslim (4%; Pew Research Center, 2016c). For most immigrants across the religious spectrum, religion is important. More than four in five immigrants (82%) say that religion is “somewhat” or “very important” in their lives. Of religious groups, Hindus have the highest proportion of immigrants (87%), followed by Muslims (64%), Orthodox Christians (40%), and Catholics (28%).
REGIONAL TRENDS

In each of the four U.S. regions (Midwest, Northeast, South, and West), a similar pattern is playing out: American society is becoming more religiously diverse at the same time as the religiously unaffiliated are on the rise. In the South, the religiously unaffiliated make up 19 percent of the population; they make up 22 percent in the Midwest; 25 percent in the Northeast; and 28 percent in the West, where they are the largest single "religious" group (Pew Research Center, 2015c).

THE 2010 RELIGION CENSUS

The 2010 Religion Census, conducted by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB), surveyed religious groups in each county across the United States. The 236 respondents included Christian denominations (including Latter Day Saints, Messianic Jews, and Unitary/Universalists groups), as well respondents from non-Christian religions (Jain, Shinto, Sikh, Taoist, Spiritualist [National Spiritualist Association], Bahá’í, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Zoroastrian). The respondents reported nearly 345,000 congregations with 151 million adherents, comprising almost 49 percent of the total U.S. population (ASARB, 2012).
Regional variations also appear when you look at who makes up the largest non-Christian religious group by state. In the West, Buddhists are the largest religious group after Christians and the religiously unaffiliated. In the Northeast, Jews make up the largest religious group; in the South, Muslims; and throughout the Midwest, a mixture. Hindus are the largest non-Christian group in Arizona and Delaware, and Bahá’ís are the largest non-Christian group in South Carolina (Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies [ASARB], 2012).

The 2010 U.S. Religion Census also found patterns in the size of the communities where religious adherents tend to live. More than four in five Americans belonging to a non-Christian faith resided in metropolitan areas of one million or more, and more than half lived in the largest cities, with populations greater than five million people (ASARB, 2012). Catholics and Orthodox Christians also largely resided in metropolitan areas of one million or more, whereas Protestants’ residences were more evenly spread between metro areas of all sizes and nonmetropolitan areas. Not surprisingly, larger cities are more religiously diverse.

Source: Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies [ASARB], 2012.
DIVERSITY ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

College-age populations, like immigrant populations mentioned earlier, are some of the most religiously diverse segments in the United States today. A 2014 survey conducted by the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) involved 38 campuses and found that a majority of respondents still identified as Christian (57%) but at considerably lower levels than in the general population (IFYC, 2014). The college survey also found a much higher proportion of respondents from non-Christian faiths: one in eight respondents identified with a non-Christian faith, while one in 17 off-campus respondents identified with a non-Christian faith. Interestingly, these numbers are not too dissimilar from the faith landscape the Pew Research Center projects for the U.S. population in 2050.

While the demographics of those self-identifying with faith in the college-going and college-age population are changing, trends related to open dialogue about issues of religious and faith identity are also changing. In a 2014 longitudinal survey conducted through the Interfaith Youth Core, 72 percent of students reported that “students, faculty, and staff on this campus who represent diverse worldviews.” Young interfaith leaders are pioneering new ways to bring people and communities together across lines of difference to work for a better world.” A local Y voice (Ann Rasmus), quoted later in this manual, details what interfaith leadership looks like at the University of Illinois Campus YMCA.

![Diversity on College Campuses Today and in 2050](chart.png)

Source: Interfaith Youth Core, 2014; Pew, 2016a, 2016c.
THE SLOWING PACE OF CHANGE

The recent changes in the religious landscape have been significant and rapid, but the pace of change may be slowing. Pew projects the religiously unaffiliated to grow only three more percentage points, to 26 percent by 2050 and the Christian proportion to decline another five percentage points to 66 percent—still two in three Americans. Non-Christian religious groups will continue to grow but also at a relatively slow pace, from 6 percent of the U.S. population to 8 percent.

If Pew’s projections are correct, then the landscape over the next 20 to 25 years will be relatively similar to today’s, at least at the national level. Recognizing the nuances of the demographics of the communities we serve, especially across the dimension of religion, is critical as we continue and begin community conversations and seek to make YMCAs places where diverse populations meet and where community cohesion is brought to life in inclusive, equitable, and transformative ways.
MAJOR RELIGIONS

The religious landscape is one of diversity in virtually every aspect. As you read in the preceding section (“Demographics”), the United States is home to a many different faiths, beliefs, and religions. Within each major religious group is a variety of subgroups. These subgroups include not only the various denominations, but also the many dimensions of diversity such as age, citizenship status, ethnicity, geographic location, native language, race, and sexual orientation.

Think, for example, of Ashkenazic Jews (of northern and eastern European descent) and Sephardic Jews (those of southern Europe, North Africa, and Middle Eastern descent). Think of white Americans who have converted to Buddhism and Buddhists who are first generation immigrants from Asia. Think of a 65-year-old Catholic immigrant from Mexico and her 16-year-old American-born granddaughter.

Even the family home is a religiously diverse place, with differences in religiosity and religious affiliation between spouses, between generations, and between genders. At the individual level, every one of us has a unique experience of faith, one that is likely to change and evolve over time.

So what does all this diversity around us mean? It means that we have so much to gain from learning more about those who are different from ourselves. It also means that quickly and concisely describing the myriad religions or religious groups that contribute to the diversity within the United States is virtually impossible. Finally, it means that the diversity of belief, faith, and religion within our YMCAs presents a unique, timely, and transformative opportunity to engage in interfaith dialogue and engagement, as well as education and awareness building, of this historical, complex, and critical dimension of diversity.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Test your religious knowledge and take the Pew Research Center’s U.S. Religious Knowledge Quiz: www.pewforum.org/quiz/u-s-religious-knowledge/. At the end, you’ll find out how your knowledge stands up to the average American’s.
The purpose of this section, therefore, is to provide very basic introductions to the five major non-Christian religious groups that, with the Christian majority, make up a large part of the tapestry of faith in the United States today: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the religiously unaffiliated.

Religious traditions and belief systems are practiced and experienced in a multitude of ways. As a result, the best way to understand what it means to be Jewish or Hindu or Muslim in the United States today is to seek out and learn from individual experience: in other words, get to know your neighbor. Knowing the basics, which this section aims to provide, can help you start these conversations with the people around you.

Just as importantly, this section aims to inspire you, as a learner, to continue to develop your understanding of the faiths, practices, and beliefs of others. We’ve included links to resources that help you do just that in the later “Links and Resources” section.

Note: The five largest religious groups in the United States have been consistently and generally called “religions” rather than “faiths.” This is the language that we adopt in this section.

The Five Largest Religious Groups, After Christians

Following are the five largest religious groups after Christians, who continue to constitute the majority of Americans (about 70% of the U.S. population; Pew Research Center, 2016a):

- Unaffiliated, 22.8%
- Jewish, 1.9%
- Muslim, 0.9%
- Buddhist, 0.7%
- Hindu, 0.7%

“Many American mosques bring together disparate peoples in a manner unprecedented in other American religious communities or in other Muslim communities. Racial and ethnic barriers, as well as Sunni/Shi‘i [Shiite] divisions, dissolve in many American mosques, as American Muslims come together and pray. Side by side, shoulder to shoulder, are people who come from distant parts of the globe; they may speak different languages, but they hold a common faith.”

— From the Pluralism Project
According to the Pew Research Center’s projections for 2050, these same five groups are expected to remain the largest non-Christian religious groups for the next three decades.

JUDAISM

The first Jews settled in the United States nearly 400 years ago, establishing a community and institutions in the 1650s, first in New York (then New Amsterdam) and then in Rhode Island. Today, Judaism is the largest non-Christian religion in the United States, comprising 1.9 percent of the overall population.

The Jewish religion dates back over 3,500 years, originating in the Middle East. Abraham, the patriarch and founding father of the nomadic Hebrew tribes, was the first Jew, but the founding of Judaism several centuries later is attributed to Moses, who united the 12 Israelite tribes (descendants of Abraham) at Mount Sinai.

WORSHIP

Judaism is a monotheistic religion, meaning Jews believe there is only one God. Jews have a number of sacred texts, the most important being the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, referred to as the Old Testament by Christians) and the Talmud, a series of teachings on the Torah.

Jewish religious leaders are called rabbis (both male and female-identified), and houses of worship are called synagogues. Shabbat (or Sabbath), which starts Friday evening and ends at sunset on Saturday, is an important time for Jews for family life, for God, and for rest. Some Jews may also attend synagogue at this time. Shabbat represents the seventh day of creation, when God rested. Many Jews share a family meal on Friday evening, lighting candles together and saying blessings over traditional bread (challah) and wine.

There are four major Jewish denominations in the United States today: Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform. Some Jews, however, do not consider themselves members of any denomination. In addition, some Jews may not consider themselves to be religious but may still identify as Jewish due to shared history, ethnicity, and culture.
HOLIDAYS
Jewish holidays follow the Jewish calendar, which is lunar. For this reason, the exact dates of Jewish holidays change from year to year but fall within the same month or two. Like Shabbat, observance of Jewish holidays also tends to begin the evening before the holiday itself, usually at sundown.

While there are many Jewish holidays, the following are most commonly observed in the United States:

- **Rosh Hashanah** is the Jewish New Year. This one- or two-day holiday occurs in September or October and is a time when many Jews go to synagogue.

- **Yom Kippur** is a day of atonement and includes a 25-hour fast. It occurs nine days after Rosh Hashanah and is another date when many Jews, including those who do not attend throughout the year, go to synagogue.

- **Chanukah** (or Hanukkah) is an eight-day festival of lights commemorating the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem. During Chanukah, Jews light the eight candles of a menorah in the evening, after sundown. Chanukah occurs between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Possibly because of its chronological proximity to Christmas, many people outside the Jewish religion perceive Chanukah to be the most important Jewish holiday, but it is not, unlike Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

- **Passover** commemorates the Exodus from Egypt. Passover starts on the night of the full moon in April and lasts seven to eight days. It frequently overlaps with Easter.

Religiously, work is not permitted on certain Jewish holidays, including (but not limited to) Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and the first, second, seventh, and eighth days of Passover. Work is also prohibited on Shabbat. For some Jews, being able to take leave from work at these times is important. Other Jews may need time to prepare or travel for large holiday meals. (Think of the time many families need to travel or prepare for Thanksgiving dinner.)
ISLAM

The first Muslims are thought to have arrived in what is now the United States in the 1300s, coming as explorers from Mali and other parts of West Africa. Some historians date Muslims’ first arrival in America even earlier, to 1178 (The Pluralism Project, 2016a). It is also estimated that one-third of Africans who were taken from their land and forced into slavery in the 1600s identified as Muslim. Today, Muslims make up less than 1 percent of the overall U.S. population but are the fastest growing non-Christian religious group.

WORSHIP

There are five pillars of Islam: Muslims must (1) orally declare their faith by saying, “There is no deity but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God,” (2) pray five times per day, (3) perform zakat, or charitable giving, (4) fast from dawn until dusk during the month of Ramadan; and (5), at one point in their lives, if able, perform the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). When Muslims pray, they turn in the direction of Mecca, the birthplace of Islam.

Muslim religious leaders (male-identified) are called imams and houses of worship are called mosques. Some Muslims gather for prayer on Fridays for a weekly worship service called Jumuah.

Islam has two major sects: Sunni and Shiite. Other Muslim sects, like Ismailis, Druze, and Sufis, exist in smaller numbers but may have some commonalities with either or both of the two major streams. Within each sect are different schools of thought and interpretations of Islamic law, but the sects hold much in common as well, including praying daily, performing zakat and Hajj, and fasting during Ramadan. Sunnis, Shiites, and all sects affiliated with Islam share the same holy book, the Quran, and believe in one God (InterFaith Leadership Council of Metropolitan Detroit, 2013).

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

About Islam

• The Pluralism Project–Islam: http://pluralism.org/religions/islam/
• Council on American Islamic Relations: www.cair.com/guides-to-muslim-religious-practices
• Islamic Network Group (ING): https://ing.org/
• Institute of Islamic Information and Education: www.iiie.net/index.php?q=node/16

Strengthening Inclusion: Diverse Faiths and Beliefs | page 21
HOLIDAYS
Islam follows a lunar calendar (one that is about 11 days shorter per year than the U.S./Gregorian calendar); therefore, holidays and significant dates shift from year to year. Significant Muslim holidays or observances include the following:

- **Ramadan** is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and is a month of fasting, reflection, self-purification, and renewal. During Ramadan, Muslims fast from dawn to dusk, abstaining from food and drink during daylight. Typically, during Ramadan, Muslims eat an early morning meal before dawn and share a meal (iftar) after sunset. If able, Muslims may attend mosque for congregational prayers in the evening.

- **Eid al-Fitr** occurs at the end of Ramadan. This holiday celebrates the end of the fast and lasts one to three days. Typically, Muslims share large meals together (eid means "feast"), visit each other's homes, and gather for prayers. “Eid Mubarak” is a popular greeting, meaning “Blessed Eid.”

- **Eid al-Adha** occurs at the end of Hajj and commemorates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Ismael (Ishmael). Traditionally, to remember Abraham and his devotion to God, Muslim households sacrifice an animal such as a sheep or goat, giving away two-thirds of the meat to friends and to the poor.

BUDDHISM
Buddhism is thought to have first come to the United States in the 1850s with Chinese Buddhists who came to California for the Gold Rush. In 1853, the first Buddhist temple was built in San Francisco to serve this growing community of workers and miners (The Pluralism Project, 2016b). Today, Buddhists make up 0.7 percent of the total U.S. population.

Buddhism began some 2,500 years ago in what is today Nepal. In the sixth century BCE, Siddhartha Gautama, an Indian prince, gave up his position and life of privilege to better understand the realities of existence. According to legend, as Siddhartha sat at the foot of a tree and meditated, a stillness descended upon him, and he was able to think more clearly and deeply. After 40 days, on the night of the full moon in May, he was finally “awakened” to the true nature of the world and the causes of suffering (The Pluralism Project, 2016c). He became the Buddha, which means “Enlightened One” or “Awakened One.”

FAST FACTS
Islam is one of the three Abrahamic religions (the other two are Christianity and Judaism) and traces its origins to Abraham, who is recognized as Islam’s first prophet. Islam formed as a religion in the 600s in the Middle East when Allah (God) sent his final revelation to the prophet Muhammad, descendant of Abraham and Ishmael. This revelation was then transcribed into the Quran, Muslims’ primary holy book.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?
About Buddhism

- **The Pluralism Project—Buddhism:**
  http://pluralism.org/religions/buddhism/

- **Basic Buddhism Guide:**
  www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/basic-guide.htm

- **The Buddhist Centre:**
  https://thebuddhistcentre.com

- **DharmaNet International Learning Center:**
  https://dharmanet.org/irc/
Buddhism is a way of life and a spiritual pathway through which individuals seek to better themselves, with the hope of ultimately achieving enlightenment. Unlike the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Buddhism does not focus on the relationship between the individual and God. Buddhists do not worship a personal or creator god, nor do they consider Buddha to be a god or prophet.

The teachings and sermons of Buddha are called the Dharma. The Dharma teaches that life involves suffering, suffering that is caused by desire and by grasping. Buddhists work to attain freedom from suffering by practicing eight habits in their everyday lives (The Pluralism Project, 2016c, 2016d):

1. **Understanding**: Knowing that both wholesome and unwholesome acts and thoughts have consequences
2. **Intention**: Recognizing that actions are shaped either by habits of anger and self-centeredness or habits of compassion, understanding, and love
3. **Speech**: Recognizing the moral implications of speech and truthfulness
4. **Action**: Observing the five precepts at the foundation of all morality: not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying, and not clouding the mind with intoxicants
5. **Livelihood**: Earning a living in ways that are consistent with the basic principles
6. **Effort**: Fostering this way of living with the same attention, patience, and perseverance it takes to cultivate a field
7. **Mindfulness**: Developing "presence of mind" (i.e., moment-to-moment awareness, as well as mindfulness of breathing, walking, and bodily sensations) through meditation practice
8. **Concentration**: Developing the ability to center and focus the dispersed and distracted mind and heart in order to see clearly

**WORSHIP**

Buddhists can worship at home or at a temple. The design of Buddhist temples symbolizes the four elements (fire, air, earth, and water), as well as wisdom. Some Buddhists set up a room or part of a room in their homes as a shrine for worship. This shrine may include a statue of the Buddha, an incense burner, and candles. Most Buddhists revere the *Tripitaka* (or "Pali Canon") as a holy book. It is widely considered to be written in a language over 2,000 years old, called Pali, which was closest to the language the Buddha himself spoke.
HOLIDAYS
Buddhism follows a lunar calendar, so exact holiday dates differ from year to year. In addition, different traditions within Buddhism celebrate festivals on different days. The following are a selection of popular holidays:

- **Vesak**, or Buddha Day, is the most important holiday. It occurs on the first full moon in May. Vesak represents Buddha’s birthday; for some, this holiday also represents his death and when he achieved enlightenment. For Vesak, Buddhists may clean and decorate their homes and attend temple for service and celebration.

- **Buddhist New Year** is celebrated at different times by different Buddhist communities between January and April.

- **Asalha Puja**, or **Dharma Day**, marks the day Buddhism was established (when Buddha started teaching) and is a celebration of the Buddha’s teachings. Dharma Day occurs on the full moon in July. On this day, Buddhists read from the scriptures and reflect on the content.

HINDUISM
Hinduism arrived in the United States in the late 1700s, after trade began between America and India (The Pluralism Project, 2016d). Today, 0.7 percent of the U.S. population identifies as Hindu. Hinduism is a collection of traditions that has evolved over thousands of years. Hinduism is thought to have started over 5,000 years ago in India, in the Indus Valley, where the ancient world’s largest civilization thrived. Hinduism shares much with the other three religious traditions that are indigenous to India (the “Dharma traditions”—Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism—including the concepts of dharma (cosmic order), karma (force that determines fate), samsara (cycle of death and rebirth), and moksha (release from rebirth; Hindu American Foundation [HAF], 2016).

Hinduism has a vast number of religious texts, reflecting its long history, including the **Vedas** (hymns, capturing the wisdom of the ancient sages), the **Upanishads**, the **Puranas**, the epics **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata** (including the **Bhagavad Gita**), and a body of devotional literature.

For Hindus, **Brahman** is considered the Supreme Consciousness, the Divine, or simply God. Brahman is present in all living things and is represented in various forms. Some Hindus believe that Brahman is formless and infinite; others believe that Brahman exists in the form of **Shiva** (Shaivites) or **Krishna** (Vaishnavas). God can be represented in both female and male forms, and different forms represent different qualities: for example, Ganesh is the god of wisdom and Lakshmi is the goddess of prosperity. Hinduism is pluralistic by nature; Hindus believe there are many forms of the divine and many pathways toward truth and self-realization.

Hindus believe in reincarnation (**samsara**) and the law of karma, which holds that every action has a consequence. At death, only the body dies, while the soul (**atman**) is reborn in
another body. What you experience in your current life is the consequence of actions from prior lives, and your actions in this life will have consequences for your future lives. The journey to self-realization occurs over many lifetimes.

Hinduism describes four primary goals for life:

- **Dharma**: Righteous action in any given situation
- **Artha**: The pursuit of prosperity
- **Kama**: The enjoyment of the material world
- **Moksha**: Liberation from the suffering caused from dependence on the material world

**WORSHIP**

Hindus worship at home, as well as at temples on special occasions. At home, Hindus may create alters with murtis, which are embodiments of Brahman in particular forms. Temples will honor one or more murtis. The performance of rituals is important for Hindus. Devotion, or bhakti, can take many forms, including song, honor-offerings (of fruit, flowers, water, sweets, etc.) at alters, worship at temple, and the performing arts like dancing and plays. Congregational worship and performance of rituals has become more prominent in the United States because communities and priests are more scattered (The Pluralism Project, 2016e).

**HOLIDAYS**

Like the diversity and expansiveness of the Hindu tradition, there are many festivals and holidays, celebrated differently by Hindu communities, around the world. Hinduism follows a lunar calendar, so exact dates shift from year to year.

The following are some key holidays that may be celebrated by Hindus in the United States:

- **Holi**: This celebration of spring, creation, and renewal occurs in early March. During this colorful festival, people throw colored powder and water at each other in a spirit of celebration.
- **Diwali**: A festival of lights lasting five days usually in October or November, Diwali celebrates the New Year.
- **Mahashivaratri**: This festival celebrates Shiva and occurs in the same Hindu month as Holi.
- **Dasara**: Usually occurring in September or October, this 10-day festival celebrates the triumph of good over evil.
- **Pongal (or Makar Sankranti)**: This harvest festival, which usually occurs in January, lasts four days.

**FAST FACTS**

The lotus, which grows in muddy waters but remains clean and dry, represents the importance of doing the right thing even when surrounded by wrong influences. Learn more at the Hindu American Foundation: www.hafsite.org

Some suggest that Hinduism is more of a culture and way of life than a creed. Read more at http://pluralism.org/religions/hinduism/issues-for-hindus-in-america/what-is-hinduism/

**WANT TO KNOW MORE? About Hinduism**

- **The Pluralism Project–Hinduism**: http://pluralism.org/religions/hinduism/
- **Hindu American Foundation**: www.hafsite.org/
- **Hinduism for Beginners**: http://hinduism.about.com/od/basics/p/hinduismbasics.htm
- **BBC Religion–Hinduism**: www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/
THE RELIGIOUSLY UNAFFILIATED

Sometimes called the "nones," the religiously unaffiliated constitute almost one in four Americans overall and more than one in three Americans under the age of 50 (Pew Research Center, 2016d). While not really a religious group (these individuals report not being part of any specific group), the unaffiliated are the largest religious category after Christians; and the religiously unaffiliated group is larger than any of the religious groups described previously. The number of unaffiliated is growing rapidly, and individuals in this group are becoming more secular in their practices and beliefs (Lipka, 2015b).

According to the Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape Survey, the religiously unaffiliated include atheists ("do not believe in God"), agnostics ("not sure if there is a God"), and those who answered "nothing in particular" when asked to state their religion. Of those who answered "nothing in particular," nearly 7 percent said that religion is important. Together, these respondents make up 22.8 percent of the overall U.S. population (Lipka, 2015c).

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

“Do I take my shoes off?” If you are visiting a house of worship and are not sure how to dress or behave, you can find guidance from “Entering Houses of Worship,” a resource made available by Tanenbaum: https://tanenbaum.org/tanenbaum-resources/houses-of-worship/

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

WHO MAKES UP THE RELIGIOUSLY UNAFFILIATED (THE “NONE’S”)?

BLURRY BOUNDARIES

The categories of religious versus nonreligious, based on group affiliation, may be less clear-cut than the numbers suggest:

- One in three (34%) of the religiously unaffiliated report that religion is still somewhat or very important in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2016d).
- Nearly half (49%) of the religiously unaffiliated say they are absolutely or fairly certain in their belief in God (Pew Research Center, 2016e).
Furthermore, not all individuals who do not believe in God would be considered, or identify, as atheist. Significant numbers in some religious groups do not believe in God, don’t know, or are not too or not at all certain. More than one in three Jews (36%), for example, report not believing in God or being not too or not at all certain. At the same time, other indicators of religiosity among Jews are increasing, including frequency of prayer, attendance at religious services, importance of religion in one’s life, and frequency of participation in scripture study or religious education.

Choosing to subscribe to the label of “religiously unaffiliated” carries a certain degree of ambiguity that begs clarification—especially to those learning about the diverse network and intersectionality of faiths and beliefs. “Unaffiliated” includes more familiar terms such as “agnostic,” which denotes a belief that it is impossible to know the truth in regards to the existence of God or a higher power (Russell, 1953), and “atheist,” which, broadly speaking, denotes a nonbelief in the existence of any god or higher power (Robinson, 2015).

These are not absolute terms and, like all dimensions of diversity, have nuances and differences that often fall on a spectrum of characteristics. In addition, being religiously unaffiliated does not necessarily equate to explicit atheism. Rather, this group can encompass those who feel that a certain religion may be too political or consumerist and so choose not to define any concrete organizational association (Pew Research Center, 2012). Furthermore, the unaffiliated may also include those who possess certain convictions taken from a variety of faiths and therefore possess a plurality of beliefs that cannot simply be grouped under any one denomination or defined religious group.

**GOING BEYOND ASSUMPTIONS**

Religious experience is complex, dynamic, and not easily categorized. Religious affiliation, practice, and belief rarely fit neatly into a single box. Deeper understanding can come from getting to know religious communities and individuals directly. We hope this brief introduction to the major faiths in the United States today will help you start this process of discovery.
THE RELIGIONS AT A GLANCE


KEY TENETS OF SELECT MAJOR RELIGIONS

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<td>Jesus</td>
<td>Abraham and Moses</td>
<td>Muhammad</td>
<td>No single founder</td>
<td>The Buddha (Gautama Siddhartha)</td>
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<td>Key writings</td>
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<td>The Bible</td>
<td>The Tanakh (the Old Testament), the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), and the Talmud (teachings about the Old Testament)</td>
<td>The Quran, (revealed to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel), as well as the Psalms, Torah, and Gospels from the Jewish and Christian religious books</td>
<td>The Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, and others</td>
<td>The Mahavastu (the Buddha’s life story); the Jataka Tales (stories of the Buddha’s former lives); the Tripitaka; and the Tantras</td>
<td>Humanist Manifesto I (1933), which expresses a general religious and philosophical outlook meant to give meaning, direction, and purpose to life</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Who or what is God?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>A holy, personal God in three forms (Father, Son, Spirit—the Trinity) who created the universe out of nothing and who is just, merciful, and perfect.</td>
<td>A holy spirit. Some believe God to be all-powerful, personal, and compassionate. Others believe God to be impersonal and unknowable. There is no Trinity.</td>
<td>Allah—one impersonal God to whom human attributes like “father” cannot be ascribed.</td>
<td>A universal spirit or mind that all are part of. The many gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon are manifestations of the universal God.</td>
<td>None or the Buddha. The Buddha did not believe in the existence of God; others consider the Buddha to be a universal, enlightened consciousness or a god.</td>
<td>Not important. Most humanists (the majority of which are atheists or agnostics, although a few ascribe to some religious practice) view belief in God as irrelevant or detrimental. The world is governed by natural laws, and there is no transcendent realm or beings (e.g., heaven, paradise, spirits, etc.).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Nature of humankind</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Created in the image of God and of incredible value. Although fallen by choosing against God, humans can be redeemed by God’s grace.</td>
<td>Created in the image of God, fallen by choosing against God, but redeemable by prayer, repentance, and obedience.</td>
<td>Created basically good but fallible and in need of guidance and obedience.</td>
<td>Born basically good but ignorant of the true nature of reality. Easily distracted by temporal concerns, humans become alienated from themselves, others, and reality. Rebirths are based on Karma (a moral law of cause and effect).</td>
<td>Born basically good but ignorant of the true nature of reality (all is impermanent and there is no self) and easily distracted by worldly concerns, which leads to suffering. Realizing that the self is an illusion leads to compassion; freeing oneself of desire relieves suffering and ultimately leads to enlightenment.</td>
<td>Have the capacity and responsibility to think and act in moral and ethical terms. People are individually responsible for their own lives and collectively responsible for society and the planet.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Christianity</strong></th>
<th><strong>Judaism</strong></th>
<th><strong>Islam</strong></th>
<th><strong>Hinduism</strong></th>
<th><strong>Buddhism</strong></th>
<th><strong>Humanism</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Redemption</strong></td>
<td>Earned by works. Prayer, repentance, and obeying the law of the Tanakh lead to salvation. Some believe that salvation is the improvement of society.</td>
<td>Earned by works. The balance between a person’s good and bad deeds determines eternal destiny in paradise or hell. Allah, showing mercy, may tip the balance toward heaven. The Five Pillars of Islam¹ are the religious duties that faithful Muslims must practice.</td>
<td>Earned by works. Through yoga and meditation, a person evolves through cycles of reincarnation until ultimately achieving release from the cycle of death and rebirth and being absorbed into the universal Spirit Mind.</td>
<td>Earned by works. Belief in the four noble truths (reflections about the nature of suffering) and following the eightfold path² leads to Nirvana (enlightenment). All individual desires are eliminated and suffering ends through enlightenment.</td>
<td>Not applicable in a religious sense. With no expectation of an afterlife or spiritual liberation, salvation is not needed. The paramount concern is realizing one’s personal potential and working for the betterment of humanity.</td>
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**Who is Jesus?**

| **The son of God, who lived a perfect life and sacrificed his own life to atone for the sins of humankind. Forgiveness of sins and eternal life are promised to those who believe.** | **Either a martyred Jewish rabbi or a false messiah. He is not the son of God, nor was he resurrected after death.** | **A respected, sinless prophet who was born of a virgin but is not God. He is among the thousands of prophets sent by Allah. He was not crucified for people’s sins, but he will return someday.** | **A teacher or guru and son of God, but God and Jesus are part of a pantheon of gods. His death does not atone for sins, and he was not resurrected after death.** | **An enlightened teacher but not the son of God.** | **A moral teacher but otherwise not really important.** |

¹ The Creed, prayer five times daily, giving, annual fasting, and lifetime pilgrimage

² Having right views, resolve, speech, behavior, occupation, effort, contemplation, and meditation
MAKING THE CASE

As community-based organizations, YMCAs are well-positioned to respond to the changing makeup of our communities. Faith and religious identity and practice are part of these changes (see the earlier section “Demographics”) and, like other dimensions of diversity, play a role in determining how individuals, families, and communities relate to the Y. Taking a strategic approach to better understand and work with communities of diverse faiths and beliefs will help prepare your YMCA to address these changes and build the Y’s reputation as a place for all.

Strengthening inclusion of communities of diverse faiths helps YMCAs do the following:

• Build **membership** by meeting the changing needs of diverse, historically underserved, new, or growing populations whose interests align closely with YMCAs’ work to strengthen communities in youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility for all

• Strengthen **program value** by catalyzing innovations to respond to the unique needs, interests, and resources of communities’ new and changing populations

• Build **leadership** by ensuring diverse faces and talent are present, engaged, and nurtured within the YMCA family, and cultivating culturally competent leaders and staff for the future

• Mobilize new skills and resources through **collaboration**, opening doors to new and historically underserved populations and opportunities

• Support **financial development** by mobilizing the talent, energy, and resources of all community populations, and by attracting new supporters, donors, and partners through demonstrated investment, commitment, and success in working with diverse populations

• Increase **mission impact** and **visibility** by reaching new or historically underserved populations and community partners, and by making a lasting impact in more lives
STRATEGIES TO STRENGTHEN INCLUSION

Strengthened inclusion in your community is the result of many hands and many efforts. This section highlights five strategies that diverse YMCAs from across the country have used to strengthen inclusion of faith communities from the five major faith traditions. The strategies outlined in this section help you form an inclusion task force or steering committee; build key relationships; gather information on needs, interests, and opportunities; prepare to serve new populations; adapt programs and services; and reach out to those you want to include.

These strategies will be familiar to readers of other manuals in the Strengthening Inclusion series. While the high-level steps in the process are the same across the manuals, this manual helps you identify ways to apply these strategies to communities of diverse faiths and beliefs, and includes examples and advice from YMCAs currently strengthening inclusion of diverse faiths through their programs, operations, and leadership.

The strategies are numbered one through five, but you do not need to pursue them sequentially, although doing so is recommended. For example, your YMCA may need to conduct an initial community inventory (strategy 2) before it is ready to create an inclusion task force (strategy 1).

Probably the fastest route to strengthened inclusion is an intentional approach that activates multiple strategies at once to get to your goal. But if your YMCA cannot activate all of these strategies simultaneously, consider a staged approach. The momentum gained through successes in one or more strategies can help drive commitment to subsequent stages.
STRATEGY 1: MOBILIZE AN INCLUSION TASK FORCE

Most would agree: a focus on strengthening inclusion is successful when it is intentional. Establishing a task force, or employing your existing inclusion task force, will help your YMCA determine those intentions (i.e., set goals), make a plan for achieving them, and ensure that the plan is moving your YMCA toward its goals.

Faith diversity does not necessarily need to have its own task force. After all, if every dimension of diversity had a dedicated task force or committee, Ys would have as many committees and task forces as members—and more. Instead, you can include faith and faith diversity as a dimension in your YMCA’s broader inclusion task force, which may be a part of your existing Diversity, Inclusion, and Global (DIG) Committee. Ys beginning the work of strengthening inclusion of diverse faiths and beliefs may want to assemble a working group specific to interfaith engagement and dialogue. In this case, we recommend a close linkage between the working group and the broader inclusion task force.

Understanding the intersectionality of all dimensions of diversity is critical when bringing people together for interfaith dialogue and engagement. Ensuring that your inclusion task force is a vehicle through which people can bring their whole selves—rather than just a single dimension of diversity—is critical.

Keep faith as relevant as your community thinks it is. Many individuals, regardless of faith identity, may view their faith or belief as deeply intimate or as a personal journey and may not want to call personal attention to it—even if that attention is in celebration. Follow your community’s lead regarding whether faith is a dimension of diversity needing attention at this time. Continue to be curious, empathetic, and asset-based in your approach to understanding faith as its own dimension of diversity.

DEFINING TERMS

Intersectionality is an approach that argues that classifications such as gender, race, class, and others (including faith and belief) cannot be examined in isolation from one another; they interact and intersect in individuals’ lives, in society, and in social systems. When we recognize that the dimensions of diversity are mutually constitutive—that is, each dimension impacts and is impacted by the others—we gain greater understanding and can have greater impact.
THE ROLE OF AN INCLUSION TASK FORCE

An inclusion task force is needed to

• determine and put words and actions to your YMCA’s intentions around faith diversity;

• develop a plan for realizing these intentions, drawing on input from a variety of stakeholders with unique perspectives;

• monitor and provide ongoing guidance related to your YMCA’s implementation of the plan; and

• create a safe space for dialogue that focuses on education and awareness building and that seeks to build bridges across faiths, beliefs, and other contexts of spirituality.

In addition, your task force can help with the following:

• Connecting your YMCA to strategic community partners and faith leaders so that you can better understand what these partners are doing and how your Y can collaborate to contribute to building community in new ways

• Providing insight into the diversity of faiths (and the diversity within faiths) in your area, including needs, interests, and existing services and institutions

• Advising on how to make your YMCA’s programs, operations, and facilities more accessible, relevant, and attractive to individuals and families of diverse faiths

• Building credibility, trust, and awareness among faith communities and faith leaders that your YMCA is genuinely committed to strengthening inclusion and has a plan for transforming words into actions

What would a religiously diverse community institution look like?

“One where staff have the structure of institutional support for their different backgrounds. For example, when it comes to holidays, there would be opportunities for celebrations within offices and branches that are reflective of all communities. One where dialogue happens, and where, if there are disagreements concerning religion or beliefs, we acknowledge people’s beliefs, and people feel safe and included. One where we can see each other for what we are, and we feel safe.”

—Jawanza Barial-Lumumba
Business Resource Associate Director
YMCA of San Francisco

“Without a doubt, engage your local volunteer board. We created a Diversity, Inclusion, and Global (DIG) Council as a standing committee of our association board. This council is the consciousness of our organization. Agree on a plan and get buy-in by engaging local stakeholders in the community to endorse your YMCA’s direction. We engaged a lot of faith [groups] around the city, and it has led to healthy discussion.”

—David Byrd
President and CEO
YMCA of Greater Kansas City (Mo.)
WHO TO INVOLVE

Strengthening inclusion is about relationship building, and your task force will help you do that. It is important that involvement in any task force or faith-related group be based upon individual willingness to participate and have a stake in group business. An effective inclusion task force includes both internal and external stakeholders, such as the following:

- Representatives of your YMCA’s leadership, staff, and membership who have expressed interest, experience, or passion in strengthening inclusion of diverse faiths
- People engaged with faiths in a variety of ways: faith leaders, members of underrepresented and well-represented faiths, and leaders of interfaith initiatives in your community

Involvement of broad and diverse faith and belief systems ensures that your task force truly demonstrates the range of orientations to faith in your community. As your YMCA develops a deeper understanding of the communities and practices of faith in your service area, the makeup of your task force may need to shift or expand.

EXAMPLE: YMCA OF GREATER KANSAS CITY

The YMCA of Greater Kansas City (Mo.) wants to be the most welcoming YMCA in the country. In Kansas City, the Y is already seen as a leader that supports the coming together of various cultures and faiths under one roof.

Kansas City has the second largest Sudanese and Somali immigrant population in the country, and the Kansas City Y has Muslim representation at all levels, including on the board, on its Head Start parent committee, and as frontline and senior staff. The Y also serves Muslim women in women-only aquatics and exercise programs. During the women-only times, it also provides other services for families.

“We try to work at not counting heads, but to be reflective of the community,” says David Byrd, President and CEO of the Greater Kansas City YMCA.

How did they do it?

According to David, “There is no doubt that it has to go both ways to be successful. It has to start from the top leadership and go down through the organization and vice versa. If the top leadership has bought into it, and if they touch other parts of the organization, then it becomes part of the fabric of the organization. Our early work involved focus groups, lots of staff meetings, and lots of meetings with grassroots groups. We used YMCA of the USA programs and resources and have taken hundreds of staff through the Cultural Lens program.”
WHERE TO BEGIN MAKING CONTACTS

If, after hearing from your community that faith is a critical concept for your DIG committee to explore, your YMCA wants to expand and diversify your contacts across faith communities, here are some suggestions that can help you get started:

- Contact places and houses of worship (including local churches, temples, mosques, gurdwaras, jamatkhanas, synagogues, and spaces where faith services may be held outside of customary houses of worship).
- Look at a map to see whether other community-serving agencies or businesses that you can contact are in the same area of the place or house of worship.
- Investigate whether there are faith-associated chambers of commerce at the local or state level that you can contact.
- Seek out agencies that serve specific faith communities or that serve from a foundation of faith.
- Remember that not all communities of faith use houses of worship that you are familiar with. Consider other places where a particular community of faith may gather. You can find these places by asking group members or searching online for notices and media articles featuring that faith.
- Some communities of faith use another faith’s place or house of worship, so remember to ask about other groups when speaking with faith leaders and representatives.
- When possible, utilize a team approach including both male- and female-identified individuals.
- Some places of worship host services in different languages. Many Methodist churches, for example, also hold space for the Korean Methodist Church, which has its own preacher or pastor and church elders. Be sure to think about these people when evaluating whom your Y should reach out to.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

If you are unsure about how to address religious leaders, consult Addressing Religious Leaders, a guide from Tanenbaum: https://tanenbaum.org/tanenbaum-resources/addressing-religious-leaders/
STRATEGY 2: GET TO KNOW COMMUNITIES OF DIVERSE FAITHS AND BELIEFS IN YOUR AREA

Getting to know your community through a community inventory is an easy and rewarding three-step process that informs in a crucial way your first steps toward strengthened inclusion. What you learn through your community inventory can help you at all stages of the process:

- It helps you determine your inclusion goals and may lead you to individuals to include on your task force.
- It helps you decide how best to
  - reach out to diverse faith and belief communities;
  - develop targeted programs and services to meet the needs and interests of those communities; and
  - adapt facilities and operations to be more welcoming.
- It provides data that gives you a baseline against which you can measure your Y’s progress toward strengthening inclusion of diverse faiths and beliefs.

STEP 1—ACCESS OR GENERATE DATA RELATED TO RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN YOUR AREA

In other manuals in this series, we recommend looking at U.S. Census Bureau data as a first step. However, the U.S. census is legally prohibited from asking mandatory questions about residents’ religious or faith identification and, as a result, does not contain helpful data reflecting the great diversity of faiths in most communities, specifically related to self-identification and group membership. However, the Pew Religious Forum provides some data at the state level (www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/), but gathering municipality- or neighborhood-specific information requires more creative efforts. Following are some ideas for generating or gathering your own data, which is a critical learning and engagement opportunity for your task force.

A good initial step is to contact your city hall, community foundation, chamber of commerce, local schools and health clinics, or United Way to see whether information currently exists about the needs and assets of the faith groups and their members or whether this information is in the process of being collected by others. Let them know about your YMCA’s plan to strengthen inclusion.
Learning about your community involves getting to know both your existing and your emerging YMCA communities, as well. Would your members, staff, and leaders be willing to respond to an anonymous survey related to their feelings about how their religious identities are served and treated at the Y? If yes, work with your task force to determine survey questions that will (1) gather the information you need and (2) stand the test of time, thus enabling you to measure change over time by surveying your YMCA community again, using the same questions.

As you create the survey, it is important to ensure that the questions themselves, the way in which they are framed, and the terminology used align with the Y brand and your Y’s internal and external DIG communications strategy. Be sure, also, to include an option for respondents to provide open-ended comments. Sometimes the best information comes from something you didn’t even think to ask.

**TIP**

Being familiar with the demographic pieces of the various faith and belief communities that are in your area helps ensure that your inclusion task force is representative of that diversity. Therefore, if you are just beginning in this work or are unfamiliar with the faith communities in your area, or if your community is changing rapidly, you may decide to complete strategies 1 and 2 simultaneously or to complete strategy 1 first. Either approach enables you to get to know the communities of diverse faiths and beliefs and enhance your efforts to create a truly inclusive task force.

**STEP 2—OBSERVE AND REACH OUT TO YOUR COMMUNITY**

Follow up with any connections made in step 1, and use these connections to observe your community in an intentional way. Are there community spaces, places or houses of worship, or neighborhoods where specific communities of faith gather? Places of worship are often marked on maps or in community listings, such as those published by local tourist boards.

Move about your community to listen and observe. Consider what might be the most appropriate way to record your observations, share reflections, and ask questions in inclusive ways. And take your time.

As you observe your community, ask yourself questions like the following:

- What types of businesses, services, and associations do you see? How do you know they serve or target a particular faith community? What services do they provide? What types of marketing or advertising styles do they use? What hours are they open?
- What languages do you hear being spoken or see used on signage?
- When are the streets busiest? At these times, are people commuting, shopping, exercising, or socializing?
- Where do people get together and socialize? Is it different for different genders? What about older adults? What about families with children?
- How do people greet one another? Is it different for women and men?
- Where is community information posted? Are there bulletin boards on the street, at community centers, at businesses, or in places of worship? What type of content is posted and in what languages? Record where
community information is posted and note the name of the contact person in the event that you want to ask to post information about your YMCA in the future.

- Are there open community spaces for gathering and recreation? If yes, are they being used and by whom?
- What can you infer about the socioeconomic status of the area? What type of housing is visible?
- Is public transportation available between this area and your YMCA?

During this step, you can also begin to reach out in ways that are sensitive, appropriate, and relevant. For example, Tim Joyce of the YMCA of Greater Richmond (Va.) reached out to the Jewish community through his local Jewish community center because of the organizations’ shared history of community service and their shared interest in healthy kids. Staff from both centers meet regularly now and send referrals both ways, and a Jewish representative now sits on the YMCA of Greater Richmond’s board of directors. For additional guidance on reaching out, refer to the information you gathered as you built your inclusion task force, as well as the information you gathered in step 1. The Y-USA DIG team also has relevant materials that can aid you; check out Best Practices in DIG Committee Work (https://link.ymca.net/mlink/file/NjI0MQ).

A faith community’s central house of worship may be a great place to start. You can reach out through an email, a phone call, or even an in-person visit, if appropriate. As you reach out, keep these points discussed in the following sections in mind.

“Sometimes we have to make time to take time to engage people, without an agenda. We need to be intentional about developing relationships—but without an agenda as to where they’re going to go. We need to show up at events and see what people are doing. We don’t always know why we’re there, but we’re open to see where the journey will lead us. That’s how we’ve developed a lot of our relationships: by showing up.”

— YMCA CEO
LOOKING AT FACTORS THAT MAY PRESENT A CHALLENGE TO DEEPER ENGAGEMENT

If no one from a given faith community is involved with your Y or your DIG committee, consider this an opportunity to

• more closely examine the processes suggested in the earlier section “Strategy 1: Mobilize an Inclusion Task Force”;
• ask some self-reflective questions about the role of faith in your community; and
• think more deeply about information you have heard directly from members of underserved faith groups or organizations in your community.

It may be that factors—some related to your Y’s outreach and others beyond your Y’s influence—present a challenge to deeper engagement. These topics are critical ones for your DIG committee to tackle collectively by examining your engagement with members and your community across the multiple dimensions of diversity.

GOING OUTSIDE YOUR SERVICE AREA

If your Y does not have within its service region representatives (pastors, rabbis, priests, imams, swamis, etc.) for all the religious or faith groups in your community, connect with places and houses of worship slightly outside your service region, which may include congregants or adherents that do fall within your YMCA’s service region. Alternatively, you may discover that some of the people who attend the places and houses of worship in your area come from beyond your Y’s service region. If so, look at this as an opportunity to engage individuals from beyond your community and share with them the Y’s role as a community organization.

USING THE APPROPRIATE TERMINOLOGY

Ensure that you learn the appropriate terminology regarding the various faith communities that may be in your area. Ask yourself questions such as the following:

• Do participants at religious assemblies prefer to be called congregants, adherents, friends, celebrants, members, etc.?
• Are the religious houses called synagogues, mosques, temples, churches, and so on?
• What title do faith leaders go by: reverend, imam, rabbi, etc.?

It is also important to know the difference between culture (which often includes a common language, heritage, and country or region of origin) and religion (which, although it occasionally includes a common language, heritage, and country or region of origin, most frequently refers to common rituals, practices, beliefs, and principles regarding the human condition). Consider, for example, the tendency to regard Muslims (individuals who identify with the Muslim faith) as representatives of a culture, yet Muslims, who ascribe to the same religion (Islam), come from many different cultures. Muslims can be Somali American, white, black/African American, Arab American, Asian American, and so on, but not all Somali Americans, Arab Americans, African Americans, etc., are Muslim.
BEING OPEN TO UNPLANNED OPPORTUNITIES

Sometimes the conversations that lead to greater understanding and better engagement are unplanned. A local YMCA described how an important adaptation evolved from a casual conversation in the hallway with a group of Muslim women members and led to the YMCA approaching the mosque the women attended. Says its CEO, “We said, ‘We want you to tell us how we can better serve you. We don’t know how, but we are open. We want you to tell us.’” What resulted was a women-only swim class led by female instructors with no one else in the aquatics area. “They were very interested in it. We took them from being casual members to connected members of the Y because we took the time to get to know them. If these Muslim women were brave enough to walk into an organization called the Young Men’s Christian Association, then we should be brave enough to have this conversation.”

STEP 3—DEVELOP OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE MEMBERS OF DIVERSE FAITH GROUPS

Develop opportunities to intentionally and directly interact with members or leaders of diverse faith groups. With the assistance of your DIG steering committee, request meetings or interviews with faith or community leaders and associations. Ask whether they can assist you in organizing focus group discussions or one-on-one interviews with diverse members of their communities. The meetings that result from your outreach efforts will not only be information gathering events but also opportunities to begin building key relationships and developing a trusted network within faith communities.

“What’s most important in doing this work is relationship building and being authentic. So if it makes you nervous, say you’re nervous. If you don’t know what you’re talking about, don’t say you do. Just show up and rely on the goodwill of others.

“Think of the strengths that your YMCA has and who else is working on the issues you care about (for example, kids and hunger) from a faith perspective. In my context, that would lead me to different churches that are feeding kids.

“Then go out and visit. You have to be willing to go out of your comfort zone. A mistake is to invite lots of people to come to you. Do the work of going out, particularly when going to a group that is really different from who you are.”

— Ann Rasmus
Associate Director
University YMCA, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign
In your discussions, consider addressing questions or topics such as the following:

- What is your faith or belief community (if applicable), and how is your faith or belief represented in your broader community? Can you tell me more about the makeup of your faith or belief community and the diversity within it?
- Does your faith or belief community gather together? Where and how often? Do you gather together for activities other than worship?
- Which organizations serve your faith or belief community, and what role do they play? (If appropriate, can you introduce me to them?)
- Do you feel that your faith or belief community has needs or interests that are not being met?
- What barriers or factors, if any, do you feel prevent or discourage your faith or belief community from participating in the YMCA?
- From your perspective, what does your faith or belief community know and think about the YMCA?

*TIP*

These interactions may be opportunities to engage key representatives from your branch or association board in your inclusion work, if appropriate. Also be sure to involve your YMCA’s leadership as much as possible. Doing so demonstrates the importance and organizational commitment your YMCA is investing in this initiative.
STRATEGY 3: PREPARE TO SERVE

You’ve set up your inclusion task force, you’ve done your research, and you’ve talked to members of the diverse faiths and belief communities in your Y. What’s next? It’s time to make sure that your Y is prepared to serve.

Inclusion begins from within. To be ready to serve a changing landscape, the Y needs to change as well. This section focuses on resources (capacity building), staff makeup (organizational readiness), and knowledge about where you are now and where you want to go (gap analysis) that will enable your Y to strengthen inclusion of diverse faiths and beliefs. Here, we specifically address capacity building and organizational readiness; for information on how to ensure that your Y’s programs and services also support inclusion of diverse faiths and beliefs, see strategy 4.

Preparing to serve begins with asking these questions:

- Do staff and leaders at your Y have the competencies for serving communities of diverse faiths and beliefs, or for serving communities of all faiths and beliefs in new ways.
- Do staff and leaders at your Y reflect the diverse faith and belief populations (to the extent possible), and are they welcoming?
- Do your facilities and operations, like membership and financial assistance, welcome and accommodate unique faith and belief practices, situations, and customs?
- Do your programs and services answer the interests and needs of diverse faith and belief communities?
- Do all of the pieces that make up the Y—staff, leadership, facilities, operations, programs, and services—clearly and repeatedly demonstrate that all are welcome?

PREPARING YOUR PEOPLE

Perceived similarity can be a powerful factor for engaging and retaining members. Having board and staff who reflect the diversity that your YMCA has stated it intends to achieve sends a strong message of internal commitment to both prospective members and staff. Underscoring this commitment to diversity is especially critical as you try to

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The Tanenbaum Center (https://tanenbaum.org/) provides a variety of resources on workplace inclusion of people from diverse faith and belief backgrounds.

“I look for people who are inclusive and innovative, people who can think out of a box and are accepting. We need to know that we have staff who are open. I want to hire people who may lack professional skills but who have the will of servitude. You can’t teach that.”

— YMCA CEO
strengthen inclusion of communities of diverse faiths and beliefs. In addition, YMCA staff and leaders who share dimensions of diversity with these populations are critical resources for connecting, listening to, and communicating with diverse faith and belief communities and developing strong relationships based on trust, understanding, and openness.

If your YMCA is trying to engage a population the Y has not previously engaged, consider asking the people you spoke with when you were getting to know the communities of diverse faiths and beliefs in your area (strategy 2) to share your staff and volunteer recruitment notices within their communities. Now is also an opportunity to leverage the experience, connections, and influence of your inclusion task force, whose members may also have strategic referrals. Y-USA’s leadership and affinity networks may also be able to assist.

It is also important to consider your human resources policies and customs. Are they flexible and accommodating of a more religiously diverse workforce? For example, do they include accommodations that enable staff members to pray when needed, to take alternate holidays (in appropriate conditions, if at the workplace), and to share their religious or belief-system celebrations with their colleagues? Are staff of diverse faiths and beliefs able to safely and comfortably express their concerns or suggestions?

For example, Hanif Walker, a practicing Muslim, considers the Y to be welcoming, supportive, and accommodating of his practice of faith. “When we had religious events, like Ramadan, I was able to adjust my hours and go to pray. It helped me stay grounded and fulfill my responsibility to myself and my community.”

“We need to have basic knowledge about dos and don’ts and how to interact with people of other faiths. We also need to understand the differences and diversity within faiths.”

— Tami Farber
Vice President of Equity, Advancement, and Global Engagement
YMCA of Snohomish County (Wash.)
PREPARING YOUR PLACE

Faith can be expressed in a multitude of ways, even within one faith or belief tradition. And there are multiple ways—more ways than we can cover here—that diverse faith and belief practices can be welcomed and celebrated. Nevertheless, a few common themes and suggestions related to facilities and operations surfaced in the interviews that informed this manual.

YMCAs have found that small adaptations can make a large difference and significantly advance inclusion of communities of diverse faiths and beliefs. Some adaptations for strengthening inclusion may include the following:

- Dedicated space, with privacy, for prayer
- Women-only times in the pool and in the gym, with female staff and screens for privacy
- Holiday décor reflecting a diversity of religious holidays

As you think about your Y’s facilities and operations, identify which may be barriers and which may be facilitators for inclusion of diverse faiths and beliefs. Members of your Inclusion Task Force, as well as the findings of your community inventory (strategy 2), can help you do perform this assessment. Once identified, barriers to inclusion can usually be resolved with intentional action.

PERSPECTIVE FROM TWO Y MEMBERS

Rezvan, who identifies as Muslim, and Sreedevi, who identifies as Hindu, are members, frontline staff, and serious champions of the Y. But their YMCA doesn’t yet have a women-only swim or gym time. For both women, from different cultural and faith traditions, this is a barrier.

“If you’re wearing a hijab and working out, you get really hot,” Rezvan says. “That is one of the reasons I don’t use the gym. I’m a member here, but I use another women-only facility for working out, so I pay double. A lot of Muslim women who are members here, I see them over there, too. We wish the Y could have a few hours in a day that were women-only. That way, we could use the facility without wearing a hijab.”

Sreedevi agrees. “For my faith also, women would like to be among women only. You don’t have to be picture perfect to go in the water. You don’t have to shave!”

Privacy for prayer is also important. Rezvan and Sreedevi have seen women praying in the locker-room, and while no one objects, a dedicated space or a dedicated time in a certain space would be preferable. “When you pray, you need some space, and you need privacy to pray,” says Rezvan.
STRATEGY 4: ADAPT AND DEVELOP PROGRAMS AND SERVICES TO SUPPORT INCLUSION

Your programs may also need adaptation or innovation to serve communities of diverse faiths and beliefs. Take an inventory of your existing programs and services, and then compare this to the unique needs and interests that you identified during your community survey (strategy 2) and any subsequent exploration. Is your programming responsive? Are staff empowered and accountable for making ongoing program and service enhancements with a lens of diverse faiths and beliefs? Sometimes it just takes a small adaptation of an existing program to make that program relevant, accessible, and attractive to a new or historically underserved or underrepresented population. The following sections provide a sampling of the ways that programs and services can be adapted to support inclusion.

TIP

Welcoming front desk staff are another important asset for YMCAs that seek to strengthen inclusion of diverse faiths and beliefs. Many life-long members remember their first encounter with the Y, usually at the front desk, and recall how that experience launched their relationships with the Y.

Sreedevi, a member at the YMCA of Central Massachusetts, is an immigrant from India and a practicing Hindu. She remembers her first experience with the Y. “A lot of people told me the Y was good, but I was not convinced based on my understanding of the Y in India. I thought people would ask me what church I went to. Strangely for me, when I first came to this YMCA, the person at the front desk was definitely not a Christian. She was of Asian background, and she could spell my name. I asked if I needed to pray here. ‘You can pray if you want,’ she said, ‘but this has nothing to do with prayer.’ She saw my confusion and asked me if I’d like to have a tour. I had been afraid they would ask me to leave. I thought, ‘Oh my goodness. This is so different from where I came from.’ I see a lot of differences, and I’ve never experienced any discrimination. I have a lot of friends here.”

AQUATICS

Many YMCAs have adapted their aquatics programs to offer a women-only swim time, when the pool area is screened off and staffed by women. These women-only times make it possible for women who would not otherwise swim at the Y to do so.

This popular example is relevant to many Muslim women and other women whose faith or belief traditions value modesty, privacy, or some form of dedicated time for women. Although not all women from these faith or belief traditions require or request women-only swim times, this program adaptation—which has also proven attractive for
other women as well, but for reasons other than faith—is one way to demonstrate that your YMCA considers the needs and preferences of these communities in its programming. As you work to strengthen inclusion, consider ways you can include people of diverse backgrounds in all your Y programming—aquatics, camp, sports, etc. Involve your members, staff, and community for help identifying the kinds of adaptations that would benefit your YMCA’s inclusion efforts; refer to strategies 1 and 2, earlier.

LEVERAGING SPACE TO EXPAND REACH AND IMPACT

One of the primary ways the Y can underscore its support of and willingness to connect with diverse faith communities and groups is to offer its physical spaces as opportunities to demonstrate commitment to inclusion for all.

Serving a new population may mean providing space for services that already exist within the community—for example, providing space for a worship service or for a faith-based life-skills course. When new populations come into the Y, even for a program or service provided by a third party, they directly experience the Y as a welcoming place, and they see what else the Y has to offer.

As you begin to explore collaborative opportunities that will help your Y strengthen inclusion of faith and belief communities, think about the unique assets and expertise your YMCA has to offer, as well as your Y’s areas of need. Do not underestimate the importance of the Y’s building, land, and spaces. While they may not provide the same level of comfort or safety to people from diverse faith communities as a place of worship might, an invitation to use, in relevant and meaningful ways, multipurpose spaces your Y has available can still bring meaning and joy to your community members who identify from diverse faith backgrounds. The following sections offer examples from Ys whose space-sharing efforts have enabled them to more fully engage community members of diverse faiths and beliefs.

PROVIDING A NEUTRAL SPACE

Larry Whittlesey of the US Mission Network believes the Y, because it is a neutral space, is uniquely positioned to address a full spectrum of issues, like divorce, grief, and addictions. “There are people that would walk into a Y who would never go to a church who we can reach out to and support. If they walk through the door, and we just give them a towel, we are missing out on an opportunity to address that spiritual need.”

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

US Mission Network is a collaboration of Y leaders “united in an effort to preserve, nurture and advance the Christian heritage and purpose of the YMCA across America.” The Network’s vision and mission is to encourage Ys to be sources of “spiritual care for their members and staff” and to provide opportunities for members and staff to “serve and volunteer in their communities.” To find out more, go to www.usmissionnetwork.org/who-we-are/
Larry tells the example of a small Christian divorce recovery class offered by a church in Minnesota. At the suggestion of a Y staff member, the class moved its meeting location to the Y, and the class grew significantly. It had the same leader and the same Christian-based material, but when offered at the Y, the class was able to reach out to and engage others who would not otherwise go to a church. Says Larry, “Find the need and fill it. We might not be able to meet it with our staff, but there are people already in the community that are doing these things, and we can bring them to the Y.”

**HELPING PROGRAMS GROW**

The University YMCA at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) has been successfully bringing people of diverse faiths and beliefs together for a range of programs, programs whose participation is continuing to grow.

Says Ann Rasmus, Associate Director, University of Illinois Campus YMCA, “We had a photo show called ‘We Have Faith,’ featuring LGBTQ stories, and we worked our interfaith connections to get people here. The response was great. Many people came, media coverage was significant, and of the 13 religious organizations that we asked for financial support, 12 did! We strive to offer programs that people are really excited to support.”

**FOCUSING ON THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES**

The YMCA of Greater Richmond (Va.) hosted a service fair organized by a group of Christian refugee support agencies. Local churches working with refugees (80–90% from non-Christian backgrounds) provided transportation for newcomers to the Y; service providers, like financial institutions and health centers, set up tables; and the Y hosted the event in its gym and provided free child care. According to Tim Joyce, CEO of the Greater Richmond Y, “We had the opportunity to meet families, to get to know them, and to share our services. We were not focused on the faith perspective but on what are the needs of the family.”

“My main reason for first coming to the Y was that I was lonely and depressed. I had just come to the U.S., and I didn’t have friends or know people from my country. I was referred to the Y by my husband’s friend, and I was lucky, because when I came here one of the staff was Iranian and we spoke Farsi and that was it—I became a member! From then on, I was day and night at the Y with my kids. My life changed because I started to meet people, I started to exercise, and I exchanged information, particularly on being a newcomer. I learned everything at the Y. The Y gave me new life.

“My community is all members of the Y! So I see them on Saturdays, when we gather to worship, and then through the week at the Y. They started from the same point as me—alone—and then someone referred them to the Y. That’s why we put the advertisement for the Y at the mosque.”

—Rezvan

Member and child care staff

YMCA of Central Massachusetts, Boroughs Family Branch
HOLIDAYS

Holidays are important community gathering times for many faith and belief traditions. How can your YMCA adapt or expand your celebration of holidays to include the diversity of faiths and belief traditions present in your community? Several YMCAs interviewed for this manual, for example, have adapted their prayer breakfasts to be interfaith prayer breakfasts, inviting faith leaders from multiple traditions into the Y to celebrate. Some Ys invite everyone, regardless of faith and belief tradition, to join their annual Good Friday prayer breakfasts. Rather than taking something away from the experiences of members and staff, strengthening inclusion of diverse faiths and beliefs enhances these experiences, enabling all to enjoy the rich tapestry of diverse faiths and beliefs already represented in so many of our YMCAs. As you consider how to make your Y’s holiday celebrations inclusive, it is also important to ensure that you are offering interfaith opportunities that are not conceived through one specific faith lens. Partnering with faith-based institutions in your community, such as mosques and temples, can help your YMCA identify, understand, and celebrate a diversity of holidays.

Holidays are often a time that communities of faith come together to celebrate. As you consider how to celebrate holidays in a way that strengthens inclusion, keep in mind that some faiths and belief traditions may be reluctant or unaccustomed to sharing their celebrations in the same way that other traditions might be expected to share their celebrations. For example, the idea of a prayer breakfast may be unusual to individuals who identify with faiths where prayer is a private affair or where meditation or other types of reflection are the primary prayer or faith activity. Take these perspectives into account as you seek to understand individuals’ or groups’ initial reactions to sharing or involving outside third parties such as the Y in their religious traditions. Also, work with individuals from all faith traditions to find creative solutions to these differences and to create new events and activities that all can appreciate, participate in, and understand.

INTERFAITH ACTIVITIES

Interfaith activities can be a great way to

• introduce members and leaders of communities of diverse faiths and beliefs to the Y;
• demonstrate how common faith principles drive the Y’s commitment to healthy living, youth development, and social responsibility; and
• recognize that different faiths have different views on service and that learning about these different perspectives is a valuable way to better serve all.

When we embrace and value faith as an important core dimension of diversity for many individuals throughout our global community, we expand opportunities to enrich the experiences, interactions, and lives of all those the Y serves.
STRATEGY 5: REACH OUT TO YOUR COMMUNITY

YMCA's are often experts in community outreach. But outreach to communities of diverse faiths can be challenging because these communities themselves are so diverse. What works for one person or family may not work for another. Building capacity around cultural competency prior to embarking on this important strategy is crucial, as is considering a historical lens of faith and belief and the multiple dimensions of diversity. Customs and traditions based on or involving elements of faith are often deeply rooted and heavily valued. YMCA's working toward strengthened inclusion have had success with the methods outlined in this section.

USE YOUR NETWORKS

Trust may be a significant barrier to entry for new populations. That is why building trusted networks through your inclusion task force and through the people and associations you engaged during your community inventory (strategy 2) is so important. You can ask these organizations and people to help you spread the word about your YMCA’s programs, services, and facilities. As you do so, it is important to be prepared to talk through past challenges or perceptions related to the Y’s role in faith-based work and conversation.

Many YMCA's have found that staff members who identify with groups you want to engage are important bridges between the Y and these populations. For example, Y staff member Rezvan from the Boroughs Family Y in central Massachusetts is a bridge between the Y and her local Iranian American community and the community of Muslim women who attend her mosque. The connections that staff members, like Rezvan, make possible are another reason why strengthening inclusion among your staff and leaders first is so critical to the success of your YMCA’s overall inclusion efforts.
ADVERTISE AT KEY COMMUNITY GATHERING SPOTS

To get word out about your inclusion efforts and engage members of diverse faith and belief communities, consider advertising at houses and places of worship and other key community gathering spots. The trusted networks you’ve been cultivating can help in these efforts. Ask whether they would be able to advertise the Y within their own facilities. Rezvan’s mosque in central Massachusetts, for example, has had an advertisement for the YMCA hanging for years. People in your network also may be able to suggest other locations where information about the Y would be appropriate and reach a large number of people. You can also revisit the bulletin boards that you noted during your community inventory (strategy 2).

STAY ACTIVE IN THE COMMUNITY

It is important for your YMCA’s staff and leaders to be visible and known in the community—outside the walls of your facility. Leaders and staff can participate actively in the community by

• visiting schools and universities (including those founded in a faith or belief tradition) and houses and places of worship;
• attending a diverse array of cultural events; and
• serving on boards or committees for agencies and initiatives that are related to faith or that touch diverse faith and belief communities.

As many YMCA leaders recommended in the development of this manual, you need to get out there—to become involved in the communities you want to engage. The Y can facilitate dialogue among diverse faiths and beliefs and, in doing so, build empathy and understanding—two important attributes of strong, inclusive communities.
INTERNATIONAL YMCA PERSPECTIVES

FAITH AND INCLUSION IN THE GLOBAL YMCA MOVEMENT

This section provides a short overview of multiple Ys across the world that all work with faith groups differently, based on the needs of their countries. Similar to the United States, many YMCAs across the world include staff, volunteers, and members who are deeply connected to their faith and use their faith as a guiding principle in their work. Some YMCAs work in countries where no faith is widely practiced, and some Ys operate in contexts in which there is no majority faith. The way YMCAs around the world connect with organized religion and express faith depends on context and history. When working with or studying international YMCAs and their relationship to diverse faith communities, it is important to have an understanding of the dynamics of faith, religion, and inclusion of each country and community.

Much of the content in the following sections was compiled from quotes by various YMCA leaders around the world. These quotes are their responses to a series of questions related to how they embrace and work with diverse faiths in their communities. Also included here is a selection from an interview with an archivist at the YMCA Archives, who reviews the role of faith in the YMCA from its inception.
While contemporary Americans tend to associate the YMCA primarily with fitness and recreation, the organization's roots are firmly embedded in the missionary movement of the mid-19th century. A child of evangelical Protestantism, the YMCA at first considered itself a specialized agency for bringing young men to Christ. In 1855, eleven years after the founding of the YMCA in London, Ys from around the world met in Paris and adopted a statement of individual commitment as a basis for membership. Called the Paris Basis, it pledged the Y to unite young Christian men who "regard Jesus Christ as their God and Savior according to the Holy Scriptures, desire to be His disciples in their faith and in their life and to associate their efforts for the extension of His kingdom amongst young men." Initially and for much of the Y's history, religious work was primary and all other features were intended to contribute to it.

Although the early Y's mission was unabashedly religious in nature, the organization focused on method rather than doctrine or philosophy. Dominated by business men rather than professional religious leaders, the movement tended to emphasize facilities, expansion, practical usefulness, and specific influence. Early work included not only the distribution of tracts, Bibles, and other Christian literature, but also the creation of lists of respectable houses and places to obtain employment, community relief projects, and care for members who were ill. As early as 1857, the Brooklyn (N.Y.) YMCA added physical work to its programs, basing its effort on the belief that "bodily health is intimately connected with mental and spiritual activity and development." The YMCA saw physical work as a means of attracting to its Christian program young men it could not otherwise reach. In 1866, the New York association expanded its statement of purpose to include the word "physical," thus defining the fourfold purpose of the YMCA: "The improvement of the spiritual, mental, social, and physical condition of young men." This concept was formally endorsed by the Y movement as a whole at the Baltimore Convention in 1879.

The YMCA went on to pioneer such programs as vocational education, recreational camping, and support services to men and women in the armed services, invent the sports of basketball and volleyball, and become a key provider of recreational and social services in cities across the country. Still, religious motivations, influenced heavily by the Social Gospel movement with its call for compassionate Christian response to issues of social justice, remained at the heart of YMCA programs. As YMCA leader Robert McBurney stated, "The primary object for which these societies have been established is the binding together of Christian young men and the leading to the savior of those who are ignorant of him. All other services, no matter how good, how great, or how desirable are but collateral and subordinate and should be engaged in only as they tend to secure this primary object." Until 1931, representation at conventions was limited to YMCAs that accepted the Portland Basis. This test, established in 1869, affirmed tenets held by most conservative Protestant churches of the day, such as the inerrancy of scripture, the divinity of Christ, and the centrality of the atonement using widely recognized scripture texts and statements of faith.

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The International Committee (the governing administrative body of the YMCA in North America) formed the Religious Work Department in 1902, focused on Bible study and evangelistic work, with Frederic S. Goodman as its secretary. It published the first complete YMCA handbook of religious work methods and principles. Larger city YMCAs increasingly added religious work secretaries to their staffs. Although a separate department had been established, however, religious emphasis was expected to permeate the work of all departments of the International Committee and all local associations. A year later, Laurence L. Doggett, president of the YMCA-founded Springfield College, helped found the Religious Education Association, which dealt with problems of philosophy, methods, leadership, and materials in the field of religious education. Through this organization, many YMCA leaders first learned the concept of character building by way of educational and group activities. The YMCA’s physical, social, and educational work seemed an ideal laboratory for testing these new ideas.

Following the vote in 1931 by the delegates to the 43rd International Convention to eliminate the Portland Test, the YMCA abandoned formal theological identification of any kind, adopting a more general statement of purpose: “The Young Men’s Christian Association we regard in its essential genius, a worldwide fellowship of men and boys [changed in the late 1950s to “persons”] united by common loyalty to Jesus Christ for the purpose of developing Christian personality and building a Christian society.” The delegates also proposed “a program of social and Christian education with the view of helping to educate public opinion for the purpose of reconstructing our social order in the light of, and upon the basis of, the teachings of Jesus.” In 1937, a committee on Christian Emphasis and Method, chaired by Dr. Rolland W. Schloerb, was established by the National Board. The committee was charged with “specific tasks connected with preserving the Christian emphasis and with devising methods of infusing it into the program as a whole.”
The 1931 statement of purpose was reaffirmed by the annual meeting of the National Council in 1963, and again by the National Council meeting in 1983. Even so, the Y did become increasingly ecumenical and pluralistic as the years went by. Throughout the years, local YMCAs have negotiated between the Y’s evangelical heritage and the desire (and in many cases, need) to broaden its constituency, accounting for the diversity that existed within their own membership but attempting to remain consistent with the spirit of the national statement. A 1952 study conducted by the Program Committee of the National Board on the basic characteristics of the YMCA reported that it was characteristic for the YMCA to “demonstrate what it meant to be a Christian in one’s daily life and to welcome persons of various religions, provided they respected the Y’s Christian purpose.” In 1967, the same year that the National Council banned racial segregation in the YMCA, it also recommended “Guidelines for Ecumenical Education in the YMCA.” These guidelines called for “laymen and staff to free themselves from religious prejudice and increase their knowledge and respect for diverse religious traditions,” as well as that membership in YMCAs and boards “be open to qualified persons of all Christian affiliations, as well as to Jews and to persons of other religious faiths who wish to join.” In 1983, the National Council amended the YMCA constitution by adding the word “religion” to the list of categories on the basis of which discrimination is banned. In 1990, the National Board approved the following positioning statement for the YMCA of the USA: “We will position the YMCA as a community service organization that meets community needs and is open to people of all ages, all abilities, and all incomes; that meets health and social service needs of the family; and that emphasizes the development of values -- the encouragement of moral and ethical behavior based on Christian principles.”


YMCA/YWCA WEEK OF PRAYER

Starting in 1904, the World YWCA (Young Women’s Christian Association) and the World Alliance of YMCAs have issued a joint call to prayer during the second week of November, called the Week of Prayer and World Fellowship. During this week, the two movements pray and act on a particular theme in solidarity with members and partners around the world. The World YWCA and the World Alliance of YMCAs annually develop a book with Bible studies and reflections to lead each day. The booklet can be downloaded (PDF) from http://www.ymca.int/resources/ymcaywca-week-of-prayer/. The week culminates with the celebration of YMCA Peace Day.

YMCA GERMANY

Shared by Tabea Kolbel, International Director, YMCA Germany

The German YMCA is deeply rooted in the Christian foundations of the YMCA Movement (Paris Basis). Our active leaders are united in their faith in Jesus Christ. As a movement, we strive for close co-operations with different Christian churches and other faith-based organisations. We believe that fostering an interreligious dialogue strengthens mutual understanding, trust, and respect within a more and more multireligious and multicultural society. We firmly stand against any forms of religious fanaticism and acknowledge the freedom of religion as a basic human right. Based on our Christian mission, the programmes of the German YMCA are open to boys and girls, women and men from all social, ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Within the fellowship of the YMCA, all people shall experience appreciation, discover and develop their talents, and take responsibility in accordance with their abilities.
Our work regards the human being as an integrated whole of body, mind, and spirit, in their relationship to themselves, to other human beings, to creation, and to God. This materializes in a variety of forms of youth work, youth education and social youth work. In 2014, the YMCA College developed “Standards for Inclusive Work with Children and Youth” in order to encourage even more inclusive cultures, structures, and practices within our YMCAs. Through our international work, we strengthen peace, reconciliation, and justice at home and abroad and promote global, ecumenical, and intercultural learning of our staff and volunteers, and amongst those we serve. We believe that giving witness of our faith in word and deed can only bring fruit in an atmosphere of freedom and with love and respect for the other.

**Ys IN EASTERN EUROPE**

**Prepared by Tom Valentine, Vice President, International Group, YMCA of the USA**

The YMCA existed in several countries in Eastern Europe and Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. During the time of the Soviet Union, there were no NGOs [nongovernmental organizations]. Many churches were destroyed or converted into state facilities, and church leaders were often killed and/or oppressed. Despite these challenges, the Eastern Orthodox Churches and their believers still existed in various regions of the country, still adhering to long-held traditions and structures. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the YMCA reemerged in several Eastern European countries. After years of oppression, the Orthodox Church also experienced a dramatic resurgence in the larger society in the newly formed countries of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, and Georgia. Today the church wields increased moral and political influence.

The YMCAs in these countries work with the Orthodox Church and its leaders on youth outreach programs. In some cases, Orthodox priests are local and national board members or key community partners.
ARMENIA
Within the YMCA Europe Roots for Reconciliation project, we enjoy strategic partnership with the Armenian Round Table, which is the Armenian Apostolic Church's charity structure. A number of times, the Armenia Round Table has extended donor-required official recommendations supporting our project. We strongly cooperate in shaping the donor agencies’ (such as Bread for the World [BfdW] Germany) regional strategies for the South Caucasus. Moreover, the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church—the catholicos—has regularly received YMCA delegations during the Roots for Reconciliation project’s international events, giving his blessings to this initiative for peace and reconciliation. In the same way, when holding Roots for Reconciliation international events in Nagorno Karabagh, a region that is part of an unresolved dispute between Armenia and neighboring Azerbaijan, we make sure that a meeting with the Archbishop of the Artsakh Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church is part of the programme.

It’s important to accent that these are not meetings for the sake of the protocol. The Roots for Reconciliation participants have always valued these meetings as crucial moments in their attitude and behaviour change. Being an ecumenical movement, we need to be aware of the Christian base of our theories of change—in the case of the Roots for Reconciliation project, our belief in peace and reconciliation. The dialogues with the catholicos or the Archbishop of Artsakh have always helped us reflect on our value base and get empowerment (and blessing) for our efforts. We consider these partnerships as one of the pillars for the success of the project.

NOTE
The Armenian Apostolic Church plays a key and constructive role within the global ecumenical movement. It is one of the leading members of the World Council of Churches, which the YMCA is a member of, too. This framework facilitates cooperation in important ways.

UKRAINE
YMCA Ukraine has good collaborations with Orthodox, Greek-Catholic, and traditional Protestant churches. In recent years, YMCA Ukraine signed an agreement on cooperation with the Youth department of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. YMCA Ukraine has elaborated, printed, and disseminated among the leaders of the local YMCAs in Ukraine a few manuals, such as the following, concerning the YMCA work in this area:

- **Ethics of Dialogue or Christian Collaboration in Social Context:** To assist the YMCA volunteer leaders establish cooperation with priests and theological seminary students to provide socially useful activities for children and youth
- **YMCA—Path of Kindness:** To assist the YMCA leaders hold seminars, lectures, and discussions with youth regarding YMCA values and the Christian aspects of YMCA activities
- **Collection of Devotions:** To use in YMCA activities at the start of different activities (seminars, workshops, etc.)
- **From Christmas to Saint Nicolas:** Collections of stories and descriptions of the main Christian holidays, for use by YMCA volunteers in their activities with youth and children
YMCA Ukraine has good experience with the involvement of priests in different YMCA activities (seminars, workshops, camps, pilgrimages, scouting activities, etc.). As experts in spiritual area, the priests hold prayers, perform devotions, participate in excursions, and engage in spiritual talks with children and youth that include group discussions, Bible interpretation, and conversations regarding socially relevant issues and problems related to modern life, such as HIV/AIDS, war and peace, true love, sexual health, and so on.

The YMCA Ukraine also has good contacts with the Informational-Educational Department of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and a few positive articles about the YMCA and its role in the socially useful work with children and youth were published in the main Orthodox newspaper of Ukraine and made available online.

YMCA Ukraine jointly organizes with Ukrainian Orthodox Church representatives a variety of socially focused activities, such as distributing Christmas gifts and holding theatrical performances for the children with special needs, such as orphans, the internally displaced, and others.

In the internal institutional life of the YMCA Ukraine, the representatives of the Orthodox Church play an important role and are in the governing bodies of the YMCA. Currently, a priest serves as the chair of the National Board of the YMCA Ukraine. In Umanj, Ukraine, an Orthodox priest, who was once a YMCA volunteer, has initiated the establishment of a local YMCA at his parish in the village where he now lives; the parish is now going the formal YMCA registration process.

LEBANON YMCA

Prepared by Tom Valentine, Vice President, International Group, YMCA of the USA

The importance of working inclusively with diverse faith communities is extremely important in the Middle East. No country in the region is more diverse than Lebanon, where the population is estimated to be 54 percent Muslim (32% Shiite, 22% Sunni), 40 percent Christian (various sects), and 6 percent Druze. Lebanon also hosts over 1.6 million refugees from Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and Sudan.

Within this complex operating environment, the Lebanon YMCA is one of the strongest and most dynamic NGOs serving over 150,000 people each year in every part of the country through emergency medical supply distribution programs, women’s agricultural cooperatives, environmental conservation, youth financial literacy, and vocational training and camping. The Lebanon Y works with a wide range of governmental, nongovernmental, United Nations, faith-based, and international YMCA partners.

The YMCA is respected by everyone because the staff, volunteers, and community partners throughout the country represent every faith and work together to address critical health, education, and economic development priorities. In a country where sectarian differences are still extremely challenging, the Lebanon YMCA effectively brings together youth from diverse faith backgrounds in safe program and camp spaces to learn about each other and develop plans to improve themselves, their communities, and the country for all.
Ys IN ASIA

Submitted by Nam Boo Won, General Secretary, Asia-Pacific Alliance of YMCAs (APAY)

Asia is very much a multireligious and multicultural region. People’s lives—both individual and collective—have been shaped by their religious faith and values/ethics derived from those faith. Therefore, YMCAs in the region are situated in the context in which they are called to play a role as initiators and facilitators of interfaith dialogue and cooperation for common good to be achieved in their communities and societies. Many YMCAs in our region are actively involved in interfaith and interreligious dialogue and cooperation as integral part of missional works.

Apart from this, many YMCAs in the region are quite active in civil society building with like-minded NGOs and NPOs [nonprofit organizations], where diverse people and groups can work together in the spirit of solidarity beyond their faith and creed. In this regard, YMCA has the advantage of being able to work with openness with diverse groups of people beyond faith and religion.

In Asia, YMCAs continue to maintain their identity and legacy as coming from a faith-based and ecumenical organization. YMCA staff in Asia regard their faith as a fundamental source of power which motivates the YMCA and its people to work for the extension of His kingdom characterized by love, justice, and peace. That said, in view of the multireligious context and also recognizing that Christianity is a minority religion in most of the countries in the region, Asian YMCAs are actively engaged in interreligious dialogue and cooperation with peoples/groups of other faiths. One of the programs of this thrust is APAY’s ongoing work on Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF). The ICF is a relevant and meaningful venue where young people of different faiths meet together, learn from each other and each other’s religion, and commonly seek ways of working together for building peace and justice in their communities and societies.

In terms of the organizational dimension, YMCAs in Asia open their membership to people of other faiths to the extent that YMCAs can maintain their identity as faith-based organizations. In this regard, some YMCAs in our region limit their full membership to Christians only. In other cases, they allow up to a certain portion the full membership to people of other faiths (or of no faith).

YMCA URUGUAY (MONTEVIDEO)

Prepared by Renata Ferrari, Senior Director, Global Advancement, International Group, based on information shared by YMCA Montevideo

Following a long-lasting tradition of ecumenical work, in 1984 the YMCA of Montevideo, together with several Christian churches and organizations (Protestant and Catholic), created the Ecumenical Service for Human Dignity (SEDHU, for its acronym in Spanish). SEDHU is a nonprofit organization that was initially tasked with helping reintegrate Uruguayans returning to the country after years of political exile and recently freed political prisoners.
The creation of SEDHU was a Christian witness response to the situation in Uruguay after more than 10 years of military dictatorship (1973–1984). Christian organizations felt it was important to unite people and efforts to ensure a smooth transition to democracy for all.

SEDHU later evolved to assist immigrants’ and refugees’ integration in Uruguay. In 1991, SEDHU became the representing agency of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), helping refugees’ settlement in Uruguay. In recent years, SEDHU has been assisting five of the six Guantanamo detainees who were freed through an agreement between the governments of the United States and Uruguay. YMCA representatives have a permanent seat on the board of SEDHU.
A NOTE ABOUT MONITORING PROGRESS AND SUCCESS

In seeking to effectively monitor progress and success of engagement with communities of diverse faiths and beliefs, you may come to realize there are insufficient tools and resources publicly available to aid you in doing so. Because it is challenging to find accurate and relevant national documentation that tracks religious identification, you will need to rely on local community data and, therefore, also will need to focus on locally created measures of progress as well. As was noted in the "Demographics" section of this manual, the U.S. census does not track religious identification; therefore, you will need to be creative with your inclusion task force, DIG Committee, or other body you work with as you begin to track and seek to measure your progress in engaging communities of diverse faiths and beliefs. Also note that engagement strategies that work effectively with strengthening inclusion of one faith community may not work effectively with another faith community.

It is also critical to recognize that diverse faiths and beliefs, especially those that may be demographically and/or historically underrepresented in your community, may be unwilling to be seen as a uniform bloc or as a group with one specific set of engagement needs. Be aware of the social environment and attitudes across your community as you seek to gain traction, improve upon past successes, and continue to strengthen inclusion specifically for underserved and diverse faith communities in your YMCA.
YMCA OF THE USA RESOURCES

Y-USA aims to help its member associations effectively carry out the Y mission in their communities and partner with all Ys to achieve the Movement’s collective goals and priorities. For more information, contact your Resource Director at 800-872-9622.

Link (https://ymca.net) is an online resource that Y staff and volunteers can access for Y news, knowledge, and tools from across the Movement.

Diversity & Inclusion department (https://link.ymca.net/mlink/group/diversityinclusionandglobalengagement) helps Ys as they strive to ensure that everyone, regardless of gender, income, faith, sexual orientation, or cultural background, has the opportunity to live life to its fullest; has access to the Y; and feels welcome and fully engaged as participants, members, staff, and volunteers.

International Group supports local and international Y leaders as they address local, national, and international issues. Through YMCA World Service (www.ymca.net/world-service/), the International Group promotes global education and raises awareness of and financial support for the work of the worldwide Y Movement. The International Group also builds the Y Movement’s capacity to engage and serve diverse populations and enhance impact in underserved communities in the United States and abroad by offering training and workshops; Y-to-Y partnership collaboration and facilitation; World Service fundraising tips; global engagement assessment, consulting, and strategic planning; and newcomer and immigrant outreach strategy and training. For more information, visit the Global Y Movement page on Link (https://link.ymca.net/mlink/site_page/NTky) or call 800-872-9622.

Brand Resource Center (www.theybrand.org) is a free online resource for member associations, providing access to marketing materials such as logos, images, and templates.

Kautz Family YMCA Archives (https://www.lib.umn.edu/ymca) is a repository of historical records of the Y’s national resource office, YMCA of the USA. The collection documents the Y’s evolution of the Y from its Protestant evangelical origins as well as its many contributions and initiatives around the world.
OTHER RESOURCES

**About Religion and Spirituality.com** ([www.about.com/religion/](www.about.com/religion/)) provides information (basic teachings, sacred texts, list of holidays, and more) about a variety of faiths and beliefs.

**BBC–Religions** ([www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/](www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/)) is a repository of information on several faith and belief traditions, an interfaith calendar, and links to related websites.

**BuddhaNet** ([www.buddhanet.net/index.html](www.buddhanet.net/index.html)) is a nonsectarian Buddhist education and information network covering all Buddhist traditions. The site offers links to more information and a library with texts available in multiple languages.

**The Buddhist Centre** ([https://thebuddhistcentre.com](https://thebuddhistcentre.com)) highlights the Triratna Buddhist Order, a worldwide movement of those who try to apply Buddhist teachings in the modern world.

**Chabad.org** ([www.chabad.org/](www.chabad.org/)) provides information on Jewish traditions, lifestyle events, and Jewish holidays. Religious texts, guidance on community and family life, and inspiration and entertainment, including classic stories from the past, are also featured.

**Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR)** ([www.cair.com/](www.cair.com/)) is a grassroots civil rights and advocacy group that promotes understanding of Islam and seeks to build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.

**DharmaNet** ([www.dharmanet.org/](www.dharmanet.org/)) is a multimedia resource center, where visitors can learn about meditation and compassionate action. Its Resource Learning Center and Ashoka Study Center direct visitors to short teachings and online courses. The site also includes a directory of Dharma centers and practice groups.


**Hindu American Foundation (HAF)** ([www.hafsite.org/](www.hafsite.org/)) is an advocacy organization that educates the public about Hinduism and speaks out on issues affecting Hindus worldwide. HAF focuses on human and civil rights, public policy, and interfaith relations.

**Islamic Network Groups (ING)** ([https://ing.org/](https://ing.org/)) teaches about the traditions, contributions, and cultural diversity of American Muslims, while building bridges between members of American Muslim communities and other groups.

**Institute of Islamic Information and Education (III&E)** ([www.iiie.net/](www.iiie.net/)) provides information about Islamic beliefs, history, and civilization. Available brochures and articles cover topics that include Islamic beliefs and practices, misconceptions about Islam, Islamic values, and more.
InterFaith Leadership Council of Metropolitan Detroit (www.detroitinterfaithcouncil.com), a Detroit area, faith-based organization founded after 9/11, encourages interfaith groups and networks, promotes interfaith education, and works toward interfaith reconciliation through community events, educational programs, and council publications.

Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC; www.ifyc.org/), is a campus-based, national movement that fosters pluralism and seeks to create interfaith cooperation by promoting knowledge of and positive relationships across faith traditions in order to build understanding and contribute to the common good.

Judaism 101 (www.jewfaq.org/) is an online encyclopedia of Judaism, covering a wide range of topics, from the tenets of the religion, Jewish sects, important people (patrarchs, prophets, and others), and sacred texts, to the Hebrew alphabet and Jewish signs and symbols.

PBS.org–God in America (www.pbs.org/godinamerica/) is a companion website to God in America, the Public Broadcasting System’s six-part series that portrays the 400-year history of religion in the United States.

Pew Research Center–Religion & Public Life (www.pewforum.org/)—Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan organization that reports on trends shaping the United States and the world. In its Religion & Public Life section, Pew makes available demographic information on religion in America, as well as reports focusing on particular areas of concern in a variety of topics (e.g., religion and politics, gay marriage and homosexuality, science and innovation, etc.).

The Pluralism Project (http://pluralism.org/), affiliated with Harvard University, conducts research, outreach, and the dissemination of resources to help promote religious pluralism. In addition to providing information and timelines on a variety of religions and faith traditions that make up the American landscape, the site also makes available models for interfaith interaction, a directory of religious centers and interfaith organizations, promising practices, and links to other resources.

Tanenbaum (https://tanenbaum.org/) is a secular, nonsectarian nonprofit that makes available resources, services, and practical programs to help schools, workplaces, and health care settings bridge religious differences.

US Mission Network (www.usmissionnetwork.org/who-we-are/) is a collaboration of YM leaders “united in an effort to preserve, nurture and advance the Christian heritage and purpose of the YMCA across America.”
### APPENDIX: POTENTIAL COMMUNITY PARTNERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Potential Community Partners</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business organizations and groups</td>
<td>Neighborhood business associations, trade groups, businesses that serve or employ communities of diverse faiths</td>
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<tr>
<td>Civic groups</td>
<td>Chambers of commerce, neighborhood associations, school boards, town committees, League of Women Voters, Kiwanis, Rotary Clubs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community organizations</td>
<td>Community-based agencies serving communities of diverse faiths, afterschool tutoring, mentorship programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural and artistic groups</td>
<td>Cultural centers, musical groups, libraries, dance troupes, community theaters, museums</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faith-based organizations</td>
<td>Churches, temples, mosques, other places of worship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health service organizations</td>
<td>Clinics, hospitals, medical and dental offices, government health agencies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local media</td>
<td>Radio stations, newspapers, TV stations, local cable TV, local websites (Consider media that are knowledgeable about—if relevant—their own faith, and nonreligious resources that have an academic or other research-based background in faith studies. Also recognize that some media may have different affiliations or interests in describing faith, and these difference may affect how they chronicle efforts with diverse faiths.)</td>
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<td>Outdoor, sports, and recreation groups</td>
<td>Youth sports leagues, martial arts studios</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political organizations</td>
<td>Political parties, caucuses, political action groups (this suggestion in particular may be dependent upon community demographics)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schools and universities</td>
<td>Parent-teacher associations or organizations (PTAs or PTOs), school-associated clubs, afterschool programs, yearbook clubs, alumni associations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior citizen groups</td>
<td>Senior community centers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social issues groups</td>
<td>Volunteer organizations, immigrants' rights groups, United Way</td>
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<tr>
<td>Veterans groups</td>
<td>Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth groups</td>
<td>4-H, Boys &amp; Girls Clubs, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, other local groups in your community affiliated with houses of worship or nonfaith groups</td>
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