

## DEACONS' TOOL KIT



### Deacons in an interfaith context – ministering diagonally

*Deacon Jessica Foster*

#### Why a deacon in an interfaith context?

*“They are to serve the community in which they are set, bringing to the Church the needs and hopes of all the people.”* This is what the Bishop says at every ordination of deacons.

For many of us in urban settings, we need to engage with people from different faiths and ethnicities if we are to serve the whole community and bring to the Church the needs and hopes of all the people.

Interfaith has become a so-called ‘expert’ area of ministry, but I believe that this makes our job harder. Society tells us that some people are more ‘other’ than others, but again I do not believe this is necessarily so. Every encounter I have with another human being is an encounter with the ‘other’, and in that encounter with difference is the possibility to encounter more of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

My ministry has been about making friends with people of different faiths, friends with a purpose – the purpose being to work together for the good of our neighbours. Making friends with people of different faiths is not very different from making friends with anyone - because as I have already said, we are all so different anyway.

#### Why a ‘diagonal’ deacon?

I see my community split into a grid, and most people live mainly in one box:

	Christian	Muslim	Sikh	Hindu	Not religious
Wealthy					
Quite wealthy					
Doing OK					
Squeezed					
Struggling					
Very Vulnerable					

This is hugely simplified and we need to remember other factors also separate us, such as ethnicity, age, geography, sexuality, gender and political beliefs. But generally interfaith engagement works in a straight-ish line across the top three boxes – usually excluding the ‘not religious’.

Often projects run by churches and others work in vertical lines – this might be a food-bank or a job club. I think some of my most interesting encounters happen when we seek to connect people, and **connect ourselves in diagonal lines** across the boxes, breaking down expectations and barriers.

### How?

*“Theirs is a life of visible self-giving”* (from the Bishop’s charge at the Ordination of Deacons).

**My most productive times are when I have no agenda** and I am prepared to ‘waste’ time with people. My kids laugh that I am paid to have lunch and drink coffee with people, and it is true that I spend a fair amount of time hanging out – because I find that such times deepen relationships and build new ones. I am lucky that one of my official roles helps me to seek out people who love God and love their neighbour, but it is something we all can do.

### “Seek the people of peace”

I don’t find that the most helpful way of building relationships with people of other faiths is to go straight to the leader of a mosque or temple – although that can be part of it. Instead I tend to go to the places in my area where **I see people living the love of God** – it might be someone trying to clean up the area, a group that supports older people, a community centre, or a parent at the school gate who shows concern for others. Look for what is going on and join in – that way you can start to build relationships with the people running activities or campaigning for justice.

Join in, wash up, offer support and **affirm what is happening**. See what happens next – there often seems to be an ‘and then’. Opportunities open up, invitations are offered - try to accept as many as possible, although you need to avoid over-filling your diary with planned events as many invitations in this context are quite short notice. This week I have had to turn down three invitations I would have loved to have accepted – two of them on the same night! Turning up is a great support. Once you are there – don’t be in a rush. Strike up conversations, stay to the end and

arrange to see people again for a coffee or a curry. (Warning: this work has added massively to my waistline!)

**Begin to think about what you could do together.** Talk about shared concerns, invite people to festivals at Church, offer to pray for ill members of the family. Feel free to ask questions respectfully, and be curious about people's faiths. Don't tell them what they think: ask, and be prepared to talk about your own faith. Alternate as missionary and seeker in conversation. Talk about prayer, fasting, worship, scripture etc when it comes up in discussion.

**Always look to grow the movement.** Introduce people to each other and rejoice when their friendships flourish. Give people the confidence to go to unknown places by going with them. Include people in your life – hold your birthday party somewhere accessible to people who are vegetarian or don't drink, share favourite prayers, swap recipes and go on daytrips together. It's not 'expert' ministry - it is normal life.

Our friendships in Birmingham have led to wonderful adventures and partnerships – some high-profile, some quite personal.

**Here are some examples:**

- ✚ In January this year 23 of us (five were members of our congregation), a group of Christian, Muslim, Jewish and no-faith Brummies, travelled to Calais to take aid and volunteer with a charity supporting asylum seekers in Northern France. We continue to meet as a group and are working out how we can support local asylum seekers. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/love-your-neighbour/loving-our-forgotten-neighbours/398791720492146/>
- ✚ In July 2015, we hosted an Iftaar (the meal that breaks the fast in Ramadan) in our church. Around 80 people attended, we had wonderful food (paid for by an anonymous donor) and ended the evening with Compline. The following year we joined with a local community centre to host an Iftaar for around 200 people including 50 Brummie Syrian refugees. <https://distinctivedeacon.blog/2016/06/08/why-i-welcome-ramadan/>
- ✚ Around four times a year between 30-50 people gather in our church for Scriptural Reasoning <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org/>
- ✚ Working with Hope Not Hate and a local mosque, hundreds of presents were donated, gift-wrapped and distributed to people in the city through charities that work with asylum seekers.
- ✚ A small group of people meet in our neighbourhood at 8 am every morning to walk together for an hour. The core walkers are a Muslim man and a Christian woman.
- ✚ Before the Midnight Mass service last year about 12 of us met for desserts – the group then came to church together and handed out mince pies to the regular worshippers.

Personally, my life and the life of my family have been hugely enriched by relationships that cross perceived boundaries and open up new perspectives and narratives.

***A final note on food:***

Food really brings people together but it can highlight differences.

Most Muslims only eat Halal meat and some don't like to be in a room when alcohol is being served. If I have Muslim guests coming to an event I tend not to serve any pork at all.

For some Sikhs and Hindus, keeping a strict vegetarian diet means no eggs – not all caterers know this.

Orthodox Jewish people eat Kosher food – this usually has to be bought in.

Some people go for a buffet approach and have everything from pork pies to kosher falafels and halal chicken on the same table. I prefer to find food that everyone can eat although this is not always possible.

***On shaking hands:***

Some orthodox Jewish people and some Muslim people prefer not to shake hands with people of the opposite sex. Others don't mind. Try to follow their lead but please don't get offended – it's nothing personal and doesn't stop you building warm, friendly relationships.

Remember: always ask if you are not sure. Have fun!



***More about Deacon Jess***

Jessica Foster is a distinctive deacon who is currently a curate at St Peter's Church in Hall Green, Birmingham. She is also very involved in the Near Neighbours programme in Birmingham <https://www.cuf.org.uk/near-neighbours> and works as Public Affairs adviser to the Bishop of Birmingham.

She was ordained in July 2015 and before beginning to work for Near Neighbours in 2010 she was Communications Director for the Diocese of Birmingham and worked in PR and journalism. She is married and has three teenaged children.

Some of her favourite books (in no particular order):

The Go-Between God – John V Taylor

Exclusion and Embrace – Miroslav Volf

Distinctly Welcoming – Richard Sudworth

Fear and Friendship: Anglicans Engaging with Islam – Edited by Sarah Coakley

Understanding Islam: The First Ten Step – Chris Hewer

Generous Love: the truth of the gospel and the call to dialogue -

<http://www.presenceandengagement.org.uk/generous-love>

Many other useful resources can be found on the Presence and Engagement website

<http://www.presenceandengagement.org.uk/home>