

Questions and guidance for churches and cathedrals considering hosting an Iftar

The Church of England is committed to being a 'Christian presence in every community.' The increasing diversity of our country means that in some communities, questions arise which relate to the nature of that presence among people of other faiths. In order to ensure that Anglican clergy working in these areas are supported in their ministry, Presence & Engagement have put together guidelines addressing a range of frequently asked questions. These are intended to highlight some of the theological and practical issues which need to be considered in multi-religious contexts, and in doing so give clergy the confidence to make decisions which can be the basis of good relations with other faith communities.

These particular guidelines on hosting iftars have been prepared by Presence & Engagement in partnership with the Christian Muslim Forum. They are aimed at Anglican clergy, but may also be of interest to lay people and ministers of other Christian denominations working in diverse settings. Within most dioceses there is a designated interfaith adviser, who can be consulted for further assistance. To find their contact details plus other information and resources, go to www.presenceandengagement.org.uk. For more information about the Christian Muslim Forum, see www.christianmuslimforum.org.

Introduction

An iftar is an evening meal with which Muslims end their daily fast during the month of Ramadan, having abstained from all food and drink since dawn. The meal itself is not a service or act of worship, however prayers will usually take place in between the initial breaking of the fast with a small item of food, and the main meal.

This guidance is intended to help you think through whether your church might host an iftar. To do so, you'll probably need two rooms or spaces – one for the main part of the event, and one where Muslims can pray. The space for prayers should not be a consecrated space, and more information about this is given below.

The idea of hosting an iftar may have originated with you or a member of your congregation, or maybe you've been approached by a local Muslim individual or organisation. Before making a decision, there are three things you should do, which are listed below. Please note that some churches receive requests from people wishing to hire their hall for a family or group to hold an iftar. These guidelines do not address this scenario, but separate guidance on the use of church buildings can be found on our website.

1. Firstly, do some research on the relevant mosque or organisation, if you've not worked with them before, so your response is well informed. Your diocesan interfaith adviser will be able to assist with this.

2. Secondly, think through how the idea might be received by your congregation, and consult the PCC so any concerns can be raised. You may also want to talk to other local church leaders you work with, either in your Deanery or ecumenically.
3. Thirdly, if you've been approached to host by a Muslim contact, ask why they are keen for you to do so – even if you are inclined to say yes. It's helpful to be aware of what the church hosting an iftar would represent for Muslims, and how they would explain this to their own community.

How you approach the question of hosting an iftar will also be determined by your context. For example, people of other faiths may feel a connection to a cathedral given its role in civic events, tourism or school visits, and cathedrals are often a focus for issues of faith in the public square. As such, hosting a city-wide iftar might be an expression of this identity. In parishes where there has only been a significant Muslim population fairly recently, a church might host a small community iftar as part of a broader process to breaking down barriers and building relationships with neighbours. In other areas with a longstanding Muslim population and many mosques, it may be more fitting for Christians to attend iftars as guests, demonstrating their willingness to receive hospitality as well as offer it.

If after the three steps above, you decide that for any reason you don't want to go ahead, explain this to the person who has suggested or requested it, and be honest about why. Don't pretend the church is already in use that night or make another excuse! Interfaith relationships are best served by integrity and a willingness to have difficult conversations. If you don't proceed with an iftar, there are plenty of other ways to develop Christian-Muslim relations in your area, so make an alternative suggestion about what you might do together instead – such as a community celebration during the summer or a joint fundraiser.

If you decide to proceed, ensure you allow lots of time to prepare while also being aware of potential cultural differences around timing and organisation. During the planning process, there are a range of things to think through in terms of how the event will run. For each of the areas explored below, the key thing is to be proactive in thinking through your response to any issues which might arise. Make sure you then discuss these with your Muslim partners so as to avoid any surprises on the night!

Hosting an iftar is something which should be done with Muslim partners. Ideally it will stem from and feed into your interfaith relationships, not be a one-off event, so consider who you might partner with – though if the suggestion has come from elsewhere, this may already be decided. If not, suitable partners might be your local mosque, a Muslim community group or a charity. Bear in mind that it will be easier to relate to one or two key contacts, rather than a large number of people. It is then helpful to think about what kind of partnership this will be. Are you hosting it with their input and advice, or are you joint hosts? How will this be framed in the invitations or publicity, and how will this be perceived by others? While working with others, ideally a church should retain ownership of an iftar which takes place in their building, so as not to become simply a venue where someone else's event is taking place.

Questions to Consider

Where will you host it? Some churches use rooms within their building. If the main part of the event takes place in the body of the church, you shouldn't cover up any crosses or images but do let Muslim co-organisers know about these in advance – ideally inviting them to visit the church ahead of time so they're familiar with the space. On the night, you might want to give a brief explanation about different aspects of the building, especially for Muslim guests who may not have visited many churches.

As well as a room for eating, you will also need a space where Muslims can pray. While individual visitors from different backgrounds may pray privately in your church on an occasional basis, organised corporate prayer is different. Remember that worship and other events held in a Church of England place of worship are governed by Canon Law. A building and any attached land which have been consecrated are said, in the deed of consecration, to be set apart for worship according to the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England forever. In light of this, check which parts of your church are consecrated – it may just be the body of the church or could include other rooms too.

Once you have this information, identify one of the other spaces for Muslims to pray in. Some people will wish to perform ablutions (*wudu*) before praying, meaning availability of bathroom facilities may need to be taken into account. If there are large number of people and a mosque very close by, you could explore whether people might go there to pray instead. The prayer in question (*maghrib*) needs to take place within a fairly small window of time though, so bear this in mind when deciding what to do. If your church doesn't have a suitable room for Muslim prayers, consider whether a community centre or similar might be a better venue for the whole event – with the church still acting as host.

When will you host it? Ramadan is a whole month, but different times within it have particular significance. Consider avoiding the last ten days of Ramadan, when many people will spend additional time praying, as well as the first few days, when people are still adjusting to fasting. Depending on the culture of your Muslim partners, there may be certain days when they prefer to be at the mosque rather than attending an iftar elsewhere, so discuss with them which date would be best.

Who will help? This isn't something you can do on your own! Let your Diocesan Inter Faith Adviser know what you are planning, and ensure you have the support of your bishop. Recruit some volunteers from your church – remember that getting people involved is a good way of ensuring they attend! However, while Ramadan is during the summer, iftars can go on very late – though as the timing shifts each year, this will change. Ensure that Christian volunteers and attendees are aware of this so they know what they are signing up to, and don't start packing up or leaving early which might look inhospitable. With volunteers, it's good to have Christians and Muslims helping out together so ask your Muslim co-organisers to supply volunteers too. As well giving you more pairs of hands on the night, this is a way for people to get to know one another. Consider putting your volunteers into pairs, one Muslim and one Christian, to be responsible for various tasks.

Who will come? As well as volunteers, think about who you would like to attend. How will you engage members of your congregation? You need to have a good number of people from the host church, and ideally not just those who are interfaith enthusiasts! As for Muslims guests, will these be local people or leaders and representatives? If you're a parish church then a local focus is best, while a cathedral will clearly have a wider city remit. Think about inviting members of your congregation to

bring their Muslim friends and neighbours rather than clergy and Muslim leaders doing all the inviting. Consider too whether political/civic leaders will come. Your local council etc may want to be involved and might even have some funding, but again bear in mind the need to retain ownership of the event. You need to think about the other faith communities in your area too, if there are some. Will they be invited? And are you also engaging with them and their festivals throughout the year?

What will happen when people arrive? Ideally the first words people hear should be a welcome from the parish priest or cathedral dean – who may also comper the evening. This should clearly set out how you understand the event and why you've chosen to host it. After this, there will probably be time for some sort of activity or presentation before people break the fast. You could choose to start later and skip this, but Muslims may be glad of something to keep them occupied in the final hours of the fast. Some churches use this slot for Muslim and Christian speakers to share what fasting means to them, or offer reflections on a particular theme such as welcoming refugees. Others have a scriptural reasoning session, or a talk from a relevant charity or organisation. You might decide just to have the opportunity for guests to mingle, perhaps with discussion prompts to get people talking. This is fine – not every iftar has to be a formal event with a programme. Whatever you do, try and avoid a series of boring speeches! Work out in advance who might expect to speak, particularly any VIP guests, and be clear about whether you will allow this and for how long. Make sure you do due diligence on any speakers you aren't familiar with, and consider how you might move things along if necessary!

When it is time to break the fast, what will happen? There is a set and precise time for the fast to end. Find out what this is in your area by asking someone or checking the website of a local mosque, where you'll usually find a timetable. As soon as the moment arrives, people who have been fasting will end or 'open' it with a small item of food, often dates, and water – those who have not been fasting can eat these too.

Some Muslims like the fast to end with the Islamic Call to Prayer, the *Adhan*, before they go and pray. You'll need to ask your Muslim partners if they want this to happen, and if so whether this will be said by someone present or if a recording will be played. If the Call to Prayer is made in either form, and your event is taking place in the church building, this should happen in the room allocated for prayer, rather than a consecrated space. The Call to Prayer is not always used at iftars, so it may be that you decide with your Muslim partners that you won't have it recited or played. Sometimes guests will ask for it anyway though, so consider how you would respond to this. Whatever you do, ensure that you do make some sort of announcement about where and when prayers are happening, so that none of your Muslim guests miss out.

Those not participating in Muslim prayers may be invited to watch, or alternatively you may wish to have a short time of prayer for Christians while Muslims pray elsewhere. Equally you might feel this is unnecessary, if it's not your custom to pray at this time of day. Note that the preparations for distributing food will need to happen during this slot, so some Christian volunteers should be available to ensure everything is ready when Muslim prayers finish.

What about food? At last, it's time to eat! You'll need to choose a menu which will appeal to the taste and preferences of your guests, while making sure those attending from your church are catered for too. As a starting point, it will need to be a hot meal, and sufficiently filling for those fasting. Could a local restaurant or caterer provide food for free or at reduced cost, will you cook, or will people bring dishes? Remember that Muslims can only eat meat which is halal. You will need to decide with your

Muslim partners what is best for your context, but to avoid concerns about cross-contamination of utensils etc, it may be simplest to only serve halal meat dishes while also having vegetarian options. In addition, ensure no pork or alcohol is brought or used in cooking. If different people have volunteered to bring food, make sure everyone understands what's been agreed. Everything should be clearly labelled on the night, and mention in your publicity or invitations that halal food will be provided, so Muslim guests feel confident that they will be catered for.

You'll also need to consider how you serve the food. Given that those who have been fasting will be very hungry, it's important to make sure food is distributed swiftly. A buffet is probably not the best set up, especially if this means Muslims find themselves at the back of the queue when they return from prayers! One approach is to plate up or prepare containers of food in advance, which can then be handed out to people from a number of distribution points by volunteers. You'll also need to make sure you have plenty of water easily available, as those who have been fasting will need to drink a lot to replenish their fluids.

The biggest cost of hosting an iftar is likely to be the catering. While most are free to attend, it may occasionally be possible to charge for attendance or take a collection, depending on your context. In this scenario, once you have covered your costs, any remaining money can be given to charity in line with the emphasis during Ramadan on charitable giving. Alternatively, your Muslim partner may be able to donate food or share some of the cost.

Once food and drink has been distributed, consider how people will be seated while they eat. Some Muslim guests may not be used to men and women sitting together at social events, so have a conversation with your partners about this in advance. Usually it's best to let people choose where they sit, but try and ensure people mix with those they don't know. Be intentional about encouraging conversations and getting people to swap contact details with new friends before they leave.

Afterwards, how will you report it? You might like to let local media know what you are doing, as well as your diocesan communications officer. Be ready to articulate the rationale for the event in a couple of simple sentences. While most churches who host iftars do not receive any negative publicity, you should think about how what you or others post on social media may be perceived around the world, especially the visual message this could send if a photo was detached from the text. You should also be aware of what other media is going out via any Muslim TV channels or newspapers who attend.

Having hosted, will you be a guest? It's good to attend another iftar if you can. Could you do a two-step thing, where your church and a local mosque take it in turns to host? When attending as a guest, be prepared to say something if invited, perhaps about a Christian understanding of fasting. Whether you are a host or guest, some Christians choose to fast when attending iftars.

Final Thoughts

This may seem like a lot to consider, but don't be intimidated. Thinking through these questions in advance will enable to you make an informed decision about whether and how to host an iftar, and ensure that any event you do organise will make a positive contribution to relationships between Christians and Muslims in your local community.