



MY SPECIAL PLACE

Sharing stories of faith
through visiting places
of special meaning

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My Special Place

Sharing stories of faith and our experiences of how religion has shaped and transformed us is something that many people are interested in. In our increasingly diverse society, lots of people find that meeting people of different faiths happens quite naturally either at work or college or when shopping or chatting to neighbours. Yet bringing faith and belief into the conversation can seem daunting; people can feel anxious that conversations around faith will cause division or tension or that they just won't know enough.

My Special Place is a resource that seeks to help people overcome those fears and, in a fun and relaxed environment, introduce their beliefs and ideas through the story of their own lives.

Specifically, this is done through identifying places which have a special meaning or memory and together visiting those places. They are then used as a springboard for discussion and as a way of getting to know each other more deeply.

This resource is based on the experiences of the Faithful Friends: On Tour project. The project secured funding to provide resources like this one to encourage others to run similar activities. You can read more about Faithful Friends: On Tour and see a number of videos of their visits at http://www.fncbham.org.uk/?page_id=1418.



Faithful Friends: On Tour

Faithful Friends: On Tour came about when a group of seven men from four different faiths in Sandwell started to meet to get to know one another and to talk about their faiths and local issues of joint concern. They became good friends and shared more about their own beliefs and stories. During 2017 they decided to journey together to places of special meaning to different members of the group. As they did so, they shared this journey with children and families across Sandwell to inspire a generation to follow the example and build their own meaningful friendships with people different to themselves.

Since then they have been to eight different places and at each one they have learnt new things about each other, things that they agree and disagree about, and their friendships have become even stronger. Other groups such as Women First and a Community Orchard have also started and been celebrated as part of the way people of faith in Sandwell are overcoming difference and building strong friendships.

In 2019 they became a Together for Hope community as part of the Coventry Cathedral peace and reconciliation work through the Community of the Cross of Nails.



Getting Started

The idea of *My Special Place* is relatively basic: you get together with a small group of people of different faiths and backgrounds and you all choose a place that has a special meaning for you. You then travel together to one of those places. The person whose choice it is (hereafter referred to as the host), talks about why it matters to them, how they changed while being at that place and how their faith has been informed through things that happened there.

The rest of the group look around the place of meaning, ask questions and take time for their own reflections on the place. It's very simple, but is great fun and it opens up ideas, memories and thoughts in ways that sitting in a room together rarely does.

If you're interested in gathering a group to explore different places of spiritual meaning, there is some groundwork that needs doing first.

Decide your aims

First of all, you need to be clear about the aims of the project and what it is trying to achieve. Starting a project like this is a chance for people to get to know one another and build up good friendships. It is also a great opportunity to share something of their own stories and beliefs and have chance to discuss these in an open and friendly way, to visit interesting places that might be local or further afield, and to find out how those places have influenced and formed the people in the group.

It is not designed to be a place where people argue their case, prove a political or theological argument or try to persuade others to agree, change their minds or convert. Rather it is a space for open and honest sharing about things that matter and experiences that have formed each person.

The discussions will, almost inevitably, raise beliefs or ideas that not everyone agrees with, it's important for the group to agree a framework for the discussions that allow for disagreement but in a constructive and positive manner. The Feast, a charity that aims to bring together teenagers from different faiths and cultures to build friendships, explore faith and change lives, has produced some guidelines for dialogue which might be useful to use as a basis for the discussions. They can be found in full at <https://thefeast.org.uk/resources/guidelines-for-dialogue/> but they can be summarised as follows:

- Listen to what everyone has to say.
- Do not tell others what they believe but let them tell you.
- Do not force people to agree with your views.
- Acknowledge similarities and differences between faiths.
- Speak positively of your own faith rather than negatively about other people's.
- Do not judge people here by what some people of their faith or community might do.
- Be honest in what you say.
- Respect other people even if you disagree with their views.
- Make every effort to get along with everyone regardless of their faith, gender, ethnicity or age.

Gather your group

The next thing is to identify a group of people who want to do this activity together. It can be any group of people, but it tends to work best if:

- They know each other but aren't really close friends.
- They come from a mix of faith and cultural backgrounds.
- The group has between six and 12 people, enough for good conversation but not too big so that no one gets left out and travel isn't too complicated or expensive.
- They are people who are both willing to share their own stories and ideas but are also open to hearing, and taking seriously, the experiences and beliefs of others.

People need to be willing to be part of the whole project, the idea isn't to just take people to your special place, but also be willing to go to the others. Not everyone will be able to go to all the places, but people should sign up with the serious intention of being part of the whole project.

Form the group

Once you've gathered people who want to be part of the project; it's worth spending time together to get to know one another and making sure everyone agrees with the aims of the project. This is best done over a meal; sharing food usually relaxes people and creates an atmosphere where people are ready to talk.

Using simple prompt questions can break the ice with a new group. You could print out the following questions and scatter them round the table for people to pick up and use. At the first meeting, you might need to take a lead in suggesting that each person picks a question and answers it for themselves before inviting others to answer it.

- Where did you grow up and what was it like?
- What did you want to be when you grew up?
- When did faith or religion become important to you?
- If you could travel to any place where would you go?
- What food have you tried that you would never eat again?
- Have you any unrealised ambitions?
- How well do you get on with people you disagree with?
- If you could have any job at all what would you do?
- If someone offered to buy you any luxury you wanted what would you choose?
- Does faith or religion affect the way you live now, if so how?
- What do you like about where you live now?

Choose a place

During your first meeting you need to invite people to choose a place of special meaning. At this stage members don't need to worry about the practicalities but rather choose the place they would really like to take the group to. It may prove impossible to visit when you look into it more closely, but try not to get bogged down in the practicalities too early. The only condition you might want to make is that the place needs to be in the UK to save the costs of foreign travel. However, you may decide as a group that you'd like to visit a place of meaning that is overseas, and you would really like to find the funds to go. The Faithful Friends: On Tour group found the funds for a trip to Amritsar in India.

The place they should be thinking of is anywhere where special to them when they think about their own faith or religion. Some examples have been:

- A place of worship where you first encountered that religion.
- A place of worship that you have had a long association with, where you have grown in your faith.
- A place in the countryside where you felt close to God.
- A campsite where you went as a young person.
- A sacred site that you've travelled to on pilgrimage.
- A house where you grew up and where your faith was formed.
- An area where you lived or worked which had a lasting impact on you.

They don't have to just be places where everything was wonderful and amazing things happened. The point is the place is somewhere that is important to them, somewhere where their life was impacted in one way or another. People might need time to think of their special

place, so you might need to arrange on another date to continue the conversations and give people chance to think. Ask everyone to share where they want to take the group and why they've chosen it.



Sort the practicalities

Once all the places have been chosen, you need to start to map out the practicalities of the visits. This can seem daunting, but you don't need to plan them all in one go.

Decide how frequently you want to meet up for the visits. Once every four to six weeks is probably what most people can manage.

First, work out which place you are going to visit and the date on which you are going to visit. Is it somewhere you can get to and back in a day or will you need to arrange somewhere to stay overnight? Typically, the visit to the actual place takes two or three hours to complete properly – to look round and have chance for the host to explain why they have brought the group to the place and discuss it.

Secondly work out the transport. It's much better if the group can travel together as you get extra chance for conversation and friendship during the journeys.

Contact anyone at the venue from whom you might need permission or give them a courtesy

call to let them know you're coming. Make sure that on the date you intend to visit the place is open and there are no other events happening that will clash with your visit. Ideally it is good to have a space where you can gather at the end of the visit for a discussion about what you have seen and heard without being interrupted or overheard by other people.

Decide what you are going to do about meals and refreshments. Be aware that if you are visiting rural parts of the UK, halal or kosher food might not be easily available. Be sensitive to different people's budgets when considering whether to go for a coffee or buy a meal.

If people need any special clothing, eg head coverings, walking boots or raincoats, make sure people know this in advance and can get them before the visit. Ensure that everyone has the practical details of when and where to meet. Allow plenty of time for the journey - things always take longer when you are in a group, such as stopping at a service station or negotiating railway stations.



On The Day

As you arrive at the venue, ask the host to give a brief explanation of why the place is special to them and the kind of place it is. They should also make the group aware of any special features or views, or any particular issues of etiquette.

Taking people to a place that is special can make some people feel quite vulnerable. This moves the relationship from talking about life and faith to allowing people in to somewhere sacred where memories matter. It's important to allow the host to express their nerves or concerns, and for the rest of the group to be respectful of how the host is feeling. You may be going to somewhere familiar to other members of the

group, but for whom it has no special memories. It may be to a place of worship which some of the group have never visited and aren't sure how to behave or what to expect. It's important that, however they are feeling, they acknowledge and affirm the special nature of the place for the host and to treat it as such. Helping the group to be honest about their feelings before during and after the day will make the visit more meaningful and deepen the conversations and friendships.

There are four key roles during the visit that it's important to allocate before the day. One person might do more than one role if needed but they all need covering.

Logistics

This involves arranging travel, refreshments and liaising with the venue being visited. Make sure that on the day you have clear directions and contact details. One of the aspects of travelling as a group is that you learn who the members are who are used to travelling, who might be a bit anxious, who likes to know exactly what's happening and who just goes with the flow (and who is always five minutes late!). Managing the logistics so that everyone has a good time will ensure that when people are at the place and have conversations they are relaxed and able to focus on the visit, rather than worry about the journey home or where they are going to eat or stay.



Hosting

This is the person who has chosen the place and is taking the group. This might seem like the easiest job, but it is worth thinking through before the visit what you want to show people, how you are going to lead them and how you might explain things. If there are specific memories or parts of the place you want to focus on, think through how you will talk about them. If they stir up deep or uncomfortable memories, chat it through with someone you trust before you go, thinking about how best to talk about those memories. If you are the kind of person likely to well up when sharing your stories, have some tissues to hand and think through how you will cope crying in front of your friends. If there are some key beliefs about your faith that you want to explain as part of the visit, plan how you can talk about them clearly and in ways that everyone will understand.

Here are some prompt questions to help you get started:

- Why is this place special to you?
- Is there one stand out memory you have about this place?
- What happened here to change you?
- In what way have you felt close to God in this place?
- How has your faith been strengthened or changed through this place?
- How do you feel coming back to visit?
- How has your understanding of God or your faith changed through this place?



Facilitating discussion

It's worth having someone (other than the host) to think in advance, and during the visit, about questions that could be put to the group and the host to draw out more about the visit. These questions should help people explore how they feel about and would like to respond to what they see and hear. During the day it is good to find time and space for the group to talk through what they've seen, heard, felt and experienced. Enabling people to share honestly how they are feeling and to draw out the similarities and differences is the job of the facilitator. It's also good for the facilitator to be able to ask the host questions to clarify things that some of the group haven't understood and to help the host tell their story if they have found it hard to explain it as they've shown the group round.

Here are some questions for the group to help you get started:

- Is there anything that people don't understand or are unclear about from our visit?
- How did you feel being in this place?
- What did you think about what we heard from our host? Was it something you could relate to or something outside your experience?
- Does what you've heard chime with your own beliefs or were there points which you would disagree with?

Here are some questions for the host to help you get started:

- Is there anything else you want to tell us?
- How has it felt coming back to this place?
- Is it different being here with friends of different faiths?
- Has the place changed? If so, in what ways? Does that matter or affect your memories?

Photographer and social media manager:

Make sure someone is recording the visit in photographs or short videos. It's easy to assume that everyone is taking pictures of everything these days but that isn't always the case. It's worth asking one person to be the 'official photographer' and to make sure there is a good record of the visit. This will be good for the group to have but is also great for sharing with others. It's often said that we only hear the bad news of what's happening, so why not share the good stories of your visits with friends through social media. This can be done during the day which probably attracts the most attention, or afterwards in the form of reflections. Most people like seeing pictures with brief explanations rather than reading lengthy articles.

After The Visit

Encourage members of the group to take time to reflect on what they have said, experienced and heard during the visit and to consider how it speaks to them. Make sure you have a date in place to meet up so you have a chance to talk through the visit, having had chance for reflection. Share the pictures and stories of the visit to encourage others and show the good news of how people of different faiths can get on. Contact the venue to thank them for welcoming you, send a few pictures of the day as well for their encouragement. Then start packing for the next trip!





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Would you like to share your faith with others of different faiths and none? Do you have a place which is special to your own faith journey? My Special Place helps friends share these important places and so share their faith with each other.

