

10 top tips on working with faith communities

1. Faith communities can reach parts of their communities that others cannot reach.

Sometimes faith communities have a strong geographical presence (for example the Church of England's 'parish system' gives it a presence across the whole of England). Alternatively, they can be strong in connecting with particular communities of identity or interest (some churches serve - for instance - Chinese or Polish communities.) Be aware of the links which your local faith communities specialise in.

2. Faith communities can be enormously compassionate and a great source of help if energised.

Faith communities often put service and charity at the heart of their objectives, and have a great deal of experience in helping marginalised and excluded people. Often they have outreach work with children, young people, or the elderly. Try involving faith communities in discussing local challenges, to draw on their experience and capacity.

3. Faith volunteers all over the country give hours of their time for many different causes. Utilise and respect this.

Faith communities are a good source of volunteers because they include many people committed to social action. However, be aware, many individuals will already have pre-existing commitments. This makes faith communities great at initiating networks, but think also about how you might mobilise a wider group, both within and outside congregations.

4. Do expect faith to be on the communities agenda, but understand they can be discrete about sharing it.

Faith volunteers are motivated and inspired by their beliefs. If you are setting up a joint project, have honest conversations about when and how it might (or might not) be appropriate to share personal faith.

5. Faith communities are often structured or hierarchical – even if they don't appear so.

Try and understand what role the individuals you are working with play in their wider organisation. Don't expect a single individual to speak on behalf of a whole community, unless they have expressly been tasked with that role.

6. Understand that faith communities have their own ways of operating.

Every faith organisation will have its own procedures and governance structures, whether formal or informal. If you need a faith community to take a decision, ensure you are speaking to the right leaders, and allow time for them to discuss with members, if necessary.

7. Faith communities have many assets.

Faith communities often own physical assets such as buildings, kitchens, community halls and educational resources, sometimes even housing. They are often delighted to find new ways to use and share facilities. If you have a need in a particular geographical location, it's worth asking if they can help.

8. Has contact been made with the relevant part of the faith community who deal with safeguarding?

Faith communities should always have rigorous and transparent safeguarding procedures. Make sure any potential safeguarding issues are flagged up and acted on.

9. Many faith communities will already be running projects for people with vulnerability – make sure those projects are aware of the potential for modern slavery within that work.

How could existing areas of faith action – for instance in education, homelessness, with refugees, or young people – help to extend your current reach?

10. Faith communities enjoy having visitors...and they are great places to be!

Feel free to spend time with your local faith communities as a guest. Strong relationships will lead to excellent partnerships!