



In doing this work, there are essential considerations in working with faith-based organizations as discussed below.

Understanding Presence:

When law enforcement professionals enter a house of worship, there will be widely different responses to the presence of law enforcement. In some cases, people will be comfortable and approach officers; in other cases there may be hesitation or actual fear. Some houses of worship have membership from a country where law enforcement is abusive or corrupt. Or they might think officers are there to enforce immigration law. It is essential that law enforcement be present all the same because their positive presence helps. Officers should still be prepared for a variety of responses that need to be treated with generosity. Remember that law enforcement is the most visible form of government.

➤ *“If officers are taking their lunch break with their car sitting in our parking lot people would come over to me and say, what’s wrong? Why are the police here?”*

Numbers and Uniform:

Be thoughtful about who officers are meeting with and in what capacity when determining type of clothing and numbers. If officers are meeting with children or participating in an informal gathering, wear uniforms (but if possible, consider not bringing firearms) so that the public can get comfortable being around officers. If it is a discussion on a difficult topic, consider polo shirts and bringing fewer officers so that it’s not overwhelming.

Train:

Every officer should receive at least one in-house community engagement training beyond what has been taught in the academy before participating in a community engagement activity. Moreover, new officers should be paired with officers who have already done community engagement.

No One Size Fits All:

Houses of worship are all different; even though an officer has visited, for example, a Catholic church on East Main Street, the Catholic church you visit on West Main Street might have an entirely different dynamic. Treat each faith-based organization as unique.





Cultural Sensitivity:

When entering a house of worship, notice details of the congregants. Are women and men seated separately; do people take their shoes or hats off; are people waiting to eat; is their behavior formal or informal; are most wearing a religious garment, etc. Follow their lead. Even better, before showing up, ask how to be culturally sensitive in what officers wear, bring, and in how they behave. Ask if officers should participate in rituals if they are comfortable, or respectfully observe congregants engaging in ritual. Then, most importantly, ensure that these lessons are shared with other officers. Also note that ritual, behavior, and expectations can change, depending on the day of the week and even the time of the engagement.

“Have it on the right day. Don’t have the event on Shabbat (weekly Jewish day of observance).”



After a Controversial Incident:

Start with a lot of listening and approach faith-based organizations gingerly. Ask the faith leader how to best engage the members of their congregation. Make sure you are demonstrating that your agency is going the extra mile to listen and reach out. When possible, and when a careful reflection deems it helpful, wear polos shirts instead of uniforms and do not wear firearms when meeting with the community at such a time.

“We did vigils and protests. And the police were right there. Some of them took knees with us. I didn’t see them as the enemy, I saw them as the solution.”

Politics:

Every group has politics – and faith-based organizations are no exception. There might be multiple faith leaders within an institution, and they might have different perspectives; moreover, across organizations there might be different friendships and even rivalries. Never talk poorly about any one faith leader to another, and if they speak poorly about each other, be polite but do not agree. Understand that your agency might get a commitment from one faith leader while another leader in the same organization might be unaware. Determine who the decision makers are within and across organizations and be sure to get their buy-in first and foremost. Be aware that a faith leader might have a different – either more positive or negative – attitude toward law enforcement than the majority of his or her congregation.



Faith-Based Organizations Have Their Own Needs:

In the same way that engaging with the faith community provides value to the agency, engaging with law enforcement provides value to the faith partner. A faith-based organization, for example, may be facing attrition in losing members, and law enforcement presence is a way of showing the larger community that the faith leader has relevancy. Ask how to help the faith leader in the discharge of their duties, understand that it's possible that an event they organize might have few attendees, and aspire toward relevancy. Also be aware that many faith-based organizations hire their own security that might not be sworn officers. Having a good relationship with this external security can be very important for trust, which requires treating them with respect.

“We have what I would call genetic memory. The fact that my grandfather or my father or my uncles may have had harsh experiences with law enforcement, which may not pertain to these individual officers, but that’s passed down to us, particularly as men. So therefore, we start as black men on the defensive posture, you have to earn our trust.”

Be Patient:

In the words of a community engagement officer that helped develop this guide: *“You can’t force relationships and you can’t force trust. You have to be patient. This is not about feel-good publicity, and that means it takes time to build deep relationships.”*

One way to start with outreach is to ask the faith leaders to undergo a simulation training or a ride-along. That is often an eye-opening experience and can help set the stage for true bridging work - with both parties better understanding the other. Another important consideration is to be a listener at times, instead of a talker. It can be okay to have awkward moments, or to sit back and allow residents to drive the discussion in whatever way they see as important.

Be Ready To Discuss Diversity:

Particularly when meeting with communities of color, be ready to discuss how the agency is already engaged in diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. Be open to feedback about what can be improved, know what statistics the agency tracks, and offer to share this information. Also remember that young people are more likely to be direct and raise challenging questions. While topics of diversity might be part of the academy, consider ongoing discussions within the agency if they are not regularly occurring so officers can engage the topic more fluently externally.

“We start off as Black men on the defensive posture. You have to earn our trust. You have to keep calling.”





Do Not Be Defensive:

In the words of a faith leader: *“Because I’m a mother, every time my son leaves the house, I’m praying, Lord, cover him and protect him.”* For some people, this fear is a part of their life and they might have stories to share of how they were mistreated by officers. Instead of saying, “we would never do that,” just listen. Let people share their experiences and respond empathetically. Law enforcement professionals should be ready to hear some negativity and show it’s welcome.

“Getting on the defensive and defending bad cops shouldn’t be your job.”

Use Humor Smartly:

Jokes can be a valuable way to create connections and to relieve tension. But they can also not land well if they engage sensitive topics. Use non-critical humor, never joke about identities, and utilize cultural competency.

Different Parts of Your Community:

The community you serve is not one size fits all. Literally one street over from another might have different needs and residents with a different perspective on law enforcement. For locales where there are tensions, start with a more reconciliatory approach such as a dialogue or holding a series of public conversations with the faith leader.

Be Ready to Ask for Help:

Share the challenges that you’re dealing with and do not be afraid to ask for help. Is the agency struggling to engage youth, or are there particular areas where crime is high? Let the faith-based organization know and offer ways they can be a partner.

“Too often, the first time anyone needs a cop is when they’ve done something wrong.”