

# **GUIDELINES FOR ARRANGING GROUP VISITS TO HOUSES OF WORSHIP**

**By JW Windland**

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### **1) Introduction**

For the past 40 years, I have been visiting houses of worship in various North American cities. My visits to mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras, temples, meditation centers and churches have proved to be a wonderful compliment to my many years of studying and teaching world religions.

One cannot really understand a faith tradition without entering into some kind of experience of that tradition. A house of worship site visit allows for just such an experience.

Inside the house of worship, one experiences the tastes, sounds, sights, smells of a faith tradition and its heritage. Here one encounters the tradition's unique culture - its music, its prayer, its beliefs, its practices, its foods, its rituals, its people. One of the benefits of such visits is that not only does one learn more about another faith tradition but one also learns about oneself and about one's own religious tradition.

Because visiting houses of worship was so meaningful and helpful to me, I decided it would be a good idea to share this experience with others. In 1994, I began organizing group visits to houses of worship in Toronto, Canada. Since then, I have organized literally hundreds of such tours.

In recent years it occurred to me that it might be helpful for others if I further shared my experience by developing a set of guidelines for arranging houses of worship site visits. I felt this could be helpful for people not just in North America but also in other parts of the world.

Because more and more regions of the world are becoming environments of multicultural and multifaith, there is now occurring a meeting of religions, an encounter of religions that is patently new to history. Religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue constitute the future of religion. The growing demand for visits to houses of worship is part of this planet-wide phenomenon of interreligious encounter.

It is my hope that the guidelines outlined below will be helpful to all who want to organize site visits to houses of worship. There are variety of audiences that show interest in site visits – high school classes, university classes, continuing education classes, congregations of any given faith tradition.

There are a number of schedule models for site visits. On a given day, the visiting group may wish to visit only one house of worship; on the other hand, it is possible for the group to visit three or four sites in one day. Through the Encounter World Religions Center in Guelph, Ontario, Canada, we sponsor an annual week-long world religions program in which the student group visits fifteen houses of worship.

Efforts to prepare the visitors prior to the site visit are essential. Preparation needs to occur on two levels:

- 1) visitors should receive some general introductory information about the faith tradition they are visiting;
- 2) visitors should receive an orientation to the etiquette of the particular house of worship – this will enable them, as guests, to be sensitive to the cultural and religious sensibilities of the given tradition.

## **2) Initiating contacts**

- All religious traditions want to have their stories told, particularly when they see that you value their stories and their place in the community of faiths. Therefore, you can feel at ease in requesting a group visit to a house of worship because virtually every religious community is welcoming to visitors.
- Before booking a group visit, visit the facility to insure that it includes the kind of features, activities and community that you want to emphasize to your visiting group.
- Become familiar with the locations of proper entrances/exits, worship hall, washrooms, coat racks, shoe shelves and other places in the facility that your group will need. When a visiting group enters unfamiliar space, its comfort level is raised if it knows that the space is already familiar to you, the organizer.
- If you would like the visitors to observe a worship service, ritual or ceremony as part of their visit, you may want to attend such a service in advance to make sure it is appropriate for your time schedule, purposes and audience.
- Clarify with your host to what extent guests are free to participate in rituals, if at all. Such involvement can range from full participation (without restriction) to simple observation only.
- Avoid requesting group visits on holy days, festivals or “busy” days. For example, Sunday is not the best day for a group visit to a Christian facility, nor Friday to a mosque, nor Saturday to a synagogue, nor the festival of Diwali to a Hindu temple.
- Request the site visit at least a month in advance of the anticipated visitation date. It may take several days for the house of worship to inform the appropriate faith leaders who will speak to your group.

## **3) Developing relationships**

- If possible, periodically attend services at the houses of worship on occasions other than the time of your group visits. This gesture serves to develop a relationship with the religious leaders and members of the chosen site; it also increases your levels of comfort, knowledge and cooperation with respect to the host community.
- Send greetings (cards or notes) to hosts, guides, lecturers, clergy or the general congregation of the house of worship on special holy days or festivals.

#### 4) Making arrangements

- **In your first effort to contact the house of worship, speak to the contact person directly – face-to-face**, if at all possible. E-mail or over-the-phone conversations are risky unless you know personally the individual whom you are contacting. Person-to-person encounters are vital in building interfaith relationships. Once a relationship has been established over a period of time, phone/e-mail arrangements may be more reliable.
- Give a clear explanation to your host regarding your expectations. For example, during the visit, what would you, as the organizer, like to have happen and what would you like the host to do? Generally, I find the following four components helpful for a one-hour tour:
  - A brief introduction to the faith tradition.
  - A tour of the facility with an explanation of what the visitors are viewing (altars, images, objects, etc.) and what roles such altars/images/objects play in the worship setting.
  - A personal statement/explanation of how being a member of the host tradition shapes one's worldview. In other words, what does it mean to be Sikh, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, etc. and how does this particular faith orientation affect the way one lives one's life?
  - A period for questions from the audience.
- Clarify for the host the age/gender/grade/knowledge level of the visitors so the presentation can be tailored to the group's needs.
- Confirm that the facilities are able to accommodate the size of your group and can meet the requirements of any special needs guests.
- If time is an issue, be clear on time requirements when booking the visit. As a general rule, approximately one hour is a comfortable length of time for a site visit.
- Clarify the length of the visit **again** when confirming the booking and **again** upon arrival at the site. Accordingly, the speaker will be clear on the length of her or his talk and thus allow time for a tour of the building and a question period.
- **Ask about etiquette.** For example, is a head covering required? If so, what is appropriate? Are head coverings provided in sufficient numbers or should guests bring their own? Should shoes be removed? If so, at what point in the building? Don't be shy to ask about these and other etiquette issues.
- Ask if there are specific areas where the guests should sit or if men and women should sit in different areas. This consideration may or may not be an issue with a simple visit, but may be more important if the visit includes a ritual.
- Clarify as to what fees are expected, if any. Some facilities have a set fee. Others have no set fee. And still others are not allowed to accept money. Inquire about how the fee may be paid (e.g. If by cheque, payable to whom? Should fees be given to someone or placed in a donation box?)
- Confirm the visit two or three days before the date, reviewing schedule and expectations with your host.
- Acquire the name of the person to whom you spoke in making the arrangements as well **as the name of the person who will meet you as host** on the day of the visit.
- Etiquette and expectations vary from site to site. To avoid an uncomfortable situation, ask rather than assume.

## 5) Preparing the visiting group

- Inform visitors about issues of modesty and appropriate dress. Dress should be respectful. Remember, **these are sacred spaces, not tourist attractions**. Short pants and sleeveless shirts are **not acceptable** for either men or women. Short skirts are not acceptable for women. Modesty should be maintained when sitting on the floor (e.g. school girls should not wear school uniform kilts to sites where guests sit on the floor.)
- T-shirts should be free of advertisements or slogans that may be offensive or uncomfortable to others, even if they are not offensive to the wearer.
- Remind guests that modesty codes are more defined and formal in some cultures. For example, certain physical gestures such as handshakes or embraces are foreign to people of some cultural and religious backgrounds. In some cultures it is inappropriate for men and women to touch. Accordingly, it is better that guests allow members of the host site to take the initiative in terms of gestures such as handshakes or other forms of touching.
- To avoid embarrassment, guests should refrain from physical displays of affection or excessive friendliness toward each other (e.g. holding hands, leaning against one another, arms across one another's shoulders, etc.) This guideline applies even for husbands and wives.
- With the visiting group, review etiquette issues that may be unique to a particular site visit, for example, the prohibition from sitting with one's feet pointing toward the deities in a Hindu temple, member-only communion in some Christian churches, head coverings, shoes on/off, etc.) If you are unfamiliar with particular points of etiquette in a given house of worship, clarify these when booking the visit.
- Smoking is absolutely prohibited at all site visits. The trip should be considered a **smoke-free day**, similar to other settings with equivalent expectations (e.g. extended plane trips, etc.)
- Guests are encouraged to ask questions. Any question is acceptable so long as it is asked respectfully.
- Hosts at some sites may ask guests to participate in specific ways in the culture of the host faith group, for example, by learning how to pronounce specific words or phrases in an unfamiliar language, by engaging in meditation or other exercises, etc.) Alert guests to these possibilities and inform them of the expectation to participate. On the other hand, it should be emphasized that any individual visitor has the right to decline participation in any practice, meditation, ritual or exercise.
- Occasionally, a meal or snack may be provided by the house of worship. Because wasting the food of a host tradition is impolite, advise guests to take only what they are prepared to eat and make every effort to eat what they take. It is acceptable to decline food or snacks.
- It is very important that all individuals remain with the larger group as the tour moves through the building. Otherwise, there is a risk of individuals becoming separated from the group and thus delaying the tour.
- Because sitting on the floor may produce an inclination to lean back or recline, remind guests that in a house of worship such a casual posture may be seen as disrespectful.
- Ask the visitors to be respectful of and attentive to the host by not talking amongst themselves during the talk or presentation.
- Encourage guests to take a washroom break before departing for the house of worship.
- Above all, keep in mind that the primary intent of the site visit is that the guests enjoy a day of learning and experience.

## 6) Getting there

- A bus is by far the best mode of transportation for a site visit.
- Car pools are problematic but are sometimes necessary. In the case of carpooling, provide **each driver** (or designated navigator) with clear maps (drawn and written directions.) [www.maps.google.com](http://www.maps.google.com) provides excellent maps.
- It is helpful if each car has at least one passenger with a cell phone - this is vital in case of emergencies or delays; the cell phone is also helpful if a vehicle takes a wrong turn or gets lost in traffic.
- Out of courtesy, phone the host of the site if you are going to be more than a few minutes late.
- If you are uncertain of the location of the house of worship, **drive to the facility in advance of the visit in order to determine the best route**; this preparatory research will alert you to the locale of the entrance and parking lots as well as to the presence of one-way streets or construction in the area. Familiarizing yourself with these logistics is particularly important when the visiting group is travelling by bus.

## 7) During the visit

- Encourage the visitors to enter the site with respect and quiet reverence.
- Be prepared, as the organizer, to ask questions during the presentation that move the discussion to topics that the class or group has reviewed previously or may have questions about. Accordingly, if the lecturer wanders off topic, you can gently and non-threateningly guide the discussion back on track by raising a question.
- Ask permission of the host before taking photos or making audio/video recordings. Ask if there are specific times or places when it is inappropriate to take photos. Sometimes, visitors are allowed to take photos that do not require a flash. Clarify all these issues in advance. **Do not assume that you are permitted to take photos.**
- Some traditions have a prohibition against eating in the house of worship (apart from sanctioned food as a part of a ritual). Chewing gum, candy, breath mints, even cough drops qualify as food. Visitors should dispose of such items before entering the house of worship.
- Instruct guests to turn off all cell phones, beepers, pagers, wristwatch alarms and other electronic devices that may sound during the visit.
- Earphones from iPods and other electronic devices should be removed.
- Inform the facility host if there are individuals in your group who are unable to sit on the floor. In such a case, a chair is quite appropriate and will be gladly provided.
- Encourage the members of your group to stand or sit close to the host so they can clearly see and hear.
- Although you should encourage guests to take a washroom break before departing for the house of worship, washrooms will still be needed by your group when you arrive. Upon arrival, point out the locale of the restrooms and provide an opportunity for washroom visits before the program begins. This discipline serves to avoid disruptions later in the program. You may want to invite use of the washroom as you leave the site to avoid making a washroom visit the first requirement at the next site visit.
- When visiting a facility that requires visitors to remove their shoes, keep in mind that **shoes should be worn in the washroom**. Some facilities may permit the wearing of one's regular street shoes in the washroom; others may require the wearing of flip-flops or other sandal-type

shoes which are provided and located outside the washroom doors. To avoid an awkward situation, clarify these issues with the host in advance of the visit.

- As organizer of the visit, you need to keep in mind that the tour is for the group's benefit, not your own. Therefore, position yourself at the back of the group or at some other vantage point where you may unobtrusively monitor behaviour and the program so as to facilitate a pleasant experience for both host and guests.
- Make sure that the group remains together as a body as it moves throughout the site.
- Be vigilant about your time schedule. You may need to express politely appreciation for the host's time and contribution and then respectfully explain that the visit must end, particularly if the group is expected at another site visit where another host is awaiting you.

## **8) Follow-up**

- Once you have left the facility, it is helpful to provide a time and locale for the group to debrief and evaluate the experience. This process enables the members of the group to clarify questions, identify major learning points and discuss any uncomfortable issues raised by the visit.
- You may want to provide your group with an address or website of the house of worship so that individuals can visit again on their own or learn more about the tradition.
- At some point following the visit, have a brief conversation with the host to determine how future visits can be made even more mutually beneficial.
- Express your appreciation to the host. A phone call, a voicemail message, an e-mail message or note of thanks (signed by yourself or the entire group) directed to the host is always appreciated and is good preparation for the next visit.

## **9) About the author**

**JW Windland** (1949 – 2014) made a major contribution to world religions education in North America. A comparative mythologist, JW founded the Encounter World Religions Centre in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. The Encounter Centre is an internationally recognized educational organization designated as a "Gift Of Service To The World" by the Parliament of World Religions.

JW had more than 40 years of experience in the study, teaching and first-hand experience of world religions. In addition to his academic background in religious studies, he regularly attended mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras, churches and temples as a testimony to his appreciation of world religions. This background gave him a perspective that was unique and tangible. He had genuine friendships with the practitioners of these traditions, joined in their rituals and introduced thousands of people to the winnowed wisdom of diverse communities. JW was a specialist in interreligious dialogue and created comfort across religious and cultural borders. He also lectured internationally to universities, churches, community groups and professional organizations. JW brought a familiarity and a deep knowledge of the many religious traditions that make up the North American mosaic.

If you would like to learn more about the Encounter Center, here is the contact information:

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