THE USE OF LANGUAGE

1. People generally assume that when they use a particular term, everyone ascribes the same meaning to the term. This is almost never the case.

Whenever a significant term comes up during the dialogue, ask a few people for their definition. Discuss the various definitions.

2. In dialogue, people may use language which implies that their belief system is normative for everyone.

This is often done without realizing it. Other members of the dialogue group should point out these examples when they occur.

3. Every religious tradition has its unique terms and concepts. Some of these may be difficult or offensive for members of other traditions. No one in the dialogue group wants to intentionally offend anyone else. Offensive statements are made out of ignorance.

Don't hesitate to point it out when a term or concept is problematic. Explore why this is so.

4. In particular, the term "truth" can create difficulties. In a religious context, "truth" is often taken to be absolute, therefore there can be only one truth. What is true for one person, however, is not necessarily true for another.

In interfaith settings, it's best to consider religious "truths" to be partial rather than absolute. By sharing our concepts of the truth, we can learn from each other.

5. Another questionable term is "tolerance." In engineering terms, "tolerance" is defined as the amount of *error* we are willing to accept. This is not a good basis for interfaith relations.

"Understanding" and "respect" are better terms to use.

6. It's the responsibility of everyone in the group to learn to avoid offending other members. Conversely, it's the responsibility of everyone in the group to be slow to take offense.

Use misunderstandings as bridges to building community. The object is to learn from each other.