



ICNY
Interfaith Center of New York

***Learning from Your Neighbors’
Sacred Spaces: A Practical Guide to Leading
Student Site Visits to Houses of Worship***

**Dr. Henry Goldschmidt
Director of Programs, Interfaith Center of New York
Religious Worlds of New York Summer Institute**

<https://interfaithcenter.org>

<https://religiousworldsnyc.org>

Fundamental Goals of a Visit

What do you want students to gain from the experience?

- Content **knowledge** about religion?
- Critical thinking, analytic, or field research **skills**?
- Longer-term **relationships** with faith community partners?
- **Character** education? (empathy, tolerance, and other important traits)
- Explore their own **faith or spirituality**?
(not appropriate in public schools)
- Countless **other things** – not an exclusive list!

Think carefully and plan accordingly. Give your students a sense of why they are going, but don't be heavy-handed about it – their experiences will *always* exceed and complicate whatever interpretive frame you establish.



Students from an all-girls Catholic high school in Rye, NY, with one of the imams at the Islamic Cultural Center of New York

Different Types of Visits

What do you want students to do while they're there?

- Walking tour?
- Speak with a community leader?
- Observe a prayer service?
- Participate in prayer or meditation?
- Photography or arts project?
- Self-directed or independent fieldwork?
- Service-learning or volunteering?
- Countless other things!

Keep in mind the distinction between **observation** and **participation** during site visits.

Public schools *cannot* require, encourage, or facilitate student participation in religious practice – it's a clear violation of the First Amendment. Independent and faith-based schools can do so, but teachers may want to create an opt-out process and alternative assignment for students who may be reluctant to participate in activities they feel are prohibited by their faith.



K-12 teachers explore the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, at the *Religious Worlds of New York* summer institute.

Place Sites in Broader Contexts

It is essential for students to understand that the house of worship they visit does not single-handedly represent an entire faith tradition. ***There's no one way to build a mosque or be a Muslim!*** (ditto other faith traditions of course)

Religious diversity education should consistently stress the diversity within every faith tradition and community – racial, ethnic, gendered, doctrinal, denominational, etc.

Prior to a site visit, you may want to share and discuss photos of the site you are planning to visit, and **compare it to other houses of worship in the same faith tradition.**

It's impossible to introduce all of the diversity within a faith community, but students need to know it's there.



Students from a public high school in the Bronx, at the China Buddhist Association in Flushing, Queens



K-12 teachers observing a Vodou ceremony at the Centre Culturel, Spirituel, et Traditionnel in Brooklyn

Pedagogic and Ethical Issues

Learning from Discomfort

Discomfort and anxiety can be important parts of experiential learning – “culture shock” can unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions. But students should never be made to feel that an encounter with religious diversity threatens their sense of self or personal integrity.

For example, student discomfort with gender-segregated prayer or veiling is great, but maybe not for non-binary students.

Observation versus Voyeurism

Observing a prayer service at an unfamiliar house of worship can be a transformative learning experience, but students must be cautioned not to see community members as exotic curiosities or passive objects.

Ask your students why community leaders invited them – what does the community gain from their visit? Give students a written assignment to encourage academic focus. Have students write thank you notes to community leaders they meet.



Fordham University students with a resident monk at the Chogyesa Zen Temple of New York – with “palms together” at the monk’s request

Practical, Nuts and Bolts Advice

Subways and traffic are unpredictable – always leave more time than you think you need.

If at all possible, **visit the site yourself before bringing students**, and talk with community leaders about your learning goals and expectations.

Find out about **appropriate dress**, and prepare your students in advance. Students should not be surprised by removing their shoes or covering their hair.

Find out about other **guidelines for guests** – eg. no non-kosher food at an orthodox synagogue, not even in your bookbag.

More broadly, remind your students to **behave as honored guests** when visiting other people's sacred spaces – beware of fieldtrip wiggles and giggles.

Remember that site visits are **multi-day learning experiences**. They require preparation in advance, debrief and discussion afterwards, and ideally an assignment that integrates the visit into your curriculum. It's a big project, but worth it!



K-12 teachers explore the “Bronx Lourdes” grotto, at the *Religious Worlds of New York* summer institute

Last but Actually First . . . Making Contact with Local Faith Communities

It's not as hard as you might think!

- Some large houses of worship have info for visitors on their **websites**, or **staff people** to help
- Local **nonprofit organizations** can sometimes help – faith-based orgs or an interfaith council
- Contacts at **your school** – faculty colleagues, faith-based clubs, diversity/inclusion staff, your students (but don't put students on the spot)
- **Cold calls or emails often work!** Most religious leaders are delighted to host visits and meet students. Sometimes for evangelism (tricky to negotiate), but more often out of a desire to be seen, heard, and understood by their neighbors.

Just be sure to **leave enough time** for busy community leaders to get back to you – don't reach out the week before the visit. And let's be honest, **honoraria/donations don't hurt** (plus they show respect for people's time and energy).

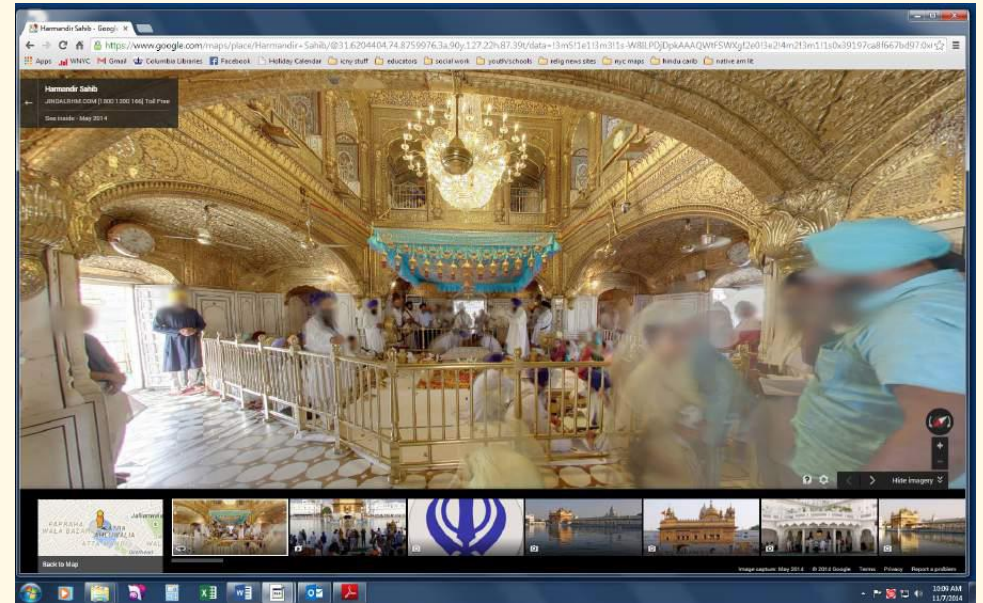


Site visits require planning,
not prayer.

ps, Virtual Site Visits

Online, **virtual site visits** can offer some elements of student-centered experiential education, with safe social distance.

- **Google Maps & Google Earth** offer 360° [tours of religious sites](#) throughout the world, but probably not in your neighborhood.
- **YouTube** offers countless videos of religious practice in diverse communities, created by both [academics](#) and [community members](#).
- Over the course of the COVID pandemic, many faith communities (but not all) shifted to **online forms of religious practice**. Easily accessible for students, but if it's on a closed platform (like Zoom, as opposed to Facebook Live) be sure to ask community leaders before students log on.



The Golden Temple in Amritsar, in 360° on Google Maps

These are important resources, but there's something missing when students don't actually meet their neighbors, or have full-bodied experiences of religious diversity.

Want to Learn More?

Email us with any Questions or Comments

institute@interfaithcenter.org

Check out Resources for Teachers

<https://religiousworldsnyc.org/resources>

Apply to Participate in the Next

Religious Worlds of New York Summer Institute for Teachers

<https://religiousworldsnyc.org>