

Welcoming the Community: Open House Event Gurdwara Toolkit

The intention of this event is to invite local elected officials, law enforcement officers, interfaith members, and educators to the gurdwara so that they can learn more about Sikhs and begin to build lasting relationships with the community.

ATTENDEES

Non-Sikhs

- Local and/or state elected officials
- City Sheriff and/or Police Chief
- Federal government personnel (Department of Education, Department of Justice, Equal Employment and Opportunity Commission, etc.)
- Members from faith based communities present in your city
- Local superintendents/principals
- Reporters from the local TV stations/newspapers; might need to target specifically religion reporters

Sikhs

- Khalsa school principal/teacher
- Interfaith organization members
- Respected Sikhs in the community who are known to non-Sikhs

INVITATIONS

At least one month before the event, paper or email invitations should be sent to all invitees. Sample invitation language is below:

*We cordially invite you to an Open House Event at
Gurdwara of the Americas (Sikh house of worship)
Anywhere, USA
September 14, 2012
6:00 pm – 8:00 pm
Hosted by the families of the Gurdwara of the Americas*

You will be our honored guest as we recognize and appreciate community leaders and get to know one another.

Please RSVP to attending@gurdwara.com by September 1, 2012.

You can print formal invitation cards with a detailed program for the evening. Alternatively, e-invitations can also be emailed to each guest. The invitations should include an RSVP email address.

RSVP

As guests RSVP to the event, please email them directions to the gurdwara and language on how to dress and what to expect when arriving at the gurdwara. Below is some suggested language:

- Attire: Wear comfortable clothes which allow you to sit on the floor and stand up easily. Since this is a house of worship, please dress modestly and appropriately.

- Arrival: When you enter the gurdwara , you will be asked to remove your shoes and cover your head as a sign of respect. You can choose to leave your socks on, if you prefer. Bandanas will be provided, but you are welcome to bring your own bandana or scarf with you.
- Seating: Some if not all of the events will be conducted in a hall where you will be asked to sit on the floor. Please let us know if you are medically unable to sit on the floor, and alternate arrangements will be made for you.
- We ask that you not drink alcohol or smoke on the gurdwara premises.

Send another email with this information the day before the event. You also might want to include a brief outline of the Program (please see below).

PROGRAM

You might consider creating a program for your guests. This program should include the timeline of events, and speakers' names and titles. An additional page could include key terms that they might have questions about in a gurdwara setting. The program could also include a list of frequently asked questions and answers. We have created a "Key Terms" and "Frequently Asked Questions" handout which are the last two pages of this toolkit.

VENUE

Some gurdwaras will prefer to host this event all in one room – the diwaan hall or the langar hall. Some might prefer to have the group move from the diwaan hall to the langar hall once the formal presentation portion begins. You will need to decide what venue is appropriate for you based on your gurdwara's needs/policies.

MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

As soon as you have determined the date and believe the event will be well-attended, please feel free to contact your local media to cover the event, **as long as you believe media coverage will not interfere with the event or building relationships.** A gurdwara in Turlock, CA was able to do engage media successfully. To read the article, please click [here](#).

VOLUNTEERS

- Depending on how many people you are expecting at the event, there should be four to eight greeters/ushers who arrive at least 30 minutes prior to the event. These volunteers will be responsible for greeting your guests as they approach the gurdwara, directing them to where they can remove their shoes and cover their head, helping them tie their bandanas, and walking them into the diwaan hall. Please ensure that you are providing clean bandanas and scarves. Volunteers should arrive at least 30 minutes before your first guest arrives. Volunteers should wear something distinctive so that they are easily recognized. For example, they can wear a name tag, a special shirt, bright color dastar/chunis, etc. They should also assist your guests when they move from one area of the gurdwara to another.
- If you are organizing the event by stations, there should be at least one volunteer that stays with each group and leads them from one station to the next (please see Sample Agenda 1 below).
- Group Leader – These are volunteers that are assigned to each of the major groups present at the event: interfaith members, educators, law enforcement, elected officials, etc. The Group Leader volunteer will stay close to the group they are assigned for the duration of the event. This volunteer will lead them from one area to the next, and answer any questions they have during the event. It's important to find group leaders who have experience working with that demographic. For example, assign a Sikh teacher to the educator's group or a Sikh interfaith member to the interfaith group.
- Langar - Please have several English-speaking volunteers on hand to explain what ingredients were used in preparing each item served in langar for those with dietary restrictions (milk, nuts, gluten, etc.) and

for those guests that have questions about the food itself. It is important for these volunteers to know the English names for the items served.

WELCOME TABLE

Sign-In Sheet – Have your guests sign in as soon as they arrive. The sign-in sheet should include fields for their name, title, phone number, and email address. You can also include columns for “Would you like a Sikh presentation done for your colleagues?” and “Would you like a Sikh representative to follow up with you after the event?” A person should be designated to follow up with all the guests that checked each column.

If you live in the Bay Area, Washington DC Metro Area, New York or New Jersey, the Coalition has trained volunteer presenters in those areas. You just need to email education@sikhcoalition.org, and we will arrange for one of those volunteer presenters to deliver the presentation titled, “Who Are The Sikhs?” If you do not live in those areas, you can access and deliver the presentation yourself by clicking on the link for “Sikh Awareness Presentation” in the Resources section below.

Folders – Please create folders for your guests that they can pick up at the Welcome Table. These folders can include:

- [‘The Sikhs’ Brochure](#)
- [Sikh Awareness Presentation](#) (for them to follow along during the presentation)
- [How Bullying Affects Sikh Students](#)
- [Fact Sheet on Post 9/11 Discrimination Against Sikhs](#)

TIPS FOR HOSTING A SUCCESSFUL EVENT:

- When selecting the date for the event, please consider your gurdwara’s calendar of events. Do not host this event on a regularly scheduled diwaan, or during an *akhand path*, and definitely not a gurpurab. There are several reasons for this idea. First, if the event is on the same day as a regular diwaan, the number of people will be too many to manage. You should devote all your energies to making sure your guests will be taken care of, and this becomes difficult when dealing with a large crowd. Second, since the entire event will be held in English, the Sikhs who are expecting a gurdwara service including *kirtan* and *katha*, might not appreciate an event in English. Third, conducting an *akhand path* during the event makes it harder to give the guests a tour of the gurdwara, listen to *kirtan*, etc. unless the *akhand path* can occur in a room that is separated from the diwaan hall.
- Begin on time. In order to maintain the professionalism of the event, and have respect for your guests’ time, you need to begin the event at the designated time listed on the invitation.
- When selecting speakers for the event, please keep in mind that because you are inviting non-Sikhs, you need to appoint speakers who are excellent English speakers. You should also have a good mix of both male and female speakers and old and young speakers.
- One of the objectives of this event is to educate your guests about Sikhs, and show them how a typical gurdwara service is conducted. For that reason, it is not essential to have too many gurdwara management committee members speak. A few words from both the president and the Khalsa school administrator will suffice.
- Langar – please be aware of the potential dietary restrictions of your guests. Even though the langar will be vegetarian (no meat/eggs), there are still other dietary needs to be mindful of. For example, for those that have a gluten allergy, they will not be able to have any *roti* or *parshad*. For those that are vegan or lactose intolerant, they will not be able to partake of any food with dairy. This includes *dhey* (yogurt), *paneer* (cheese), or even *mithai* (sweets) that are made with milk. Please have several English-

speaking volunteers on hand to explain what ingredients were used in preparing each item served in langar.

- It is not necessary to have any non-Sikhs *matha tek* that day. You can certainly explain what it means to bow down before the Guru Granth Sahib, but it not necessary for them to do the same.
- The act of taking *parshad*, as we know, is a Sikh's act of accepting the *hukam* of the day. For non-Sikhs, and especially Christians, this can be seen as accepting a sacrament or communion, and they might not want to take the *parshad*. This should be allowed, as we do not want anyone to feel uncomfortable. If he/she asks what *parshad* is, the definition provided in the "Key Words" document can be used.

POSTER DISPLAYS – The Rochester Hill gurdwara in Michigan created [these posters](#). You can get information to create your own poster displays from the following:

- [Sikh Coalition Educator Resources](#)
- [About Sikhs](#)
- [Sikhism: At a Glance](#)
- [Fact Sheet on Post 9/11 Discrimination Against Sikhs](#)

TWO AGENDA OPTIONS

Several gurdwaras across the country have hosted this type of an event before. Sometimes this has consisted of a 2 hour program where all attendees go through the whole program together as a group, and sometimes there are different stations set up at the gurdwara and attendees rotate from one station to the next. This toolkit provides a sample agenda for both types of events.

SAMPLE AGENDA 1

*Please note, this agenda is for an open house event where attendees are broken into different groups, and these groups rotate from one “Sikh station” to another, learning various aspects of Sikhism and the gurdwara.

Time	Length	Description
6:00 pm	10 minutes	Welcome/Sikh Speaker Introductions/Guest Speaker Introductions
6:10 pm	5 minutes	Divide the guests into groups, and assign each group a starting station. The GROUP LEADER volunteer will need to direct their group on where and when to move from one station to the next.
6:15 pm	60 minutes	4 Station Rotation. Station A: Shabad and translation/explanation of a typical gurdwara service Station B: Sikh Awareness Presentation Station C: Post 9/11 Bias: Workplace Discrimination, Hate Crimes, Profiling, Bullying & Live or written testimonials from Sikhs Station D: *Movie
7:15	5 minutes	[Direct your guests back to the main room.]
7:20	20 minutes	Question and Answer session
7:40	20 minutes	Speakers – Superintendent, Chief of Police, Elected officials, leaders of faith based groups, etc.
8:00	30 minutes	**Langar

*You can show excerpts from a variety of movies. The following are some suggestions:

- [Dastaar](#)
- [Meet the Sikhs](#)

**During langar, have the GROUP LEADER volunteers sit with each of the different groups – interfaith members, educational administrators, law enforcement, elected officials, etc. and have them engage in dialogue with them about how to be better connected with the Sikh community; encourage these volunteers to exchange business cards with these community leaders and follow up with them after the event.

SAMPLE AGENDA 2

*Please note, this agenda is for an open house event where all attendees participate in the general program at the same time.

Time	Length	Description
6:00 pm	15 minutes	Welcome/Sikh Speaker Introductions/Guest Speaker Introductions
6:15 pm	15 minutes	Shabad/translation/explanation of kirtan and importance to Sikhi
6:30 pm	5 minutes	[At this point, you can transition from the diwaan hall to the langar hall, if necessary.]
6:35 pm	20 minutes	Sikh Awareness Presentation
6:55	20 minutes	Post 9/11 Bias – Workplace Discrimination, Hate Crimes, Profiling, Bullying & live or written testimonials from Sikhs
7:15	20 minutes	Question and Answer session
7:35	20 minutes	Speakers – Superintendent, Chief of Police, Elected officials, leaders of faith based groups, etc.
7:55	30 minutes	*Langar

*During langar, have the GROUP LEADER volunteers sit with each of the different groups – interfaith members, educational administrators, law enforcement, elected officials, etc. and have them engage in dialogue with them about how to be better connected with the Sikh community; encourage these volunteers to exchange business cards with these community leaders and follow up with them after the event.

SESSION INFORMATION

Objectives:

- Know that Sikhism is an independent faith, and is not a branch or blend of any other religion.
- Know that Sikhism is the fifth largest world religion.
- Understand the reason why Sikhs wear the turban.
- Appreciate Sikhs which will lead to a decrease in bias, discrimination, and bullying.
- Understand that Sikhs are Americans and can be found in many different professions. Sikhs have contributed to this country's growth and development, both past and present.
- Have strategies for greater communication and trust-building.

Sikh Awareness Presentation Session

1. [Sikh Awareness PowerPoint Presentation](#)
2. [Sikh Awareness PowerPoint Presentation Talking Points](#)

Post 9/11 Bias – Workplace Discrimination, Hate Crimes, Profiling, Bullying

1. [Fact Sheet on Post 9/11 Discrimination Against Sikhs](#)
2. [How Bullying Affects Sikh Students](#) - This document reviews the statistics on Sikh bullying as well as suggestions for educators on what they can do to prevent and respond to bullying at their school.
3. Live or written testimonials from Sikhs that have been bullied should be read aloud to the group.

Movies

1. [Dastaar](#)
2. [Meet the Sikhs](#)

THANK YOU, FEEDBACK, & GOODY BAG

Encourage your guests to fill out a short feedback form before they leave. This form can be anonymous. You can ask questions such as:

- What part of the event did you enjoy the most/dislike?
- What changes would you propose?
- Was the event too short/too long/just right?
- Would you recommend this event to your colleagues?
- Did you learn anything? If yes, please be specific.

After they have completed the feedback form, you might want to send your guests home with something that will remind them of the event. The following are some suggestions:

- Thank you note signed by gurdwara president
- Book on basic Sikh beliefs intended for non-Sikhs
- Thank you mug/water bottle with your gurdwara's name

Have volunteers stationed at the exit to thank the educators for attending the event and hand them a gift or goody bag as they leave the gurdwara.

OKAY, WE'RE DONE! NOW WHAT?

Thank You – After the event, send an email to your guests thanking them for coming to the Open House event.

Educators – All efforts should be made to continue this dialogue between Sikhs and the educators that you invited. Follow up with the educators if any of them indicated that they want Sikh presentations in their classroom (on the sign-in sheet). If you live in the Bay Area, Washington DC Metro Area, New York or New Jersey, the Coalition has trained volunteer presenters in those areas. You just need to email education@sikhcoalition.org, and we will arrange for one of those volunteer presenters to deliver the presentation titled, “Who Are The Sikhs?”

If you do not live in those areas, you can access and deliver the presentation yourself by clicking on the link for “Sikh Awareness Presentation” in the Resources section above.

Interfaith Community – All efforts should be made to visit other faith’s houses of worship after the event. A good starting point would be to contact the attendees from the open house, and ask them to give you a tour/show you a typical service at their church, synagogue, mosque, etc. This is very important for our community for several reasons: a) It shows how open Sikhs are and our willingness to not only teach about our faith, but learn about theirs, too; and b) it provides another opportunity for us to show others how much we have in common with them and teach their congregation about Sikhs as well.

Sikh Coalition Feedback – After you have successfully hosted this event at your gurdwara, we would love to hear from you! Please send us your detailed feedback on what worked, what didn’t, and any other suggestions to education@sikhcoalition.org. Please include your name, gurdwara name and address, and date of the event. Your valuable feedback will help us make this an even more effective resource for other sangats to use.

KEY TERMS

Akhand Path – This is a non-stop, continuous recital of the *Guru Granth Sahib* from beginning to end and is normally completed within 48 hours. *Akhand Paths* usually occur around important historical dates on the Sikh calendar or even personal celebrations such as a loved one’s anniversary, birthday, etc.

Chunni – One type of Sikh head covering which is worn by women which is a long scarf; also called a *dupatta*.

Granthi/Giani – A person who has studied the Sikh scriptures extensively, and is available in the Gurdwaras as a teacher. They often lead a congregation, but members from the congregation can also perform the same ceremonies.

Gurdwara – A Sikh house of worship and learning.

Guru Granth Sahib – Considered the present-day Guru of the Sikhs. It is 1430 pages, and Sikh services consist of reading and singing from the scripture.

Keertan – Singing and musical performance of passages from the *Guru Granth Sahib* to express love and devotion to God.

Khalsa – Community of initiated Sikhs; a Sikh chooses – at any time – to take part in an initiation which is a public declaration and private commitment to adopt the Sikh lifestyle and external uniform. This uniform consists of the five Sikh articles of faith. They are: 1) *Kesh* (uncut hair), which is kept covered by a distinctive turban, 2) the *Kirpan* (religious sword), 3) *Kara* (metal bracelet), 4) *Kanga* (comb) and 5) *Kachera* (under-shorts).

Khalsa School – *Gurdwaras* with many congregants often have schools, and classes generally take place on Sundays. Classes may focus on Sikh history, reading/writing *Punjabi*, and/or learning musical instruments.

Langar – Food that is open to everyone, cooked by the members of the community, and served to all people in that congregation. It is eaten while sitting on the ground, to demonstrate the equality of all people, irrespective of caste, religion, race, sex, etc.

Matha Tek – To bow as a means of showing deep respect and humility for the teachings contained in the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Parshad – A sweet pudding made from flour, butter and sugar which is offered in the presence of *Guru Granth Sahib* after a passage is read setting forth instruction for the day. It is understood and experienced as a blessing from the *Guru*. When a Sikh accepts *parshad*, he/she is agreeing to follow the “order of the day”.

Patka – One type of Sikh head covering worn by younger boys. It is considered an article of faith.

Punjabi – The native language of the residents of Punjab, both in India and Pakistan. Most Sikhs speak *Punjabi*.

Turban – One type of Sikh head covering that is considered an article of faith. Turbans can be worn by men and women and can come in various colors, shapes, and sizes according to one’s personal preference.

Waheguru – Literally means ‘Wonderful Lord’. Most common word used in reference to God. However, there are several different names for God given in the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Who can visit a Gurdwara?

Everyone is welcome at a *Gurdwara* regardless of their race, religion, color or class. This goes back to one of the basic principles of the Sikh faith: equality.

Do you have to be a Sikh to read the Guru Granth Sahib?

The *Guru Granth Sahib* is open to anyone who wishes to read and learn from it.

Do Sikhs have a clergy? What about Granthis or Gianis?

No. Sikh gurus were very clear about each Sikh making her or his own journey and not depending on a clergy to show them the way. Sikhs do, however, have *Granthis* or *Gianis*. These are people who have studied the Sikh scriptures extensively, and are available in the *Gurdwaras* as teachers. They often lead a congregation, but members from the congregations – both men and women - can also perform the same ceremonies and are often encouraged to do so.

Can women execute duties in a Gurdwara or congregation?

Yes. Sikhism does not delineate/define certain tasks to only men or only women. A woman can lead or take part in any service or ceremony just as a man would.

Why are men and women divided into separate sections while sitting in the Gurdwara?

Sikh Gurus always taught equality between the sexes. For instance, the Gurus decried the cultural climate that denied women access to religion and gave women equal rights as men in all spheres. In Sikh congregations, men and women are asked to sit side by side—women on one side of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and men on the other. There are both practical and cultural reasons for this practice. Since everyone sits on the floor, often unintentionally touching the person next to them when there is a large congregation, having such interaction with the member of the opposite gender is frequently inappropriate in the cultural context in which Sikhism arose. However, in some smaller *Gurdwaras*, men and women may be seen sitting mixed in the congregation.

Langar – what is it? Why is it always on the floor?

Langar is communal cooking, eating and sharing. The Sikh Gurus instituted the unique Sikh practice of *Langar*. *Langar* is food that is cooked by the members of the community and served by members of the community, to all people at the *Gurdwara*. *Langar* is eaten while sitting on the ground. The idea is to demonstrate equality of all people, irrespective of caste, creed, religion, race or sex. When Sikhism was sprouting in the South Asian subcontinent, the caste system stratified society. Higher castes would sit on stools and chairs and eat, while the lowest castes were not allowed to eat even in the same room, and usually on the floor, away from sight. The Gurus wanted Sikhs to always practice egalitarianism and communal responsibility. *Langar* represents one of the institutions the Gurus founded to break down caste barriers.

Is there an official Sikh greeting?

The tenth Sikh Guru instructed Sikhs to greet each other with “*Waheguru ji ka Khalsa, Waheguru ji ki Fateh!*” which means the *Khalsa*, the Initiated Sikhs, belong to the Timeless, Immortal Power, and every victory of the *Khalsa*, is a victory of the Supreme Power!). Another common Sikh greeting is *Sat Sri Akal!* “The Timeless, Immortal Power, is the Truth”.