



THE SIMEON INITIATIVE'S YEAR OF ENCOUNTER

A joint project of Cardus and
Clal - The National Jewish Center
for Learning and Leadership

Session 4 **Dignity**

Facilitators' Guide



SESSION 4: DIGNITY FACILITATORS' GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

This session focuses on dignity as something made real through how we treat one another, especially when difference or vulnerability are present. In Jewish and Christian traditions alike, dignity is not conferred by status, but rooted in the theological conviction that every human being bears divine worth, created in the image and likeness of God. Antisemitism fundamentally violates this principle by dehumanizing and isolating Jews. To confront it meaningfully, we must move beyond statements of concern and ask how dignity is affirmed—or denied—through everyday actions, social norms, and communal choices.

Today's session invites participants to explore dignity not only through study, but through service. By working together to serve those in need, the two congregations practice honoring the dignity of others through presence, care, and shared responsibility. Service teaches us to improve our encounters with others, building a human connection. As we learn from our sacred texts and from one another, we ask what it means to stand with those who are vulnerable, how communities can restore an awareness of their true dignity when it has been violated, and how this commitment might shape our shared response to antisemitism and the kind of society we seek to build together.

PROGRAM GOALS

1. Participants will explore concrete ways their congregations can uphold dignity in the face of social marginalization.
2. Participants will deepen their understanding of the core Jewish and Christian belief that every human being has divine worth, and how antisemitism violates this principle by dehumanizing both individuals and communities.
3. Participants will embody dignity across differences through presence, service, and shared responsibility, rather than intention alone.
4. Participants will experience working side by side in order to build mutual trust.



AGENDA

Time	Activity	Description
15 minutes	Opening: Shared Commitments	Setting context and shared commitments for our time together.
20-25 minutes	Spiritual Inspiration	Learn teachings from our two faith traditions about today's program topic, noticing how they are similar and how they are different.
60-120 minutes	Shared Activity: Serving Those in Need	The two congregations will come together to volunteer serving those in need in your town or city.
20 minutes	Closing Reflection: Listening Pairs	Reflect together on our experience today. Learn how today's experience has impacted members of the other faith and consider how it has impacted us. Set goals for how to take this learning into the future.

FACILITATORS GUIDE

OPENING: SHARED COMMITMENTS (15 MINUTES)

1. Gather in a suitable room for the group discussion. Set the chairs in a circle if possible, so that participants can see each other.
2. Welcome everyone to the program. (5 min)
 - Facilitator(s) introduce yourselves to the group with your name, which congregation you are from, and briefly why you wanted to be here today.
 - Introduce the Simeon Initiative and the Year of Encounter. You can read the below text aloud or summarize it. (It is also in the participant handout.)

In the last decade, and especially since the horrific attacks in Israel on October 7, 2023, Canada has seen a significant rise in antisemitism. In 2024, Father Deacon Andrew Bennett of Cardus launched the [Canadian Christian Declaration on Antisemitism](#), a statement by Christian leaders across denominations committing Christians to stand publicly with the Jewish community against rising anti-Jewish hatred. Within two months, more than 700 clergy and faith leaders had added their names and The Simeon Initiative was born.

In June 2025, more than one hundred Jewish and Christian leaders from across Canada gathered in Toronto for the Simeon Initiative Jewish-Christian Leaders Summit. Rabbis, pastors, and lay leaders had thoughtful and candid conversations about antisemitism and the responsibilities their communities share, as well as both common ground and theological difference. Out of that gathering came a commitment to bring the same spirit of encounter into local communities.

What is The Year of Encounter?

The Year of Encounter invites Christian and Jewish congregations to form partnerships grounded in friendship, learning, and trust. Participating congregations commit to a year of shared experiences designed to deepen understanding and build enduring relationships across differences.

This work is both personal and collective. On the local level, it begins with conversations, meals, and study. On the national level, it reflects a growing recognition among Christian leaders that antisemitism should not be a Jewish problem, but one that Christians have a particular responsibility to confront. By entering into a genuine relationship with Jewish neighbours, Christian congregations can begin to repair what has been broken in our society and model a faith that stands against hatred, with humility and resolve.

3. Depending on the size of the group, go around for introductions. (5-10 minutes)
 - Less than 10 people: Go around one by one and have people introduce themselves, say which congregation they are from, and share (briefly!) why they wanted to be here today.
 - 10 or more people: Put people into pairs or trios to introduce themselves with name, which congregation they are from, and why they wanted to be here today.

4. Shared Commitments (5 min)
 - Give everyone a copy of the Session Handout, which includes Shared Commitments.
 - Facilitator introduces the idea that we are here because of shared commitments. “We want to encourage ourselves and each other to have meaningful, real encounters in this group today. These are not always easy things to do, but we believe they will lay the groundwork for authentic and impactful cross-communal learning. We are going to go around and each person please read one of the commitments in the Year of Encounter Shared Commitments handout we’ve given you.”
 - Go around and have a different member of the group read each item on the sheet.
 - Ask: “Is there anything anyone would like to add to this list?”
 - Then: “Do we all feel that we can commit to these principles? Please raise your hands to show your agreement.”

SPIRITUAL REFLECTION (20-25 MINUTES)

1. Facilitators introduce the Spiritual Reflection section of the program. You can read the below or use your own words.

“We will now draw upon some sacred texts from each of our faiths about the topic of Dignity. The goal is to see both commonalities and differences, to learn about each other, and to inspire ourselves in the work of Jewish-Christian encounter.

We hope you will share from your heart and your own personal experience, and know that you don't need to feel like you are representing your whole faith.”

2. Facilitators share a little bit about how your faith reads texts – Christian and Jewish traditions read and experience sacred texts quite differently, and it is helpful to the participants to understand a little about this.
 - Judaism: Here are some examples of things the Jewish facilitator might want to share about how Judaism traditionally approaches sacred text:
 - The fullest understanding comes from reading in the original Hebrew or Aramaic.
 - We learn in pairs because better understanding is seen to come from conversation and argumentation.
 - Each word can be considered intentional and sacred and therefore used in interpreting the verse.
 - Reading with commentaries from other generations adds to our understanding.
 - Each person has the potential to come up with a new and important understanding or interpretation, and interpretation and elaboration is praiseworthy.
 - We can learn from the text what God is trying to teach us about how to live our lives.
 - The Jewish legal tradition springs from the Hebrew Bible, but is further developed over the centuries through legal compendiums such as the Mishna (circa 200 C.E.), the Talmud (circa 600 C.E.), and other medieval and modern collections of law.
 - Christianity: Here are some examples of things the Christian facilitator might want to share about how Christianity traditionally approaches sacred text:
 - Catholics and Orthodox principally engage Biblical texts in a liturgical context where they are organized into a lectionary based around the church year. Additionally, some will read the Holy Scriptures contemplatively as part of their personal prayer through *lectio divina*. Holy Tradition, how the Church has interpreted these texts, is a parallel source of authority.
 - This is less common among the majority of Protestants for whom reading scripture is frequently individual or small-group based, emphasizing personal discernment and spiritual guidance and with the belief that the Holy Spirit guides interpretation. They place little to no emphasis on tradition as authoritative.
 - Scripture is usually engaged in the language of the reader, with the understanding that translation can convey the meaning without knowledge of Aramaic, Hebrew, or Greek.

- The focus is more often on what the text means about how to live one's life, rather than debate about historical, linguistic, or communal contexts.
 - Christians read Scripture, including the Hebrew Bible ("Tanach"), through the lens of Jesus, understanding earlier texts as part of a larger story that culminates in Christ. The text is read as a unified story in which God's relationship with humanity unfolds over time.
3. Jewish Facilitator teach the Jewish text. Christian Facilitator teach the Christian text.
Open for discussion.
- Suggested teaching points and discussion questions are below and on the handout.
 - Feel free to modify to match your own teaching or community.

JEWISH TEACHING: WHAT IS THE GREATEST PRINCIPLE IN THE TORAH?

This text is from the third century C.E. collection the Sifra—a rabbinic legal commentary on the book of Leviticus. It shows a debate between two of the great sages of the time, Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai, about what the most important rule is in the whole Torah. Rabbi Akiva focuses on the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, but Ben Azzai points to the quote from Genesis that begins the list of Adam’s descendants. In doing so, Ben Azzai underlines the fact that all of us are descendants of the same initial human being, and therefore all of us are related.

Sifra, Kedoshim, Chapter 4:12

“And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18)

Rabbi Akiva says: This is an all-embracing principle in the Torah.

Ben Azzai says: “This is the record of the generations of Adam” (Genesis 5:1)

— This is an even greater principle.

Questions about the Jewish teaching

1. What do you think is the difference between the concepts of “loving your neighbor as yourself” and that of all humans being related and descended from the same ancestor? Why do you think Ben Azzai says the second one is more important
2. How might these two moral concepts play out differently, in terms of how we relate to others?
3. What would it look like to take these principles more to heart in how we interact between Jewish and Christian communities?

CHRISTIAN TEACHING: RESTORING DIGNITY FIRST

In this passage from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus encounters a man whose illness has rendered him socially untouchable, excluded from both physical contact and communal life. Christian tradition reads this moment as a teaching about dignity: Even before healing the man’s condition, Jesus restores his humanity by seeing him, choosing him, and touching him: dignity does not depend on being “fixed” or acceptable. As you read, consider what it means to first restore dignity before resolving a problem, and how this story challenges communities to stand with those who have been pushed to the margins, rather than keeping a distance.

Mark 1:40-45

A man with a skin disease came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I am willing. Be made clean!" Immediately the skin disease left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly but stayed out in the country, and people came to him from every quarter.

Questions about the Christian teaching

1. What do you think is the lesson here in the difference between healing the man first and then touching him, versus what Jesus does—touch him and then heal him?
2. Have you ever distanced yourself from someone who was not socially acceptable somehow? Would you do the same thing now? Why or why not?
3. Have you had a time when you needed people to stand with you? Did you receive the support you needed?

Questions about both teachings

1. What are ways we can honor each other's dignity without requiring sameness?
2. In what ways do Jewish communities today sometimes experience "social leprosy"? What could we learn from these two different texts that would help us respond to it?

SHARED GROUP ACTIVITY**(60-120 MINUTES DEPENDING ON THE SERVICE OPPORTUNITY)**

For this session's shared activity, the two congregations come together to serve people in need through a hands-on act of care, such as preparing and serving food, working in a soup kitchen or food pantry, or sorting and distributing essential items. The central goal is to focus on the dignity of all people in our society and the ways in which we can honor their dignity, no matter who they are.

Work with a local non-profit that serves those living on the street or those in need to create a volunteering opportunity together. Note that you will likely need to plan ahead to find a service activity that can be done only once, rather than a regular volunteering slot. Facilitators should prioritize service opportunities that allow for direct human interaction, not only task completion. The aim is not simply to help, but to practice seeing, acknowledging, and responding to others as full human beings whose dignity does not depend on circumstance. Participants should be encouraged to notice how they can communicate respect through tone, attention, eye contact, and willingness to engage—especially with people whose lives or

experiences differ from their own.

Facilitators should help participants reflect on how dignity is upheld or undermined in moments of service. What does it feel like to work alongside someone rather than for them? When does service create genuine encounter? By serving together, Jewish and Christian participants also practice dignity with one another, strengthening relationships across congregations through shared responsibility and mutual presence.

This activity is less directly related to the topic of antisemitism, but is as central to the work as any of the other activities: Together, we practice seeing others and each other as a whole world, deserving of respect and dignity. This then impacts how we encounter those we do not understand or those who are different from us. This activity invites participants to consider how standing with others, rather than remaining distant, can become a powerful expression of faith and a concrete response to dehumanization, including the dynamics that fuel antisemitism in broader society.

CLOSING REFLECTION: LISTENING PAIRS (20 MINUTES)

Facilitator note: For our closing activity in each program, we'll be going into constructivist listening pairs. This is a practice of listening in which each partner is given time to reflect aloud on the speaking prompts, uninterrupted. When given the chance to speak without interruption, we sometimes are able to go further with our thinking. It is important to stress to the group that when we are the listener, our sole job is to listen supportively. Inspired by the work of [Victor Cary](#).

1. Facilitators introduce the Listening Pairs (2 min)

- The purpose of this closing activity is to reflect on our own experience and to hear another participant's reflections – and to let that learning sink in. We will be pairing up – one Jewish and one Christian listening partner – and we'll be practicing generous listening.
- The way this will work is as follows:
 - Each partner will reflect on the prompts for 4 minutes, uninterrupted. Partner B will listen supportively, but not speak. Then Partner B will have a chance to reflect back to Partner A what you heard for 1 minute. The purpose of Partner B's response is not to correct but to echo back, for example: "I heard you say" "I'm wondering what that was like for you to..." Then we will switch and do it again with Partner B reflecting. We will keep the time and let you know when it's time to switch.
 - I agree to listen to and think about you for a fixed period of time in exchange for you doing the same for me. I keep in my mind that my listening is for your benefit so I do not ask questions for my information, but for your learning.
- Guidelines to keep in mind
 - Share only what you are comfortable sharing. It's okay to prefer not to share much, and it's okay to be excited to share a lot.
 - Each person is given equal time to talk and be listened to.

- The listener does not interpret, paraphrase, analyze, give advice, or break in with a personal story.
 - We maintain confidentiality so we can be authentic.
 - We don't use our speaking time to criticize others, but rather to reflect on our own experience.
 - In a moment, please pair up with someone from the other faith background and take turns answering one or more of the following prompts:
 - What did you learn about yourself or your own faith or tradition today?
 - What did you learn about the other faith?
 - What is something new you are taking away with you from today's experience?
 - Is there a commitment you want to make, coming out of today?
2. 10 minutes for paired sharing. Facilitators tell people at the switch times:
- 4 minutes - Partner A speaks
 - 1 minute - Partner B reflects on what they heard
 - 4 minutes - Partner B speaks
 - 1 minute - Partner A reflects on what they heard
3. 10 minutes for full group conversation about their paired reflection time.
- Let's come back together to hear about your reflections. Please share only from your own reflection or your response to what you heard, but not your partner's words or experience in order to maintain their confidentiality.



SESSION 4: DIGNITY HANDOUT

What is the Simeon Initiative's Year of Encounter?

In the last decade, and especially since the horrific attacks in Israel on October 7, 2023, Canada has seen a significant rise in antisemitism. In 2024, Father Deacon Andrew Bennett of Cardus launched the [Canadian Christian Declaration on Antisemitism](#), a statement by Christian leaders across denominations committing Christians to stand publicly with the Jewish community against rising anti-Jewish hatred. Within two months, more than 700 clergy and faith leaders had added their names and The Simeon Initiative was born.

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This work is both personal and collective. On the local level, it begins with conversations, meals, and study. On the national level, it reflects a growing recognition among Christian leaders that antisemitism should not be a Jewish problem, but one that Christians have a particular responsibility to confront. By entering into a genuine relationship with Jewish neighbours, Christian congregations can begin to repair what has been broken in our society and model a faith that stands against hatred, with humility and resolve.

SHARED COMMITMENTS

We want to encourage ourselves and each other to have meaningful, real encounters in this group today. These are not always easy things to do, but we believe they will lay the groundwork for authentic and impactful cross-communal learning. We hope these shared commitments will give us encouragement in our encounter today.

TODAY, I GIVE MYSELF AND MY FELLOW PARTICIPANTS HERE PERMISSION TO:

1. **Not know:** We don't need to know everything about our own faith, our own opinions, or other topics that may come up. We can be honest about not knowing the answer.
2. **Feel upset:** We may be hurt or upset by something someone else says; that's okay. It's part of really hearing each other.
3. **Share how something impacts me:** We are not here to agree on everything. Sharing how we are impacted by what others say and do—even when it upsets us—is a gift we give to each other as we seek greater understanding.
4. **Feel paralyzed:** We don't always have to know exactly what to do next. Sometimes we may feel simply unable to act.
5. **Appreciate someone else's faith tradition:** We can grow through wisdom learned from or about someone else's tradition, without feeling like we're abandoning our own.
6. **Change my mind, potentially multiple times:** We don't need to be absolutely certain about everything, and we can even change our minds during a conversation here.

TODAY, I COMMIT TO:

1. Asking questions when I don't understand something, rather than guessing.
2. Allowing my heart to soften when I hear something I resonate with.
3. Being courageous and open to changing my heart and mind.
4. Being generous of spirit and assuming my fellow participants have the best intentions.
5. Allowing others to have their own beliefs without trying to change them.
6. Practicing holding ideas that are not my own, with curiosity.
7. Listening in order to understand, rather than to respond or correct.

HOSPITALITY IN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

JEWISH TEACHING:

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Questions

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you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded as a testimony to them.” But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly but stayed out in the country, and people came to him from every quarter.

Questions about the Christian teaching

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Reflections Prompts

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1. What did you learn about yourself or your own faith or tradition today?
2. What did you learn about the other faith?
3. What is something new you are taking away with you from today's experience?
4. Is there a commitment you want to make, coming out of today?

FOR FURTHER READING

ON JUDAISM

1. *The Jewish Way* by Rabbi Irving Greenberg
2. *Living a Jewish Life* by Anita Diamant
3. *The Sabbath* by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel
4. *Essential Judaism* by George Robinson
5. *A Living Covenant* by Rabbi David Hartman
6. *A Letter in the Scroll: Understanding Our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World's Oldest Religion* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks
7. [Pirkei Avot: The Ethics of the Fathers](#)
8. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/>

ON CHRISTIANITY

1. *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* by N. T. Wright
2. *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis
3. *The Story of Christianity (Vols. I and II)* by Justo Gonzalez
4. *The Early Church* by Henry Chadwick
5. *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith* by Bishop Robert Barron
6. *The Orthodox Way* by Bishop Kallistos Ware
7. *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution* by Alister E. McGrath
8. The Gospels (in this order): Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John (Revised Standard Version)
9. Epistle to the Hebrews (Revised Standard Version)
10. Epistle of James (Revised Standard Version)

ON ANTISEMITISM

1. *A Convenient Hatred: A History of Antisemitism* by Phyllis Goldstein
2. *Antisemitism Here and Now* by Debra Lipstadt
3. *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present* by Dara Horn
4. *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* by David Nirenberg
5. *Why the Jews? The Reason for Antisemitism* by Dennis Prager
6. "What Is Happening Here" podcast series by Canadaland on antisemitism in Canada <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/what-is-happening-here-canadaland-investigates/id1438924421>

NOTES

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YEAR OF ENCOUNTER

[HTTPS://WWW.CHRISTIANDECLARATION.CA/](https://www.christiandeclaration.ca/)

CARDUS

IMAGINATION TOWARD A THRIVING SOCIETY

CARDUS.CA