



Welcoming The Community: Gurdwara Open House Toolkit

The goal of this toolkit is to provide Gurdwara leaders with all the information and resources they need to host a successful open house event.

An open house event is a great opportunity to formally engage with neighbors, elected officials, and local law enforcement; introduce them to the beauty and resilience of the Sikh faith, community, and traditions; and begin to build lasting relationships with the larger community.

***Please contact the Sikh Coalition at
community@sikhcoalition.org for further assistance or
information***

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Preparing For Your Event

Potential Invitees

- **Local and/or state elected officials:** Inviting elected officials at the city, county, and the state level introduces them to their Sikh constituents and is the first step to building relationships.
 - *Example: Mayors, City Council Members, State Assembly members, and State Senators*
- **Law enforcement:** Inviting local law enforcement agencies helps officers develop cultural and religious sensitivities and awareness.
 - *Example: Sheriffs, Police Chiefs, local police officers*
- **Faith leaders and communities:** Inviting interfaith leaders promotes solidarity and strengthens intercommunity ties.
 - *Example: Representatives from local houses of worship (churches, synagogues, mosques), interfaith groups, and alliances.*
- **Media outlets:** Inviting local print and broadcast outlets can help amplify the event's message and coverage. Be sure to include religion reporters when possible.
 - *Example: Reporters from the local TV stations and newspapers*

Invitations

Invitations should ideally be sent at least one month prior to the event. For a document version for you to use, [click here](#).

Program

You might consider creating a program for your guests. This program should include: the timeline of events, names and titles of speakers, a glossary of key terms guests might have questions about in a gurdwara setting, and a list of frequently asked questions and answers.

Note: “Key Terms” and “Frequently Asked Questions” handouts are included as the final two pages of this toolkit.

Venue

Decide on the most appropriate space in your gurdwara for the event. Some gurdwaras may prefer to host this event all in one room –the diwaan hall or the langar hall- while others may transition between spaces (e.g., from the diwaan hall to a Khalsa school classroom for presentations). Choose a setup that is appropriate for your gurdwara’s needs, policies, and layout.

Media Engagement

Once the date is confirmed and attendance looks promising, contact your local media to cover the event, **as long as their presence will not interfere with the event or building relationships.**



Volunteers

Depending on how many people you are expecting at the event, there should be four to eight greeters 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 heads, helping them tie their bandanas, and walking them into the diwaan hall, and transitioning guests between different parts of the event. Please ensure that you are providing clean bandanas and scarves. 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.

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 their respective group for the duration of the event. This volunteer will lead the guests 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 educators 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.



During Your Event

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 to offer a Sikh awareness presentation for your colleagues or other audiences?*” 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.

Folders

Please create folders for your guests that they can pick up at the Welcome Table

Sikh Coalition Resources for Your Use



[Who are the Sikhs postcard](#)



[Sikh Awareness Presentation](#) and talking points to assist with the presentation

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 during an event at the gurdwara, such as a *Gurpurab*, an akhand path or a mela. These occasions can cause logistical issues due to large crowds and may interfere with the quality of the guest experiences.
- Begin on time. In order to maintain the professionalism of the event and respect your guests' time, you need to begin at the 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, or have translators for sangat members who speak Punjabi. You should also have a good mix of both male and female speakers as well as old and young speakers. A member or two of the gurdwara committee can formally summarize the event and thank the guests at the end of the house and all other speeches should focus on education about Sikhi and our traditions.



Tips for Hosting A Successful Event (cont.)

- Though langar is vegetarian (no meat/eggs), please consider other dietary needs of your guests also. 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 *dahi/raita* (yogurt), *paneer* (cheese), or even mithai (sweets) that are made with milk or ghee. Please have several English speaking volunteers ready with allergen information or consider making signs with popular allergens clearly mark 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 the significance of bowing down before the *Guru Granth Sahib* without expecting participation
- The act of receiving *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 wish to abstain. This should be respected, as we do not want anyone to feel uncomfortable. If a guest asks what parshad is, please refer to the definition provided in the "Key Words" document.

Sample Open House Agenda

For a document version for you to use, [click here](#).

Time	Length	Description
11: 00 AM	15 minutes	Welcome/Quick Gurdwara protocol explanation + schedule for the event
11:15 AM	15 minutes	Sikh Speaker Introductions/Guest Speaker Introductions Shabad/translation/explanation of kirtan and importance to Sikhi
11:30 AM	5 minutes	[At this point, you can transition from the diwaan hall to the langar hall, if necessary.]
11:35 AM	30 minutes	Sikh Awareness Presentation
12:05 PM	15 minutes	Question and Answer session
12:20 PM	20 minutes	Speakers – Superintendent, Chief of Police, Elected officials, leaders of faith based groups, etc.
12:40 PM	20 minutes	Wrap-up, thank yous, invitation to langar

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

After Your Event

Thank you, Feedback & Take Home Materials

Encourage and request 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/disliked?
- 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. You can find some [recommendations here](#).
- Thank you mug/water bottle with your gurdwara's name

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 the Sikh community and the educators that attended. Follow up with the educators if any of them indicated that they want Sikh presentations in their classroom (on the sign-in sheet). Feel free to email education@sikhcoalition.org, and we will arrange for a staff or volunteer to deliver the Sikh Awareness Presentation.

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 community@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.

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.

Amritdhari – An initiated Sikh. One demonstrates commitment to the Khalsa by accepting amrit (initiation) and adopting practices as articulated in the Rahit Maryada (Sikh code of conduct). The prescriptions in this document call on initiated Sikhs to, among other things, engage in daily prayers and wear five articles of faith.

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

Dastaar - An integral part of Sikh identity in addition to the five articles of faith. It is worn by Sikh males and some females. It covers, protects, and crowns the head—the center of wisdom. The dastaar safeguards the uncut hair of a Sikh, which is tied in a topknot underneath. It is not put on or taken off like a hat or cap, but tied anew daily. To ask for it to be removed in public is demeaning and disrespectful to the wearer.

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.

Key Terms

Gurdwara – A Sikh house of worship where the community gathers for prayer, selfless service, and to learn from each other. The central focus of the gurdwara is the Guru Granth Sahib and services consist of reading and singing from the sacred scripture. The Nishaan Sahib, a saffron-colored flag, flies from every gurdwara to denote the presence of the Sikh community.

Guru Granth Sahib – The volume of sacred scripture that is respected as the eternal guiding voice and living spirit of the Gurus, and which is literally revered as the body and physical presence of the human Gurus themselves. Sikhs believe that through its teachings, the Guru Granth Sahib has the ability to transform and enlighten them.

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 – Learning institutions that are typically hosted at gurdwaras across the nation so Sikh students can learn about their roots and their faith, as well as study the Punjabi language. Typically schools are in session once every week for the duration of a typical school year and students attend several classes based on their age and/or language proficiency. It is primarily run by volunteers and follows a set curriculum with routine testing and advancement of students. Classes are typically small and have several teachers and teaching assistants. Students start around age 5 and typically graduate when they enter high school. High school students often volunteer at Khalsa Schools, providing mentorship and guidance to younger students in the congregation.

Key Terms

Langar – Food that is open to everyone, cooked by the members of the community, and served to all people in that congregation at every gurdwara. 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 equal parts flour, butter, water 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 – A smaller version of a Sikh turban, is usually worn by boys in pre-kindergarten to middle school before they begin wearing a turban. It can also be worn by adults for sports or games. A Sikh child’s patka and hair should always be treated respectfully, as they are considered articles of faith.

Punjabi – The language that Sikhs most commonly use, though not the only one. It can also refer to a person, idea, or object that originates from the Punjab region in South Asia (e.g. Punjabi music, Punjabi food, etc).

Key Terms

Sangat –The word originates from sangti in Sanskrit, meaning fellowship or congregation. For Sikhs, sangat is especially meaningful because the congregation is an essential part of a Sikh’s spiritual practice and growth.

Sikh – The word Sikh originates from shishya in Sanskrit, meaning “disciple or “learner”.” In modern Punjabi, sikhna means “to learn” and sikhya means “teaching” or “something which is learned.” Sikhs therefore also refer to their tradition as “Sikhi”, “Sikhism”, or the “path of learning.”

Waheguru – Literally means ‘Wondrous Creator’. 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

(A complete list is [available here](#))

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.

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”.

Frequently Asked Questions

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 members 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.



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