

ENGAGING FAITH COMMUNITIES: SIKH LEADERS

Please note: These are generalizations. As with all groups, commonalities and differences may exist among individuals.

Religion Called: The Sikh (pronounced “sick”) faith, Sikhi, or Sikhism

Adherents Consider Themselves: Sikh and are called Sikhs

House of Worship: Gurdwara in Punjabi, Temple in English

First Point of Contact: President of board of directors

Religious Leader: No ordained leaders; a Gyani leads prayer

Spoken Direct Address: Use “Sardar Sahib” for males and “Sardarani Sahiba” for females

Physical Interaction: Handshake O.K. across sexes

HOUSE OF WORSHIP

- Sikh houses of worship are called gurdwaras, which are commonly referred to as temples in English. Typically, a gurdwara includes a commercial kitchen as well as a hall for community worship and meals (langar hall).

RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Ordained/Commissioned/Licensed Leaders

- Sikhism has no clergy. Anyone qualified may fill any role in worship.

Lay Leaders

- A scholar of Sikhism (gyani or giani) leads the congregation in prayer.
- Another worship leader is called the granthi (the one who tends and reads the sacred scripture). Granthi may also mean someone with deep knowledge of the scriptures, who is able to teach others about it.
- A musician may be called a ragi (one who knows the ragas/melodies).
- Sikhism teaches egalitarianism and a leveling of caste distinctions. Therefore, the role and place of women should be parallel to that of men, but preferences for men in leadership roles may be present in communities. The role of gyani is always held by a man.
- Board of Directors: Gurdwaras are governed by members of their board of directors who control operations and finances.

POINTS OF CONTACT

- Local: Gurdwara, independently governed by a board of directors. The first point of contact should be President of the board of directors, a position which is sometimes held by the gyani.
- Regional: There may be a Sikh Council which acts as a place for convening leaders and organizational heads
- National: The World Sikh Council – America Region

NVOAD MEMBERSHIP AND CORE CAPABILITIES IN DISASTER

- National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, membership based organization that serves as the forum where organizations share knowledge and resources throughout the disaster cycle. FEMA DSA team members should check with their VAL to determine whether local or regional VOADs exist in their operational area.
- While there are no Sikh organizations that are NVOAD members, The United Sikhs and the Sikh Coalition are active partners in state and local VOADs.
- Sikhs have often used Gurdwaras during disaster to facilitate the preparation of hot meals to be served directly from the Gurdwara or delivered to shelters. Sikh organizations are also leaders in human rights issues and advocacy.

ETIQUETTE QUICK TIPS

Greeting

- When introducing yourself to a religious leader, use formal religious titles unless instructed otherwise.
- Sikhs greet one another, and can be greeted by non-Sikhs with the Punjabi salutation—Sat Sri Akal (roughly translated as “Blessed is the person who says God is Truth”) while bringing the palms together at chest level (known as Anjali) and slightly bowing the head in a humbling and respectful posture.

Physical Interaction

- As a general rule, avoid initiating physical contact when meeting or greeting religious leaders from religious traditions that differ from your own, especially those of the opposite sex. Initiating gestures common in the U.S. such as shaking hands or hugging/embracing may be considered inappropriate or offensive. Be prepared with an alternate gesture, such as the “Sat Sri Akal” greeting. When in doubt, ask before making assumptions or wait for a leader to initiate. Sikhs do exchange handshakes with, or embrace, people of the same and opposite sex.

Other

- Remove shoes before entering a Gurdwara to respect the way that the community treats their sacred space. Both men and women must cover their heads upon entering a Gurdwara and should dress modestly. Some Gurdwaras may provide head coverings for visitors near the door. Ask before participating in worship services.

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GOVERNANCE / JUDICATORY

- The Akal Takhat (located in Amritsar, Punjab) is the highest juridical authority for Sikhs worldwide; this office has the authority to issue edicts to provide guidance or clarification on any matter of Sikh doctrine or practice. It can also issue reprimands.

ABOUT SIKH

- Sikhism, the world's fifth largest religion, has an estimated 25 million adherents. Approximately 500,000 Sikhs live in the U.S. and worship at over 250 gurdwaras. Sikhs do not have clergy. Founded just over 500 years ago, Sikhism preaches a message of devotion and remembrance of God at all times, truthful living, equality of humankind, social justice, and denounces superstitions and blind rituals. Sikhism is based on the teachings of its ten Gurus enshrined in the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh holy book). Sikhs are the disciples of God who follow the Guru's writings and teachings. The word "Sikh" means "disciple" in the Punjabi language. The religion is called Sikhism. (Sikh is also an adjective; adherents are called Sikhs, pronounced "sick").

LOGISTICS

- Meals served from a Gurdwara's langar are to be completely vegetarian. Sikhs are forbidden from bringing meat of any kind into the langar. This should be taken into account if disaster response staff request use of a Gurdwara during response and recovery operations.
- Some Sikhs may have a culture of greeting before discussing business. This could include sharing tea, a meal, or engaging in conversation. It may be considered rude to start discussing business without going through these rituals.

FOOD

- Many Sikhs follow both cultural and religious dietary practices written in the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh holy book). Sikhs are forbidden from eating halal and kosher meat. They are also forbidden from consuming alcohol and other intoxicants. All other foods are permissible, except those containing liquor or other intoxicants. Many Sikhs may be vegetarians out of cultural tradition or personal conviction, although such a prescription is not made by religious dietary law. Provide vegetarian options if scheduling a meeting where food is provided. In addition, snacks should not contain gelatin, meat, meat byproducts, or lard.

MEETING LOGISTICS AND SCHEDULING

Scheduling and Holidays

- Sikhs follow a modified lunar calendar that includes six primary holidays. Holidays follow similar pattern of celebration: three days of worship, with special food distributed free from the langar.
- Dates commemorating the birth of each of the ten gurus are distributed throughout the year. Those of the founder (Guru Nanak) and of the tenth guru (Guru Gobind Singh) are especially important.
- Baisaki is a commemoration of the formation of the Khalsa in 1699.
- Guru Granth Day celebrates the proclamation that the Sikh scripture is the perpetual living Guru.

DRESS

- **Clothing:** Sikhs may dress in clothing that falls outside of American/Western fashion norms. Although it is common for Sikh men to wear western clothing with a turban, older Sikhs and recent Sikh immigrants may wear ethnic or regional Punjabi garb. Baptized males (called Amritdhali or Khalsa) are required to wear a turban (dastar) - boys wear a thin head covering (patka). Some may wear a long shirt (kurta) or pant set (salvar-kameez). Some males wear pant-legs slightly shorter than standard fashion. Females may wear a head covering called a chunni (common) or a turban (less common) over their hair. Some wear a long shirt and pant set (salvar-kameez) or a loose fitting wrapped dress (sari). Sikh dress does not indicate a person's level of education or reflect on a particular religious or political orientation.
- **Headdress:** The Sikh turban (dastar) is a crown of commitment and dedication to serve all humanity. It is an article of faith that represents honor, self-respect, courage, spirituality, and piety. Observant Sikhs wear turbans partly to cover long, uncut hair (kesh). The turban is identified with the Sikh males, although some Sikh women also wear a turban. The Sikh faith regards gender equality as an important part of its teachings.
- **Articles of Faith:** Five articles of faith (Panji Kakar) are required to be worn by baptized Sikhs at all times. Commonly called the "Five Ks," and are not only symbols, but articles of faith that collectively form the devotee's external identity and commitment to the Sikh "way of life" (rehti). The Five Ks include Kesh (uncut hair), Kangha (hair comb), Kara (steel bracelet), Kachera (cotton undergarments), and Kirpan (a strapped curved dagger/small sword).
- Disaster staff should be familiar with these articles, especially the Kirpan and recognize that it is a required article of faith, not a weapon. The right to wear the Kirpan, including in U.S. federal buildings, has been protected by numerous legal decisions. Some Sikhs only wear a small symbolic Kirpan.



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