Water Safety Workshop for Faith Communities

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A free 60-minute water safety session for congregations: safe outings and retreats, Water Watchers, modest swimwear, and support after a loss.

Community groups · 60 minutes · For faith communities, parents, caregivers, adults

This plan helps a **mosque, temple, church, gurdwara, synagogue or any faith community** run a one-hour water safety session. Members plan their picnics, retreats and trips with Water Watchers and life jackets, learn to spot a swimmer in trouble and help from land, talk openly about what keeps people out of swim lessons, and learn where to point grieving families.

54.7%

of U.S. adults say they have never taken a swimming lesson (CDC survey, 2023).

Source: cdc.gov https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/73/wr/mm7320e1.htm

Learning objectives

- Name the times your congregation is near water (picnics, retreats, youth trips, family travel) and plan each one with layers of protection.
- Set up Water Watchers, buddy checks and an emergency plan for group outings.
- Recognize the quiet signs of drowning and help from land: shout, call 911, reach or throw.
- Identify ways to make swim lessons welcoming, including modest swimwear and women-only sessions.
- Know where to point families for grief support, including faith-based and culturally matched options.

Materials

- [ ] Chart paper and markers
- [ ] Copies of the Pool Party Checklist (it works for any group outing), Water Watcher cards and the Emergency Action Plan
- [ ] A rope or tape line on the floor, a pole and something that floats, for the reach-or-throw demonstration
- [ ] Copies of the Adult Swim Lesson Guide and the Grief Support Contacts sheet
- [ ] A list of nearby pools, with their lesson programs and any women-only or family sessions, that you looked up in advance

Lesson steps

1 Welcome — 5 minutes

A leader of the congregation opens, in the words of your own tradition, with the idea of caring for one another's children and families. Then state the goal: *Every outing this year has a water plan.*

2 Activity 1: Where are we near water? 10 minutes

As a group, list every time the community is near water in a year: the annual picnic at a park lake, a youth retreat, a beach trip, a summer camp, a member's pool, family trips abroad. Circle the ones with no lifeguard.

3 Activity 2: Plan one outing together 20 minutes

Small groups take one outing from the list and plan it with the Pool Party Checklist. Each group reports its plan in 2 minutes.

- **Place:** choose a lifeguarded beach or pool and swim only in the designated area. Check the weather, water conditions and any posted flags first.
- **People:** name Water Watchers for every swim time and a schedule to pass the card every 15 to 20 minutes. Watchers don't use phones and don't do other jobs.
- **Buddies:** pair children and new swimmers so that no one swims alone.
- **Gear:** U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets for young children, weak swimmers and everyone on a boat. Not water wings or floats.
- **Plan:** the exact address for 911, who calls, where the reaching pole or ring is, and who knows CPR.

4 Activity 3: Recognize and respond 10 minutes

Describe a swimmer who is upright, mouth at the water's surface, not moving forward and not calling out: that person needs help now. Then two volunteers demonstrate reach or throw at the line on the floor. Nobody crosses the line.

5 Activity 4: Making swimming welcoming 10 minutes

Discuss what keeps members out of the water and what would help. Write ideas on chart paper.

- Modest swimwear: long-sleeved swim tops and leggings. Ask local pools about their swimwear rules before a group lesson day.
- Women-only or family sessions: ask nearby pools whether they offer or would host them.
- Adult lessons: many adults never learned. Plan a group sign-up so nobody goes alone.
- Children: lessons can start for many children at age 1, and they still need a watching adult.

6 Assessment and commitments 5 minutes

Each group names one commitment for the congregation, such as a water safety lead for every event, a swim lesson sign-up day, or posters by the door. Ask the quick check questions below.

7 Take-home

Water Watcher cards for event leaders, the Emergency Action Plan, the Adult Swim Lesson Guide, and the Grief Support Contacts sheet for clergy and care teams.

Background for the facilitator

Group outings need a named watcher. The American Red Cross says to designate a "water watcher" whenever in a group setting, to swim in areas supervised by lifeguards, and to always swim with a buddy. Pool Safely says the Water Watcher's supervising should be their only task. The AAP suggests passing a Water Watcher card to the next adult every 15-20 minutes.

Beaches and lakes. At the beach, the Red Cross says to always swim in a lifeguarded area and be aware of weather and water conditions. Children, inexperienced swimmers and all boaters should wear U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets.

Faith and swimwear. Writing on the AAP Voices blog, pediatrician Dr. Anisa Ibrahim describes families who decline swim lessons because the attire most often required for swimming is not allowed by the religion or cultural norms the family practices. She describes a 2006 pilot of women-only swim sessions with female lifeguards and window shades at a local pool, and argues that long-sleeved swimwear or leggings under shorts should be acceptable. These are her views, not AAP policy. More in swimming with modesty.

Family travel. Many families visit relatives abroad. For families with roots in Bangladesh, WHO and UNICEF reported in 2022 that over 14,000 children in Bangladesh die from drowning each year. That is data about Bangladesh, not the U.S., but it is a reason to plan for ponds, rivers and open water on family visits too.

Recognizing trouble. A retired Coast Guard rescue swimmer explains that drowning people are usually physiologically unable to call out for help. Reach from solid ground with a rope or pole, and the Minnesota DNR advises: if the person starts to pull you in, release your grip and start over. See reach or throw, don't go.

Quick check questions

1. What is the Water Watcher's only job? [Watching the swimmers, with no phone and no other tasks.]
2. Are water wings enough for a child who can't swim? [No. Use a Coast Guard-approved life jacket and stay within arm's reach.]
3. Someone at the picnic is upright in the lake, not moving forward and silent. What do you do? [Shout for help, call 911, reach or throw. Don't go in.]
4. What could make swim lessons more welcoming for our members? [Answers will vary: modest swimwear, women-only sessions, going as a group.]

Caring for families after a loss

Faith communities are often the first to support a family after a death. Clergy and care teams can keep the Grief Support Contacts sheet on hand. Options include:

- SAMHIN's Sahara Grief Support Group, a free virtual group for South Asian people who are grieving.
- The Family & Youth Institute's Grief Support Toolkit, a free toolkit grounded in Islamic values.
- GriefShare, Christian, church-based grief groups (groups may charge for the workbook).

Anyone in crisis can call or text **988** for free, confidential support, 24/7, through the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. In an emergency, call 911. For more, see where to find grief support.

Running the session well

- **Hope, not fear.** Some members may have lost someone to water. No drowning stories, no blame. Speak with the family first if a recent loss is close to the community.

- **Everyone is welcome.** Don't ask who can or can't swim. Present adult lessons as a group adventure: Adult Learn-to-Swim Orientation.
- **Collect nothing.** You don't need names or contact details to run this session.

Take-home sheet

Printable: Water Watcher Card resource.aminfoundation.io/printables/water-watcher-card

Printable: Water Emergency Action Plan resource.aminfoundation.io/printables/emergency-action-plan

Printable: Adult Swim Lesson Guide resource.aminfoundation.io/printables/adult-swim-lesson-guide

What you can do today

Name one person to be the water safety lead for your next outing, and look up whether a pool near you offers women-only, family or adult lesson sessions. Then read water safety for faith groups for more ideas.

Sources

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13. Grief Support Toolkit, The Family & Youth Institute. https://thefyi.org/grief-support-toolkit/
14. GriefShare (Christian, faith-based), Church Initiative. https://www.griefshare.org/

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