

Working Group on Relations with Other Faiths

The working group sits within the mandate of Uniting Faith and Discipleship and works collaboratively with other units of the team.

1. INTRODUCTION

Engagement with the diverse cultures and faiths in our wider Australian society is becoming more and more a necessity in terms of Christian mission, theology and relationship. The cultural and religious landscape is no longer just a changing Australian phase but it is now becoming an integral part of our Australian identity. As a church and as Christians we can no longer afford to keep ourselves insular and separate from what our national home has become. Our churches are located within suburbs where there are diverse cultures and religions in both the city and rural settings. Our neighbours are increasingly, Jew, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh – rather than Christian. According to Garry Bouma, Anglican priest and Australian sociologist of religion, in his book *Being faithful in diversity* ‘diversity is the new normal. It has become the new normal in the lives of most people.’ (Bouma, 2011, p. 15) The challenge according to Bouma in dealing with this new normal for Australians is that ‘these issues are relatively new as the society is gradually changing from being mono-cultural to being multi-cultural and multi-religious’. (Bouma, 2011, p. 15)

One of the effects of migration Bouma emphasises is the revitalization of faith brought about by the presence of other faiths in the public space, a claim supported ironically by John Perkins, President of the Australia Secular Party. In a paper titled “Creating a better Australia: reinventing secularism”, Perkins observes,

while society has in many ways become more secular, the public profile of religion in society has seemingly also

become more pronounced. As the power of established religion apparently declines, there has been a resurgence in diverse forms of religious expression. (Perkins, 2006)

What has also become more obvious in our work and encounters with people of other faiths is that Australian society is not only made up of people from other religions, but also those who have no claims to faith and who wish to be a part of the dialogue simply because the national space is one that is shared by those who identify with Australia as home. What this effectively highlights is the need for the church to engage with religious diversity in its many varied forms both within the context of local congregations and in the public space. Being faithful as a church in an age of cultural and religious difference involves exploring new ways to understand and engage in mission. This is now being demonstrated in how we form our candidates for ministry, resource our congregations and offer hospitality to those who have a different Faith or those who do not profess a faith.

The RoF WG believes that interfaith relations are an integral part of the mission of the Church. Thereby, the Working Group seeks to serve and resource the church by

promoting knowledge and understanding of other living world faiths and their communities in a multicultural and multifaith Australia. It seeks to develop wherever possible a commitment to promote respect and tolerance for the integrity for the beliefs of other faiths, cultures and traditions. This desire not only arises from our common humanity but also a desire to live in peace and goodwill as neighbours in our communities and the world.

2. WHAT WE DO

Provide information, policy and resources on appropriate positive relationships with other faiths to the Assembly.

Raise awareness within the church of the presence of other faiths in the community, and of their particular needs and place in Australian society.

Develop resources that may be appropriate for congregations and other bodies to use in multi-faith discussions and occasions of worship.

Maintain contact with people of other living world faiths.

Provide advice and assistance to all councils of the church as requested.

Collaborate where possible with other agencies and groups interested in multi-faith relationships.

Reflect on the theological basis on which inter-faith dialogue should occur and develop statements and resources for use by the church when working with people of other faiths.

3. ASSEMBLY KEY DIRECTIONS

The Working Group's projects and priorities in this triennium are to be viewed as long-term goals. They relate to key areas of the life of the church: Education, Resources and Theology. In this triennium the RoF WG focussed its ministry and mission on the following Assembly Key Directions (b) and (d)

Believing that God is calling us to fresh obedience to be the people of God in Australia at this time, in the coming triennium to:

b) engage in Jesus' ministry of peacemaking within the world and the church by:

developing resources that will assist our members and councils to develop skills and strategies to live together in peace in a multicultural, cross-cultural and diverse UCA;

working with people of other faiths to promote mutual respect and understanding;

helping our members learn to live and act as peacemakers, as taught and modelled by Jesus;

In addition the Working Group on Relations with other Faiths commits to (d):

(i) the articulation of our doctrine in a way that communicates clearly to our members;

(ii) articulate and celebrate our identity as the Uniting Church in Australia;

(iii) the education of our members to better know, own and share their faith;

The above Assembly Key directions are realised through our various projects and activities carried throughout this triennium and outlined below. They are for us an expression of being faithful in a diverse society as well as seeking and exploring new forms of relating that move the church beyond the old paradigms of exclusivism and relativism.

4. ROF ACTIVITIES AND PROJECTS IN RESPONSE TO PRESENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES PEACEMAKING AND MISSION THROUGH INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Living with our neighbour who is different can either be viewed as a threat or it can be an occasion to offer hospitality and create more respectful relationships. It is an invitation to a fuller Christian life as local communities become committed to the task of peacemaking and the reconciliation that can be achieved in local neighbourhoods and communities. Interfaith dialogue is one way of seeking to live out this commitment to peace.

4.1 Asia Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue (RID)

The Asia Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue forum is an initiative of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs together with the governments of New Zealand, Indonesia and Philippines. The first of these Forums was held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia in 2004. Each year since then the sponsors have taken turns to host the forum in their region. This growing partnership, between government and religions, signals an understanding by some governments within the Asia Pacific Region that social cohesion cannot be sustained with the strict divide of religion and state. The objective of these forums is to bring

people within the region together, to share ideas, challenges and to foster deeper understanding and relationships between faiths. Each forum concludes with a collective statement and a plan of action whereby delegates are encouraged to share with their individual faith communities and to apply the principles whenever possible through action. A member of the RoF WG has represented the Uniting Church each year at the forum. Statements of the Asia Pacific Regional Interfaith Forums can be found at <http://assembly.uca.org.au/rof/interfaith-dialogue/dialogues-in-australia/65-asia-pacific-regional-interfaith-dialogue>

4.2 **Australian National Dialogue of Christian, Muslims and Jews (ANDCMJ)**

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) through a representative of the RoF is involved in the Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews. This is a joint initiative of the Australian National Council of Churches on behalf of its member churches together with its founding dialogue partners, the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ). The dialogue was officially launched in March 2003. Its purpose is to provide opportunity for the national bodies of each faith to come together to build understanding and harmony in the Australian context. The objectives of the ANDCMJ are:

- To be a model of how different faiths can live harmoniously together in Australia
- To build understanding, good will and a sense of community between people of different faiths
- To explore and learn about each other and our faith traditions
- To share our knowledge and insights with others
- To work together to achieve common goals in Australia
- To support each other in times of difficulty

The ANDCMJ meets three times a year with each faith community taking

it in turn to host the dialogue. Discussions are usually based on thematic theological concepts with perspectives from all three traditions. Occasionally and when the need arises the three bodies may make a joint statement of solidarity to the community on an issue of injustice or intolerance. For more information on the ANDCMJ please visit the following website: <http://www.ncca.org.au/departments/interfaith>

4.3 **Uniting Church National Jewish Christian dialogue group**

This Dialogue has been occurring for 20 years. During the years since the last report to the 12th Assembly the dialogue Group has continued its established pattern of meeting twice a year for a day long gathering in Melbourne and Sydney. The format of each day's proceedings has also continued as before, with a morning and afternoon session devoted to agreed topics. Normally there is a formal presentation from each side of the dialogue and then discussion will occur in the afternoon. Over the past three years we have covered a wide range of issues: sin and repentance; Easter, Passover; prayer, religion, resurrection and the future; and 'God-talk' within a postmodern era. At more recent gatherings we have instituted a more personal time of reflection in which member of the dialogue spoke about what they cherished in their own tradition. We have also reflected upon what value we placed in each other's tradition

During the last three years it would be reasonable to suggest that the last two years had witnessed a diminishing in tension in the two groups, in particular the issue of Israel/Palestine. In previous times it was frequently raised by the Jewish group, and this quickly led to a defensive and robust apology for the actions of Israel

4.4 **Israel/Palestine Relations**

At meetings in late 2010 and early 2011, the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) began to engage with matters relating to Israel and the occupied Palestinian

Territories in the West Bank, and action previously taken in relation to this by the World Council of Churches (WCC), the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) and other denominations worldwide.

In July, 2011, the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) resolved, on behalf of the Assembly, to join the boycott of products produced in the illegal Israeli Settlements within the Palestinian Territory of the West Bank. This resolution was made in answer to a call for peaceful action from Palestinian Christians (Kairos Palestine, 2009), and in response to a request and resolutions from the National Council of Churches (NCCA)

Further, the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) invited church members and congregations to consider taking action with two main purposes. The first, encouraging the governments of Israel and Palestine to move more seriously and effectively towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict between them and second encouraging the Australian Government to use its influence more seriously and effectively towards a resumption of peace talks between Israel and Palestine, towards an end of the occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories and of the blockade of Gaza, and towards a two-state solution with secure internationally-recognized borders, in accordance with United Nations resolutions.

Rev. Glenda Blakefield and Rev. Gregor Henderson were requested to resource members and congregations as they considered this invitation. This resource would take the form of a kit which would include:

An Information Paper
Question and Answer paper
World Council of Churches (WCC) and National Council of Churches (NCCA) resolutions
A Moment of Truth: A Word of faith, hope, and love from the heart of Palestinian Suffering (Kairos Palestine, 2009)
Jews and Judaism: A Statement by the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly 2009 and 'Light Eternal' a Study Kit

Response Form

These resources can be found at www.assembly.uca.org.au/prayerforpeace

At the time of writing this report these resources have been distributed throughout the church and there has been no adverse reaction in the Uniting Church or the UCA Jewish Christian Dialogue.

Muslim religious practitioners were happy to be a part of the consultative process for the development of these resources as were Jewish religious representatives. Robust discussions occurred regularly with representatives of the Jewish faith in the development of these resources.

4.5 Women's Interfaith Network (WIN)

The Rev Sef Carroll and Wilma Viswanathan are Uniting Church members of WIN.

The Women's Interfaith Network (WIN) is a gathering of women of different religious traditions who meet and work to promote harmony, understanding and respect among the followers of the various world religions. It operates from a conviction that mutual understanding and respect for different religious expressions proceed from building personal relationships, co-operation and discussion. The Core group meets in the NSW Parliament House every month. Win has representatives from Aboriginal, Bahai, Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Zoroastrian and Quaker communities. At WIN meetings members report on functions they have attended and issue invitations to special activities of their faith group or of their own family and friends to which WIN members are invited. Most of the agenda, however, is to listen to members talk about chosen topics from their own faith perspective. Topics over the years have included – Ceremonies, practices and rituals connected with death and dying, prayer, introducing a favourite book, or passage or article from members' faith traditions, role models who have influenced members in their faith journeys. The present topic is: the contribution of each member's faith towards peace in the world. These talks are followed by questions and lively, but sensitive

discussions. A number of members participated in the Parliament of World Religions in Melbourne in 2009. They have also attended interfaith conferences in universities, major venues in Sydney and interstate. WIN members support each other by attending activities of each other's faith groups and even personal celebrations and rituals such as funerals, baptisms/blessings, and celebrations to mark special occasions. All WIN members are leaders in interfaith conversations in their own communities.

4.6 Strengthening relationships at the local level

The RoF WG members are active practitioners. Most are involved in interfaith activities, dialogue and projects in their respective Synods. These projects and activities can be accessed through the Assembly RoF website <http://assembly.uca.org.au/rof/resources/local> or directly through the Synod website in each state. The RoF WG meets annually to share stories and challenges arising in each Synod as well as plan the work of the WG for each year.

4.7 Resources

As part of our commitment to being faithful in discipleship while also being able to celebrate the myriad of differences within our society, one of RoF's integral tasks is encouraging friendship with people of other faiths within the local neighbourhood and beyond. The WG is therefore committed to providing resources for the church either through its website (<http://assembly.uca.org.au/rof/>) or the provision of visual aids, reading material and tool kits. The following resources are those developed within this triennium.

4.8 Interfaith September

In September of each year congregations within the Uniting Church in Australia are encouraged to create a community of hospitality, conversation and friendship with people of all faiths within their neighbourhood. Beginning with the

launch of 'Interfaith September Sunday', (4th September 2011) congregations will be invited to select an activity to complete throughout the month. This might be as simple as completing a four-part book study or as ambitious as hosting an interfaith festival. Resources for several potential activities are available on the Relations with Other Faiths website. Throughout the following weeks, congregations will be taken on a journey of reflection across the anniversary of September 11, the International Day of Peace, and how these themes relate to interfaith relations. The month will culminate in congregations bringing their chosen activity to live on 'Interfaith Community Sunday'; when neighbours become friends and a deepened understanding of each other blossoms. Congregations are invited to explore and celebrate the development of these friendships in the presence of diversity and difference through:

Interfaith September resources for ministry agents
Resources for worship, themed for each Sunday throughout the month
A 'tool box' to assist congregations with their chosen activity
A DVD to facilitate interfaith engagement

4.9 Joint work with other units of Uniting Faith and Discipleship

In 2006, the Uniting Church in Australia National Working Group on Relations with Other Faiths produced the DVD 'Getting Started: Why engage in interfaith relationships?' It was followed by another production in 2009 titled, 'Neighbourhoods of Difference: The Uniting Church in Australia and Interfaith Relations' which, was launched at the Twelfth Assembly in July 2009. In 2011, the Working Group began work on another educational resource, partly a collaborative effort with Multicultural and Cross Cultural Ministry.

This new DVD may be used by study groups, individuals or congregations who wish to 'dip their toes' into interfaith engagement. While previous DVDs have answered the questions of why we engage in interfaith

relationships, and the what and how the Uniting Church works in this area, this new DVD will focus more on individuals' personal faith journeys. It asks of interviewees 'why is interfaith interaction important to you' and 'where is it found in your journey of faith?'

It is hoped that viewers of the DVD will come away with an understanding of the multiple possible motivating factors for interfaith engagement, by having heard about the personal experience, personal reflection, and initiatives of the individuals featured.

By watching this DVD, it is hoped that, in some small way, viewers will have an interfaith experience. This is an important function as some viewers, for a multitude of reasons, may be limited by circumstance in their ability to meet and form friendships with those of other faiths.

It is hoped that members of the Uniting Church will view this DVD and be encouraged to explore their own faith. It is also hoped that the DVD will appeal to those outside the Uniting Church, and be of benefit also to a broader/wider audience.

5. ROF INVOLVEMENT IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Although the Working Group is not directly involved with theological education offered by the Uniting Church's theological colleges, it supports the value and importance of offering courses on religious pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue as a means of strengthening competencies and skills in relating cross culturally. The United Theological College offers the following two courses, Christian theology and religious pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue, both of which are taught by the Chairperson of the working Group on relations with other Faiths and a member of the working Group Rev. Matthew Wilson. Both courses are offered as electives every second year and are open to lay, ordained and candidates for Ministry. The Interfaith Dialogue course was well attended when it was last offered in January 2011 as a week-long intensive. This course deals with both aspects of interfaith dialogue – the

theory and the theology and the practice of interfaith dialogue. As part of the course students are introduced to different religious places of worship as well as meeting and conversing with practitioners and theologians of other faith traditions. Feedback received from those who attended the course was very favourable and affirming, highlighting the need for opportunities to learn and acquire skills and competencies in cross cultural living.

6. OTHER INTER-FAITH CONVERSATIONS

As part of the working groups' commitment to respond to the challenges of living in a multicultural and multifaith Australia, the group has begun a series of conversations with the Hindu Council of Australia, sharing in faith forums and participation in local harmony day events. These events can be developed in response to a violent occurrence in a local community. The Hindu community has been targeted by racial violence in some local government areas. Early discussions have also begun with the Buddhist Council of Australia.

7. THEOLOGY OF INTER-FAITH RELATIONS FRIENDSHIP IN THE PRESENCE OF DIFFERENCE:

As part of our operational guidelines to 'reflect on the theological basis, on which inter-faith dialogue should occur and develop statements and resources for use by the church when working with people of other faiths,' the Working Group undertook the task of revising the 2000 resource "Living with the neighbour who is different." The resource received in 2000 at the 9th Assembly from the Doctrine Working Group was also developed into a study booklet. It has proved to be a very necessary and successful theological resource for the church. As the resource was written prior to September 11th, the Working Group on Relations with other Faiths felt it was time to reflect theologically on its implications in the Australian context and to take into account the changing scholarship post September 11th. This theological reflection process began in 2007 with a joint

colloquium between the Working Group on Doctrine (WGD) and Relations with Other Faiths which laid the foundation for further exploration. In 2009 the Working group on Relations With other Faiths (Rof) agreed to commission the Rev Dr Keith Rowe to author another statement on interfaith relations on its behalf. This process began in early 2010 with ongoing conversation with the Working group on Doctrine (WGD), the Working group on Relations with other faiths, (ROF) and other appropriate parties, including a variety of cross cultural participants and interfaith practitioners. The result of this process is a resource to be presented for consideration at the 13th Assembly titled "Friendship in the presence of difference: Christian Witness in Multifaith Australia

Working Group on Relations with other Faiths: members

Mr Geoff Boyce, Rev. Dr Manas Ghosh, Rev. Heather Griffin, Rev. David Pargeter, Rev. Marie E Wilson, Rev. Matthew Wilson

RoF Executive

Rev. Seforosa Carroll (Convener), Debra Porter, Wilma Viswanathan, Rev. Glenda Blakefield (ex-officio)

We wish to thank all the members of the Working Group on other Faiths for sharing their considerable expertise as practitioners and scholars in various areas of interfaith endeavour throughout Australia. We also wish to thank the administrative and educational project staff for their innovative, committed and enthusiastic work in support of the work of Relations with other Faiths. We give thanks to God to all who give of their time to this Working Group.

**Rev Seforosa Carroll
Convener**

**Rev Glenda Blakefield
Associate General Secretary**