

Break Out Session: "Culture Identity, Religion, Language and Belonging"
Municipal Association of Victoria Conference 2016: "From Multiculturalism to Inclusion",
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As I begin I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we gather and pay my respects to them; I honour their care of the land and make a commitment to work for reconciliation and justice.

In his opening comments at the November 2105 Forum held here in the City of Greater Dandenong, entitled "*Creating Change through Dialogue: Social Cohesion - Young People and Families*", Professor Greg Barton from the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship & Globalisation, Deakin University remarked that faith and being human is here to stay - as is the desire for value, meaning and belonging. Faith grows deeper with humanity; it is not a threat to our own traditions but enriches it – humanity moves us to care and to care is to be human. Belonging is an acute human need - human nature abhors a vacuum. And as we know, he stated that culture and tradition in Australia is very often shaped by religion. This is the reality in this City of Greater Dandenong where it is often quoted that there are over 100 Places of Worship [one day that number may be researched for accuracy].

The Age's Good Weekend magazine also in November last year carried an article about Hillsong, a very large and popular church in Sydney. It's concluding sentence on where the appeal of this particular church lies said: "*Moral certainty, community and a sense of identity. There is something so attractive about a black and white view of the world*".

Community and a sense of identity are important and it is reassuring when there is a certainty about *anything*, but for many people, and for those of us involved in "religion" as expressed through interfaith work, things are often not as clear cut and straight forward as we would like them to be. There are challenges in managing intersecting diversities with competing interests and within each faith and spiritual tradition there is a continuum of nuanced understandings which may be at odds with each other even though from the same faith/spiritual tradition – interpretation, diverse cultural backgrounds, family of origin expectations, generational understandings etc.,

However there ARE some essential common principles that people of all faiths and spiritual traditions and good will . . . and people who do not commit to any formal religious tradition can subscribe to as a moral compass and guide for living. This basis also provides the grounds for some people to move from their birth faith to another. A faith/spiritual perspective can unite across cultures.

Recognizing the fact that Local Governments are closest to the ground, and given that I work for the longest established Interfaith Network in Australia, a Network that shares an equal but independent partnership with the local civic authority [City of Greater Dandenong] this presentation will be framed by a grassroots interfaith perspective.

Just a few preliminary comments on terminology because 'language speaks': (1) I hear people use the word interfaith 'movement' to describe what is happening in the interfaith arena today. 'Movement' **can** be described as an active commitment by leaders of faith traditions to engage with other traditions in an organised way – often there's a particular

program or initiative that becomes the vehicle for the process, such as within the United Nations, or individual governments or government bodies. But 'movement' implies an amalgam that loses the particularity of each faith/spiritual tradition. As well people can misunderstand and inaccurately think that interfaith is about another or new religion so I think the term interfaith 'engagement' is a more helpful term.

(2) I also think it is useful to define two terms that are often used interchangeably but which I think are different; these terms frame my understanding of interfaith engagement: Multifaith & Interfaith – perhaps akin to the concepts multicultural and intercultural.

Interfaith “supposes an ongoing relationship or dialogue between people of different faiths and spiritual traditions” (Guidelines for Multifaith Gatherings – Victorian Council of Churches) It indicates a development in understanding and relationships between members. People are involved in an attempt to understand another’s faith tradition (and their experience of that faith tradition) to come to some common ground, through dialogue. Many who engage in interfaith dialogue find there’s an unexpected benefit in that they find that their experience of their own faith tradition is deepened through the process.

Multifaith is different. Multifaith does not necessarily suppose an ongoing relationship but is alongside or parallel – it is a gathering for a common purpose or event. It can often be a public event or gathering. Public multi faith Community Gatherings at times of distress and disaster like the tsunami in 2005, the Victorian bushfires in 2009, the earthquakes in Japan etc., have enabled the wider community to come together for a time of reflection and prayer. Facilitated and organised by people of different faiths and spiritual traditions who are engaged in interfaith conversation with each other, these gatherings have offered a space for people to express their sorrow and loss, to hear prayers and meditations from diverse faiths and spiritual traditions and to take time to reflect, meditate or pray in their own way. These efforts through interfaith practice and dialogue and the actions of a few has the potential to affect the perceptions and wellbeing of the wider community.

In the context of interfaith, 'religion' can be a force for good or evil. Generally media would have us focus on the things that divide rather than what brings us together through our shared humanity and concerns for issues that affect us all. On seeing some Places of Worship for the first time, a young woman on a recent Tour to Places of Worship that the Interfaith Network conducted for people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds said:

“... I am used to growing up with different cultures and faiths meshing together, so seeing it in person is a lot different from hearing people talk about it, seeing it in pictures. What I like most about face-to-face interaction is that it helps you expand your knowledge and expanding your knowledge always helps you fit into different societies no matter who you are and meeting people . . . just the warmth of humanity I guess. It's so much more different to facing a computer screen with bright colours. Just being on the interfaith tour kind of reinforces that even though everyone in religions are different there is like a thread of similarity that runs through all of them, so I like finding what can drive us together rather than picking the differences that people use to push us apart.”

This is not to deny difference/diversity - we must also acknowledge that there are differences. What unites us is not more important than what is different – differences are

great assets and just as important. Just as bio-diversity is necessary for survival, so too is faith/spiritual diversity. BUT you have to start somewhere and a conversation/dialogue/engagement if you like, needs to begin on some common ground. And while I have already flagged the challenge of managing intersecting diversities with competing interests and the diversity within each faith/spiritual tradition for those of us involved in “religion” as expressed through interfaith work, faith/spiritual belief is and can be a shared touch point and lead to activities which celebrate pluralism, diversity and inclusiveness while sharing a common humanity.

A LITTLE BIT OF THE HISTORY

In August 1988, the then City of Springvale embarked on a two year Access & Equity project. At that time, the Asian community was getting bad press about drug related crime and Council's Access & Equity Officer was asked to come up with a community relations proposal that would promote harmonious relations among Springvale's diverse communities.

A suggested approach was to emphasize positive symbols and gestures of co-operation. Credible leadership was needed and the Springvale Faith Leaders were envisioned as being able to fulfil this - they would be able to encourage their communities.

In February 1989, the Access & Equity Officer met with the Ministers' Fraternal, a network of Christian (Western) leaders – some were in favour, some not. Some thought work was needed on Christian unity first; some expressed difficulty in working with other faiths. A Uniting Church Minister & a Catholic Priest agreed to work with the Council Officer.

From here, there were visits to various Faith Leaders; it was obvious from these visits that there was a basis of a supportive network for interfaith co-operation.

In May 1989 the first gathering of Faith Leaders at Council was held to consider what action could be taken to promote harmonious relations.

One year after the initial beginnings, in August 1989 at City Hall, leaders of faith communities signed a Common Statement, making a personal commitment to the Mayor and Councilors to work together. The CEO of Council recommended continued support for the Interfaith Project through the Access and Equity Officer.

Value was seen in Faith Leaders initiating and organising an Annual Event as well as encouraging interaction between communities. From this basis has come the Interfaith Network's regular Annual Gathering held in October every year. Regular meetings of Faith Leaders was also seen as important and supported by Council; these also continue today in the form of monthly meetings.

ACTIVITIES

- ✚ Annual Gathering for Faith Leaders [A Common Statement is signed as a commitment to each other and the City of Greater Dandenong]
- ✚ Annual Gathering of Schools also in October: Greater Dandenong Combined Schools Interfaith Gathering
- ✚ Annual Interfaith Breakfast held during World Interfaith Harmony Week in February

- ✚ Tours to Places of Worship: Public/Special; police are now involved; funding from OMAC to conduct tours for people from refugee & asylum seeker backgrounds
- ✚ Prayers offered at every Council meeting
- ✚ Participation in new Mayoral induction every year
- ✚ Launch of a faith-based family violence preventative resource: "*Promoting Equality & Respect: An Interfaith Collaboration on Preventing Family Violence*"; a working group has continued from this to focus on (i) primary prevention with careful attention/awareness to the difficulties of being caught up in responding to Family Violence; (ii) advocacy, promotion and practical implementation of the faith-based family violence preventative resource & (iii) ongoing training for the Working Group members. A workshop was also held to raise the issue of Public Violence against women perceived as 'other' or 'different' based on faith, ability, work role etc.,
- ✚ Talking Faith? Forums in the libraries [once or twice a year]
- ✚ Working to produce a coffee table book/video around the many beautiful places of worship in the area
- ✚ Monthly meetings of Faith Leaders

BENEFITS

Interfaith engagement in a welcoming and inclusive manner builds trust, understanding and hope . . . often in a context of the broader narrative being at odds with what interfaith engagement is about such as world conflicts, political agendas etc.,

Being a multi cultural and multi faith community can bring unsettlement in the local community when there is conflict overseas. When conflict arose resulting in the Gulf War in 1991, the Interfaith Network represented by a Christian Minister, a Jewish Rabbi and Muslim Imam, stood together in Council Chambers and in turn each offered a prayer.

When there was conflict in the Balkans, resulting in difficulties here, the Serbian Welfare Association, Council and the Interfaith Network tried to resolve this through support and talking through the conflict. A letter was sent to all sides offering support, saying that no one should suffer because of conflict overseas, and that it was possible, indeed *important* that we live here together in harmony and with respect for each other.

When the Pope died, the Imam from a local Mosque went around to the neighbouring Catholic Church to offer his condolences to that community.

These kinds of responses are possible because there is a Network of trust and friendship in place. This is so important because at times of stress, whether in the local community or overseas, this ongoing commitment to trying to understand each other acts in a preventative way, rather than in a reactionary manner, where difficulties and tensions are further exacerbated.

I've already mentioned the numerous Places of Worship found in the City of Greater Dandenong built by many migrant communities over a long period of time since arrival. They start off in a small house, move to larger house, then maybe to a hall and then to building a full Place of Worship. Often any available funds are used in building such Places of Worship before any establishment of their own homes because this is their centre, their village well, their hub - their Community & Connection - the place that holds things for them while they

transition into new and strange-to-them ways of living and being. And faith holds them through often awful experiences of war, trauma, upheaval and disaster. These are special places that provide sanctuary, hope and support as they adjust.

The sustaining of an interfaith relationship over a period of time is rewarding because in the longer term comes a relationship with the wider community and a keen pride to share their faith, their community and culture once they are established.

Pride in expressing & sharing culture through the lenses of faith is particularly evidenced in the generous and warm hospitality offered in visiting Places of Worship, often offered from a faith perspective of sharing with all who come and sometimes from the position of knowing what it's like to not have anything. Torture and trauma from people of other faiths on their journey here, creates an opposition to engage but here they meet Australian Hindus, Australian Muslims and Buddhists who are practicing their faith and they positively experience a different way culturally of expressing that faith in another place.

For example, in preparation for a tour, I telephoned the Venerable monk to ask about a visit to his Temple for a group of people from asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds. I also asked whether his community could provide a special morning tea from his own cultural tradition. His comment was: *"It is good to be expanding and opening up services being offered. I will get some people from the community to prepare morning tea and be there to make them feel welcome!"*

IMPACT of Interfaith ENGAGEMENT Stories

Early one morning, prior to a tour to places of worship, I listened to a policewoman speak of her anguish over a close work colleague's suicide the previous day. With sunglasses containing her emotions she said she could have chosen to not come on the day's tour but instead was going to use the different places of worship being visited to reflect on, and think about her colleague.

I observed two dear interfaith friends from different faiths in earnest conversation about how one of their faiths could not be a part of the other's new faith organization because of strongly held cultural differences. Because of the friendship and respect they had for each other they were seeking a way through an impasse. I admired their commitment in the midst of a difficult conversation.

I was privileged to be part of a conversation between two religious leaders from different aspects of the Islamic Faith: one Turkish faith leader and one Afghani faith leader – both meeting for the first time. After the initial discussion regarding the possibilities of sharing prayer space the two leaders began exploring and comparing their differences checking with each other the different terminologies each of them use from the one language they could share in – English. What moved me so much was the deep sense of respectful curiosity and compassion each had for the other's experience and tradition: intra-faith {within} transcending cultural traditions.

As part of a working group to develop a faith-based preventive resource on Family Violence I was privileged to work with several faith and spiritual leaders including male faith leaders who wrestled with many aspects of the facts of family violence and the part that faith and

the privilege of position have played in contributing to inequality within faiths and spiritual traditions. I admired their persistence in the midst of wrestling with their sacred texts to find ways of being more inclusive while keeping the truth of those texts.

While all these stories are illustrative they do not create world breaking news. Except for the people in the stories themselves – and that counts!

Interfaith engagement, even if the world moves in the opposite direction is still meaningful: (i) for the individual who is the better for it and (ii) for the ripple effect of compassion and love that has unforeseen positive consequences in the future in an ever-widening circle of goodness. And working together from all traditions to challenge those whose narrow and often ignorant view of other faiths and spiritual traditions lead to hatred and division and violence - is crucial.

Whilst working with the Parliament of the World's Religions, held here in Melbourne in 2009, I learnt four guiding principles which I think underpin and sustain interfaith engagement:

- ◆ Interfaith engagement is about us striving for Harmony - not Unity
- ◆ Interfaith engagement is about coming together (convergence) not consensus
- ◆ Interfaith engagement is about ensuring this happens (facilitation not structure)
- ◆ Interfaith engagement is about building trust which is more important than agreement

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