

ROLE OF FAITHS IN BUILDING PEACE AND HARMONY IN AUSTRALIA

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Statement at

One Humanity, Many Faiths:

An Interfaith Summit for Peace and Harmony in Australia and the Asia-Pacific Region

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1. The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) is the third largest Christian church in Australia (the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches are larger). Its heritage lies in the Protestant Christian traditions of western Europe, particularly from the United Kingdom; and in the ecumenical Christian traditions of the past 150 years which place high value on Christian unity. The church consists of around 1800 congregations, with 300,000 members, and just over 1,000,000 Australians claim an association with the church. The church has a strong record of providing community services throughout Australia (UnitingCare agencies employ over 35,000 staff) and of working for social justice in Australia and across the world. The UCA belongs internationally to the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the World Methodist Council and the Christian Conference of Asia
2. The church's Aboriginal arm is the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. The Congress functions in every state with congregations, community development services, cultural organizations and several schools. It is particularly prominent across Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.
3. Patterns of migration into Australia through the 20th century mean that the church is multicultural. In 1985 the church declared that it is a multicultural church, and there are now over 160 non-English-language congregations, worshipping in 26 migrant languages. The majority language is of course English, the first language of about 87% of Uniting Church worshippers.
4. The church has related to the Jewish community in Australia over several decades, chiefly through the Councils for Christian and Jews. The relationship with the Jewish community has long been founded on acknowledgement of our common faith traditions, recognition that over the centuries some Christian theology has contributed to anti-Semitism, the desire to understand each other's faith better, and to live in Australia with peace and respect.
5. In 1988 the Uniting Church realized it must take steps to relate more deliberately with other faiths in Australia. The motivation was the acceptance of living in a multicultural and multi-faith society, the need to understand each other's faiths, and a firm commitment to live in Australia with respect for people of other faiths and in peace.
6. The church has been much helped by its partnerships with 36 churches overseas, many of whom are living as minority faiths within their country, for whom inter-faith relationships are a longstanding natural part of their life. Our partnerships with churches in India, Sri Lanka, Korea, Thailand, Indonesia have been particularly helpful to us in our learning about the importance, the joys and difficulties of inter-faith relationships.
7. A national Working Group on Relations with Other Faiths was established in 1989. Its purpose was stated as:
 - to address the question of how Christians in a multi-faith community are called to bear witness to their faith,
 - to raise awareness within the Uniting Church of the presence of other faiths,
 - to be available to councils of the Uniting Church, for assistance with understanding other faiths and for advice on particular situations,
 - to assist Christians to understand other faiths,
 - to find creative ways of relating together in local communities and to take steps to make contact with representatives of other faiths in Australia.

8. The Working Group's website (www.assembly.uca.org.au/rof) welcomes visitors with these words:

"We live in a world and a country where people of many cultural and faith backgrounds live together. We believe that this diversity of people is part of creation. As Christians we believe that all people are created by God and that we are called to live together in peace, loving our neighbour as God loves us and all people.

The Assembly has a national group to take a particular interest in the area of interfaith relations, to reflect theologically on interfaith dialogue from a Christian perspective and to advise the church on issues arising."

9. A key publication of the Uniting Church on inter-faith relations is "Living with the neighbour who is different", written in 1999 by a member of the church's Doctrine Commission. Six principles underpinning our relations with people of other faiths are outlined:

A. God is calling us to engage in conversation with people of other faiths.

In a world of human division, in which conflict is often fuelled by religious difference, it is imperative that Christians grow in their appreciation of other faiths and find ways in which we can work together with people of other faiths for the common good. Christ calls us to live in harmony with all other people and so contribute to a world of peace, justice and hospitality.

B. Christians are called to love the neighbour who is different.

The question of how we are to relate to persons of other faiths is a specific expression of the larger question: how can we live with the neighbour who is different? Love is central to Christianity and must continually be brought to bear in this situation. We have to face the hard fact that the Christian Church does not have a consistently good record in respecting and valuing those who we see as 'different'. How are we to move from a history of exclusion of the other to one that embraces the neighbour? Only through a deeper immersion in the love of God made known in Christ. Our personhood need not be threatened by otherness.

C. God has placed the contemporary Church in an ideal situation to engage in genuine dialogue with those of other faiths.

When the Church was at the centre of Western life it tended to relate to those of other faiths from a position of assumed political and social superiority. Much damage has been done to the human community from the outworking of this false assumption. Today Christians are aware that they share this planet with other faith communities who also believe deeply and are shaped by values and styles of living which have integrity. Our conviction is that both the situation in which we find ourselves and the call to dialogue are God given opportunities to our generation.

D. God delights in diversity and seeks unity.

The Creator has set in being an order of incredible diversity and richness. God's repeated affirmation of the goodness of this creation in the Genesis narrative, tells us that the diversity of this creation is God's delight. The story of Babel (Genesis 11) described the human attempt to deny diversity and instead to build a single tower, a single culture. It is doomed to failure and attempts at a monoculture will continue to fail. This perception must be balanced by the perspective of the post Pauline epistles. The purpose of God as expressed in Ephesians 1:9-10 is "a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth." The cosmic Christ is seen as the principle of unity, by which God draws creation into an inclusive wholeness. Unity in Christ does not destroy difference, but robs difference of its power to divide. This is witnessed in (Biblical) passages such as Colossians 1:19-20, Galatians 3:28, and Acts 2:1-13.

E. The Spirit is present in all of life.

No part of life, no person is without the influence of the Holy Spirit. In the inclusivist understanding, the Holy Spirit is present through the whole fabric of the world, yet is uniquely present in Christ and in the fellowship of Jesus' disciples. It does not follow, however, that the life and work of Jesus exhaust the work of the Spirit or exclude the presence of the Spirit in other faiths.

F. The centrality of Jesus Christ in Christian believing is not to be compromised. Christ is the foundation of Christian conviction, believing and living, and cannot be compromised without denying our essential identity. It follows that our way of being with others should be consistent with the way of Jesus and the revelation of God in Christ. It is sometimes feared that Christians might lose their faith in inter-faith dialogue. A more common experience is that it moves participants to enter more deeply into the heart of Christian faith.

10. Through the Uniting Church's Relations with Other Faiths (ROF), programs and initiatives fall into four categories. These are:

Dialogues & Relationships

- UCA National Assembly Christian-Jewish dialogue
- UCA National Assembly Christian-Muslim dialogue through the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils
- Member of the Australian National Dialogue on Christians, Muslims & Jews (ANDCMJ)
- Members who are involved in the Women's Interfaith Network
- In the past ROF has had official links with the Hindu and Buddhist communities

Resources

- Interfaith worship resources:
So you want to worship together. This is a guideline for congregations who wish to engage with other faiths in worship.
We are currently developing a web resource for use in interfaith gatherings
- Theological resources:
Getting Started: Why engage in interfaith relationships. This is a DVD resource for congregations who would like to engage with people of other faiths in their local community. It contains a theological basis for interfaith engagement.

Education

- The Uniting Church recognises and values the need for ongoing research, scholarly interpretation and research in the area of interfaith and multicultural, cross cultural relations. It has been an ongoing tradition to host a gathering of Uniting Church scholars to continue to think through and articulate a Christian theology of other faiths for the church and its members. Most recently the Uniting Church hosted a ministers' conference in Bali, among other things to help church leaders come to terms with the multi-faith context of a near neighbour.
- There are UCA ministers and laypeople that are Chaplains in schools, prisons and hospitals, which, the Uniting Church recognises, are multi-faith placements and therefore is committed to providing continuing theological education and professional development to enable them to minister faithfully, compassionately and intelligently.

In addition we are committed to developing the following:

- Develop interfaith resources for staff in schools such as an Interfaith Guide of "best practices" for education in schools
- Interfaith education in theological colleges
- Develop resources for congregations and councils of the church.

Events

In keeping with our mission of creating awareness of other faiths and sustaining relationships, ROF continues to organise visits to places of worship and participate in global events such as the Parliament of World Religions, and other interfaith seminars and programs.

11. The Uniting Church has a strong commitment to social justice, peace in the world, and human rights. The church's statement *Dignity in Humanity: Recognising Christ in Every Person*, articulates the theological groundings of the Church's commitment to human rights and affirms that
"the Uniting Church believes that every person is precious and entitled to live with dignity because they are God's children, and that each person's life and rights need to be protected or the human community (and its reflection of God) and all people are diminished."
12. The church's *Young Ambassadors for Peace* program is a peace-making program which brings together young leaders from communities in conflict, helping them to see each others' perspectives on the conflict and to work together for peace. This program has brought young people of different faiths together in countries such as Burma, Fiji, Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka.
13. The church sees increasing value in seeking common ground with people of other faiths on issues of justice and peace which face our communities, nation and world. Working together and advocating together across different faiths is a powerful witness to our own constituencies and to the community that people of faith can and do live together in harmony and can and do contribute to peace and justice in the world. Examples of joint action taken in Australia in recent years on issues of justice and peace are:
 - statements against anti-Muslim prejudices voiced by sections of the Australian community at times such as the first Gulf War, the Indonesian inter-communal conflicts, and the Cronulla riots;
 - standing together to oppose the war in Iraq;
 - emergency relief appeals after the 2004 tsunami;
 - advocacy in relation to climate change, rising sea levels etc.
 - advocacy with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in relation to recent changes in their religious programming.
14. The Uniting Church has been at the heart of proposals for a three-faiths visit to Palestine and Israel, to enable leaders of Australia's Christian, Jewish and Islamic communities to undertake a joint visit to Palestine and Israel in the next one or two years. Each community has expressed support in principle for the joint visit, as have the Israeli embassy, the Palestinian representative office and the Australian Foreign Affairs Department. But serious planning will commence only in the next few months.
15. The Uniting Church is keen to see further multi-faith initiatives on matters of peace and justice. While we recognise that a consensus of viewpoints across faiths cannot always be reached - different Christian churches do not always agree! - nevertheless we believe joint action should increasingly be considered on a variety of issues, including matters such as climate change, Australia's economic policies, nuclear disarmament, overseas aid, world poverty. We also wish to encourage more local inter-faith relationships aimed at increasing understanding, respect and joint action on issues of welfare and justice in local communities.
16. The Uniting Church recognises that she is a part of a wider interfaith journey, which is shared with those of other faiths. The Uniting Church acknowledges that as interfaith encounters continue, so too, does the challenge and call for, fresh, new, intelligent articulation and expression of faith.

Gregor Henderson
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