

# B21 RELATIONS WITH OTHER FAITHS

## 1. INTRODUCTION

At the Margaret Thatcher Lecture in 2015, not long after the Fourteenth Assembly, Tony Abbott, a former Australian Prime Minister, announced that ‘the wholesome instinct’ to love one’s neighbour as oneself was ‘leading much of Europe into catastrophic error.’ He was referring to Europe’s welcome of Syrian refugees.

In a poll conducted in September 2016, 49% of Australians indicated they would like to see a ban on Muslims migrating to Australia. This poll was taken shortly after Pauline Hanson’s first speech in the Senate, in which she declared that Australia was being ‘swamped by Muslims.’ Hanson’s distortions of fact and her invocation of the fear of ‘the other’ found a ready response in nearly one in two Australians.

When central tenets of the Christian faith are publicly questioned by a prominent figure, himself a Christian, when the Australian community indicates that giving everyone a fair go is valid only if the ‘other’ looks like us, then it is clear that the Church has much work to do. And while these comments relate specifically to the Muslim community, they also suggest a growing unease in our nation with any who adhere to a different religious tradition.

The Relations with Other Faiths (ROF) Working Group has endeavoured to address this worrying context by continuing its efforts to welcome people of other faiths, stand with them, express interest in their faith traditions and form bonds of friendship. Safe spaces for dialogue have been created and nurtured. These spaces embody the gospel insight that fears of ‘being swamped’ can be transformed into gratitude for the richness that engagement with other faith tradition brings, and that fears of cultural identity being diminished by others can be turned on their head.

## 2. ROF ACTIVITIES AND PROJECTS

In the current triennium, ROF has worked in a number of areas. The ROF website (<https://assembly.uca.org.au/rof/>) continues to be one of the Working Group’s more effective means for sharing news, offering resources and promoting the work of building interfaith relations.

### 2.1 FRIENDSHIP IN THE PRESENCE OF DIFFERENCE

This study guide, a significant focus of ROF’s work during the last triennium, was prepared to enable study and reflection on the Assembly document, “Friendship in the Presence of Difference: Christian Witness in Multi-faith Australia” (This statement was received at the Thirteenth Assembly in July 2012.) The guide is now available on the ROF website (<https://assembly.uca.org.au/fipd>). It raises questions about the rise of religious diversity in Australia, about changing models of Christian identity within this new context, and most importantly calls upon members of the Church to extend the ordinary and vital art of conversation to people of other faiths. ROF thanks Rev. Heather Griffin, who laboured for several years to complete this guide, with the assistance of the Queensland Synod Interfaith Relations Committee, and Rev. Dr David Gill who edited the resource.

### 2.2 IFTAR DINNERS

Last year, the Assembly offered financial support to Synods to organise Iftar dinners. Three Iftar dinners were held in Melbourne (hosted by Synod of Victoria and Tasmania and the Australian Intercultural Society), Sydney (hosted by Assembly, NSW/ACT Synod, Uniting NSW/ACT and Affinity Intercultural Foundation) and Brisbane (hosted by QLD Synod). President Stuart McMillan spoke at the Sydney dinner, offering a message of solidarity that was shared at the other Iftar meals. Approximately 120 people attended the Sydney event held at Parramatta Mission, where the Grand Mufti, Dr. Ibrahim was the keynote speaker. Very positive feedback was received from all three events. Plans are underway to continue this practice in 2018.

### **2.3 ‘THE SULTAN AND THE SAINT’ MOVIE PREMIERE**

The Assembly was a sponsoring partner (along with Affinity, Islamic Sciences and Research Academy (ISRA), and the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations) for the movie premiere of “The Sultan and the Saint”. This movie focusses on the historic meeting between St Francis of Assisi and the Sultan of Egypt, Malik Al-Kamil, in the midst of the Fifth Crusade. About 500 people attended the premiere on 29 July last year, which was held at Western Sydney University.

### **2.4 COLLABORATION WITH UNITING DISASTER RECOVERY**

This triennium, ROF planned to establish ‘crisis groups’ in each Synod, ready to respond rapidly to incidents of religious discrimination and abuse, offering support and solidarity. In pursuing this goal, ROF worked closely with Rev. Dr Stephen Robinson, National Disaster Recovery Officer, who has attended ROF Executive meetings and an annual face-to-face meeting. ROF has appreciated his expertise and insights. Although this goal has not been achieved as first envisaged, we do have greater understanding and appreciation of the work done by the chaplains of different faiths during times of crisis.

### **2.5 INTERFAITH SEPTEMBER**

Rebecca Beisler, our Communications and Resource officer, has done excellent work organising resources for Interfaith September, which have been made available on the ROF website. Late in 2016, inquiries were made about the use of these resources by the Church. Sadly, the feedback suggested there was a very limited uptake. As a result, ROF decided to discontinue producing these resources (2015 and 2016 Interfaith September resources are still available).

## **3. DIALOGUES**

### **3.1 UNITING CHURCH – EXECUTIVE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN JEWRY (ECAJ)**

The Dialogue is now entering its 27<sup>th</sup> year. During the last triennium, the established pattern of meeting twice each year for a day-long gathering, once in Sydney and once in Melbourne, at alternating Uniting Church and Jewish venues, has continued. The format of meetings also remains similar, with morning and afternoon sessions devoted to agreed topics, as well as a brief time of introduction/catchup and a time of general business/sharing of matters of concern.

Over the past three years, we have read the book of Jonah together, discussed matters of marriage and secularisation, and canvassed issues raised through the national debates around sections 18C & D of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975). We have also considered how to engage in a critical discussion of the actions of the State of Israel.

Mutual trust and respect within the dialogue are strong, and the Uniting Church and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry each affirm the importance of this dialogue. However, differences of opinion about ongoing tensions between Israel and Palestine (which can be exacerbated by statements released by the Uniting Church) do place strain on this relationship.

The past triennium also saw the resignation of long-term Uniting Church member of the dialogue, Rev. Prof Howard Wallace – the longest-serving UCA member of the dialogue group. We acknowledge Howard’s long interest and contribution to the relationship between Jewish and Christian communities in Australia and thank him for his efforts and work on behalf of the Assembly.

**Rev. Dr Matthew Wilson**

### 3.2 AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL DIALOGUE OF CHRISTIANS, MUSLIMS, AND JEWS (ANDCMJ)

Over the last triennium, Rev. Michael Barnes and Wilma Viswanathan from ROF represented the UCA at the ANDCMJ (which was initiated by the National Council of Churches in 2003). The dialogue meets several times a year to discuss agreed topics. Recently, the dialogue canvassed the different approaches of the three religions to forgiveness. Other topics included the situation of Indigenous people in Australia, at which former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda addressed us, and the response of the three religions to refugees. The discussion is valuable. Two critical questions continue to arise concerning the involvement of others beyond the 'regular crowd' in the dialogue, and the possibility of moving beyond debate and statements to joint action.

### 3.3 PROPOSED NATIONAL DIALOGUE WITH THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

Over the last triennium, several members of ROF, led by Debra Porter, worked hard to establish a formal dialogue between the UCA and the Muslim community. This has not yet eventuated. ROF commends to the ASC the need for further work in this area. A formal dialogue would add significantly to the many local and informal initiatives that members of the Uniting Church have already undertaken.

## 4. INTERFAITH RELATIONS

The members of ROF are active practitioners, seeking to build interfaith relations at local and regional levels. Rev. Neil Smith has done some excellent work building relations with the Muslim community in the Central Coast and Hunter regions of NSW. Debra Porter has made connections with the Church of Latter Day Saints. (News of these activities can be found on the ROF website.)

### 4.1 WOMEN'S INTERFAITH NETWORK (WIN) REPORT

The Women's Interfaith Network (WIN) was convened in March 2001. It aims to bring together women of different faith traditions to promote understanding, respect, and harmony among followers of different religions not organisations.

WIN has representatives from Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Zoroastrian and Quaker and Indigenous communities. The readings from their scriptures reach across all boundaries, speak of the essential equality between men and women, of love and compassion, unity and diversity and Indigenous spirituality.

The Core group meets monthly at NSW Parliament House. We choose a topic, and each faith speaks to it explaining in depth how that faith understands the subject. Some of the topics have been: Death and Dying, Traditions and Customs relating to Marriage, How our faiths act on issues of Peace, Structures in our faiths, Women's involvement within our faiths, What most people don't know about our faiths, Some "stuff" we don't like about our faiths, Keeping up with our scriptures: This year we are talking about traditions/customs we find difficult to understand.

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. These words of Raimon Panikkar, a Roman Catholic priest, sum up what interfaith relationship should be and how WIN members share with each other.

#### ***The Sermon on the Mount of Intrareligious Dialogue:***

*When you enter into an intrareligious dialogue, do not think beforehand what you have to believe.*

*When you witness to your faith, do not defend yourself or your vested interests, sacred as they may appear to you. Do like the birds in the skies: they sing and fly and do not defend their music or their beauty.*

*When you dialogue with somebody, look at your partner as a revelatory experience, as you would – and should – look at the lilies in the fields.*

*When you engage in intrareligious dialogue, try first to remove the beam in your own eye before removing the speck in the eye of your neighbour.*

*Blessed are you when you do not feel self-sufficient while being in dialogue.*

*Blessed are you when you trust the other because you trust in Me.*

*Blessed are you when you face misunderstandings from your own community or others for the sake of your fidelity to Truth.*

*Blessed are you when you do not give up your convictions, and yet you do not set them up as absolute norms.*

*Woe unto you, you theologians and academicians, when you dismiss what others say because you find it embarrassing or not sufficiently learned.*

*Woe unto you, you practitioners of religions, when you do not listen to the cries of the little ones.*

*Woe unto you, you religious authorities, because you prevent change and (re)conversion.*

*Woe unto you, religious people, because you monopolize religion and stifle the Spirit, which blows where and how she wills.*

I want to end with these words of Josie Lacey, spoken in 2001 at the launch of WIN.

*'The world is in turmoil. Wars are being fought in the name of God and religion. I believe women have the ability to communicate and to show that religion can unite us. Women are not afraid to communicate, but society as a whole must learn to talk. I think it's the only way to overcome divisions and social destruction in our community. No one is trying to upstage anyone, and no one is trying to convert anyone. Maybe we'll be role models for men.'*

**Wilma Viswanathan**

## **5. CONCLUSION**

### **5.1 RESOURCES AND TIME**

Like a number of areas of the life of the UCA, ROF has dreamed of great things, but not had the resources to achieve as much as we hoped. Further, building strong relations across different religions takes time. It is slow work, and its benefits are often intangible. The parable of the sower and the seed (Mark 4:1-9) speaks to the reality of this ministry.

### **5.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL CONVERSATIONS AND DISCERNING THE SPIRIT**

A local story: Gordon Uniting Church in Sydney has marked Interfaith September for four years, welcoming and listening to many representatives of different faiths at Sunday worship services. And yet, the most memorable result of this program was not planned. A person on the fringe of the Church community initiated and organised an interfaith coffee afternoon at her home with the

Grand Mufti, Dr. Ibrahim. It was a memorable occasion and it is still spoken about; it moved people beyond formal dialogue to informal conversation and friendship.

Susan Carland wrote, in exasperation, “The most troubling aspect of the current debate about Muslims in Australia is that facts are irrelevant”. Sadly, the facts will remain irrelevant until people of different faiths meet each other in conversation and friendship at the local level. Until this happens, across the nation in every community where there is a church, the work of the UCA at a national level will remain incomplete. It is sharing in Iftar meals, taking part in the activities of Religions for Peace, grieving with Jewish friends at Sho’ah remembrances or rejoicing with Muslim friends marking Eid al-Fitr, and many other ways besides, that understanding, friendship, and cooperation are built.

For all the bonds of friendship that members of the Church have built with people of other faiths, we give thanks to God. May these connections continue to grow!

### **5.3 THANKS**

President Stuart McMillan has shown a keen interest in and support for the work of ROF, attending face-to-face meetings and working to build a good relationship with the Grand Mufti, Dr. Ibrahim. One of the fruits of this relationship was a shared statement about the Rohingya crisis (<https://assembly.uca.org.au/news/item/2714-urgent-call-to-halt-persecution-of-rohingyas>)

An Assembly restructure, early in the triennium, witnessed the departure of Rev. Glenda Blakefield. This left a significant gap in resourcing the work of ROF. ROF records its sincere appreciation for all that Glenda contributed to the work of building relations with people of other faiths.

All the members of the ROF Working Group are deeply committed to the same ministry of building relationships and friendships. Their passion, insight, wisdom, and humour have contributed significantly to this ministry, and I record my thanks to them.

### **5.4 LOOKING FORWARD**

With a restructure of Assembly Working groups already underway, the oversight of building relations with people of other faiths moves into a new phase. The importance of this ministry will only increase in a community too readily divided by religious and ethnic allegiances. This ministry is vitally important to our nation and to our church, and we commend its ongoing life to all members of the Uniting Church.

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**Rev. Michael Barnes**  
**Convenor**  
**Relations with Other Faiths Working Group**