

SEEDS OF PEACE

SWEE-ANN KOH AND THE PEACE CHURCH



In one sense, Peace Churches are nothing new. The *Mennonite* (and wider *Anabaptist*) and *Quaker* (*Society of Friends*) traditions are witness to that, and both are very much alive in their peacemaking today. How many other churches, other religious, or secular, bodies are there however which make an explicit commitment to putting peace and reconciliation at the centre of their lives? **Keilor Rd Uniting Church** in Melbourne is one encouraging recent example which offers one model and encouragement for others to follow.

Keilor Road Uniting Church, led by the **Revd. Swee-Ann Koh**, a Minister for the Essendon North West Linked Congregation, launched itself recently on its mission to become a *Peace Church*. This marked a new departure. For, as the Uniting Church's *Justice and International Mission Unit* in Melbourne puts it:

'As you drive down Essendon's busy Keilor Rd past the Uniting Church you can't help but notice the huge sign on the front of the church *'May Peace Prevail on Earth'*. However you may not be able to read the rest of it unless you read another language. The same message is proclaimed in Arabic, Italian, Greek and Chinese, reflecting the make up of the local community. This may seem a just a typical church sign type of message but this one actually reflects a five year plan adopted by the congregation, aimed at becoming a church of peace and non-violence.



In thinking about its future the congregation asked itself 'If God could grant one wish for the world, what would you wish for?' Most members wished for peace in the world and so this became the vision of the congregation:

***"To become a peace church... one member at a time.
Building a peaceful world... one family at a time."***

This is based on the belief that we have to be the peace that we want to world to have. To be a peace church, each individual member has to live out that peace. To be a peaceful world, each family and nation has to live out that peace. So to build peace we must start with peace in ourselves and then look for peace in others. This is reflected in the congregation's mission statement where, they resolve to:

Pray for world peace

Experience the peace of God

Advocate peace and justice for the powerless and marginalised

Comfort those who are victims of exploitation and violence

Educate and build a culture of peace and nonviolence in the wider community

This starts with the members own prayers and experiences and then moves to help others and challenge the wider community.'

Decade to Overcome Violence

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Becoming a Peace Church

The members of Keilor Road Uniting Church do not profess to be being a special kind of church, or that they bear the marks of peacemakers more than others. Yet the key thing is that they have made a specific intent to working on this. As they say:

We are a diverse, welcoming congregation.

We are old and young.

We are city-dwellers and suburbanites.

We are middle class and just getting by.

We are singles and married and living in many different types of families.

We are a congregation of a few colours that would like to be a congregation of many colours.

We come together from many different faith traditions and hold different political views. But in spite all of our differences we are committed to the way of peace and non-violence as revealed in the lives and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Recognising that 'peace is a gift from God and a task entrusted to us', they are therefore seeking to reach out to others over a five-year period in learning how to live justly and in peace in the church, family and the community.

Working on a five-year plan - making links with others at home and overseas

The Keilor Road Peace Church five year plan covers all elements of the life of the congregation and lots of activities in which to engage the wider community. There are plans for worship services, prayer gatherings and bible studies all based around the peace theme. For the wider community there are workshops on mediation skills, peace walks, picnics, a peaceful parenting program, toy fairs (no violent toys allowed) poster and poem competitions, and movie nights with films like *Romero*, or *Armistad*. In addition there are a series of seminars on *Making Peace with your... God, self, anger, parents, losses, past etc.*

Further afield, in 2005, Swee-Ann also organised a tour to Japan, marking the 60th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, meeting and sharing with other peace groups and organisations, and attending the anniversary service on 6 August at the Peace Museum, Hiroshima.

Resourcing Peace Churches

Each Christian, and other religious, tradition has its own special resources for peacemaking from which it can draw. In Keilor Road's case, they are fortunate to have the support of the Justice and International Mission Unit of the Uniting Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, which has itself made an impressive contribution to peace and reconciliation in the *Decade to Overcome Violence*. Can we also 'draw on our wells' to build peace intentionally in *our* community?

Sources and more information

<http://vic.uca.org.au/jim/DOV/html/stories.htm>

<http://users.bigpond.net.au/gannawarra/nwl/mission.htm>

for Australian Anabaptists www.anabaptist.asn.au

for Australian Society of Friends www.quakers.org.au



**PREVENT CONFLICT:
READY TO TALK
READY TO LISTEN**