

FACC NATIONAL CONFERENCE

“Working collaboratively towards full participation”

18 November 2005

Mercure Sydney Airport Hotel 20 Levey Street Wolli Creek

Panel

Harmony and successful community relations – *helping newly emerging communities to have access and equity in resources*

Given that representatives of three religious and two multicultural organisations have been invited onto this panel, it would seem that the FACC understands religion is a key issue in building harmony and successful community relations. This contradicts the popular but ill-informed view that religion is a source of disharmony, violence, and exploitation. I think the others on this panel would agree that it is not religion itself that does these things, but people who use the cloak of religion to disguise other motives. We intentionally co-operate together to send a message that such abuse is not acceptable. I cannot imagine Africa without its religious vitality, a major difference between that continent and this one, where religion is rarely acknowledged and even more rarely discussed.

Australians might never agree about religion, but people of good will do agree about how we should **treat one another**. Successful community relations are not about everyone being the same, but about acceptable rules of behaviour that freely govern how we treat each other and work for the common good. We will not remove fear, terror, or violence by dishing out more of the same. Common human decency, although it seems frail, stands a better chance than all the mechanisms of war. That's our choice – to strengthen Australia as a society where deliberate disadvantage, prejudice, and violence might not only be curtailed by legislation, but more importantly is socially and morally unacceptable.

All societies are in transition. Humans are never finished building their society. By nature society cannot stand still. Life isn't static – everywhere, all the time, it's always beginning, always changing, always moving on. Every day we begin this journey and every evening, often exhausted, we have reached a new place. It might be where we planned to be, the day might not have gone as we intended, but it is still our starting point for the next day, the next stage of the journey.



Even after arrival in a new country the journey is not over. Because things look unfamiliar or there are barriers like a new language, bureaucracy, or culture, the new place might look static and unmoveable. The reality, however, is more fluid than that. Emerging communities have the capacity to change the surrounding culture. As an Australian I have seen this happen time and time again. Australia itself is on a journey, changing, responding to new arrivals, understanding their needs, and working for their welfare and a harmonious nation. Simply by being here, we each influence the direction of that journey. As we meet one another, discover one another, listen, and learn from one another, we are setting out on a new direction.

Perhaps more than many, Australia is a newly emerging society. Where it's going from here on in is up to all of us. It will require three things of us that will sometimes test us to the limit:

- Time
- Patience
- Trust

There is no way of short-circuiting these three things. Things will take as long as they will take – 1 generation, 2 generations, or 3 or more generations. If a car breaks down you might fix it in a day of hard work, if you have the right parts and the necessary tools, knowledge base, and skill. If you don't have those things, it's impossible to fix a broken car. Society is infinitely more complex than a car, and it doesn't come with a workshop manual, or a ready-made supply of spare parts. In some sense we are making it up as we go along.

It all takes time, patience, and trust. There are immediate needs for housing, money, and a job. Others will talk about those things, but behind them there are higher order needs. Government Departments, officials, or agencies can't produce community harmony. A Government can help, or a government can hinder, but a government cannot create. The people create it – by making good choices, right decisions, and building meaningful relationships. It's our process.

There are many communities emerging in Australia today, and some of the newest among them are African communities. As they emerge Australia is also emerging – society here is



not finished. It is still happening. African communities will have an increasing influence on what happens here. Your presence changes this country – for the better. Australia is learning that it cannot simply repeat methodologies that worked for the resettlement of European migrants in the 1950s to 1970s, or of Indo-Chinese in the 1970s and 1980s. African communities need new responses, and Australia is listening, and learning. It takes time, patience, and trust.

African communities are being noticed. People are becoming aware, and they are discovering that there is a lot they don't know about African communities, but want to know – about you, about who you are, how you see the world, how you want to be part of Australia. I have been grateful to see this happening through Church support groups right around the country. In many Church Communities people want to help. They aren't always part of the official system.

At this time, and in this process, taking the time to know and express our religious faith is more important than ever. It functions to provide better values than selfishness and greed. It teaches that life is about many other things than just accumulating wealth and power. True religion causes us to live together in harmony, not in fear and suspicion. In the religious dialogues in which I participate, we start with the basic acceptance of one another as human beings, fellow travellers, with the dignity that means for each person, and each community.

Therefore, I am saying that African communities are already part of Australia. The rest takes time, patience, and trust. As some of the most recent arrivals in Australia, you are contributing to what it will become. None of us will be around to see the outcome of that, but perhaps the next generation, or the one after that, might. That's the hope in which we all should live.

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