

to Manningham Civic Service 1 June 2008

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church 51 Victoria St Doncaster

Acknowledgement of Country (Wurrundjeri)

I wanted to come here tonight and tell you about the success story of interfaith relations in Australia. They are strong, and improving. We have laid the foundations for very good relations between our religions.

This success story, however, for which so many of us work so hard, is all too easily changed by headlines like this one from yesterday's Sydney Morning Herald: "*Am I the next Pauline Hanson? I hope so.*" The story is about Kate McCulloch, a resident of Camden, described in the article as 'a Catholic mother of four' who has 'railed against Muslims who "take our welfare"'. The background is the local Council's rejection of a planning application for a school. The article paints a picture of community division, religious suspicion, and the exclusion of those who are different.

This kind of shouting across the barricades sets us back years. While we build solid bridges of understanding between our faiths, and spread a positive message through of events like tonight, it's can all be forgotten when people start throwing labels around.

We cannot allow the work of thousands of people locally, regionally, and nationally, to be jeopardised by others who make louder noises out of self interest. The thing about people of faith is that they don't usually make the loudest noise. Instead they are busy behind the scenes, in small groups and organisations, working out ways we can live together better in this place we call Australia. It's often not glamorous work, but it's where the real results are. By patience and perseverance we can succeed in building real relationships that will weather the negative publicity of a situation like Camden. The difficulty we face is getting the message out there.

Australia is slowly realising that we can't have a successful multicultural society that permits only a privatised, innocuous form of religion. Put simply, religion matters, and we must take it seriously if we are to come up with durable solutions for a healthy, inclusive, and harmonious society.

To find these solutions we need cooperation from religious communities and the various levels of government must cooperate. Among governments, local councils have been leading the way. States are also starting to take interfaith seriously, and you have your own unique developments in Victoria (*Cf. VCC Booklet 'On the path to Mutual Respect' funded by Vic Office of Multicultural Affairs*). The Federal government is also stirring, although not always with the sensitivity it needs. Initiatives like Harmony Day grants, for instance, have been very useful (*Cf. JCMA pamphlet 'A Comparative Guide'*). The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has also taken up religious issues, especially with South East Asia, which I want to say a little about in a moment. Even AusAID now realises that the best development work must take religious communities into account.

This is all new territory for Australians, and we are still experimenting. The best things happen at the grass roots, when people get together to make a difference. This is the strength of interfaith dialogue. Help from local governments can strengthen the whole movement, with good results in the local community. A most remarkable initiative took place last year on the Sunshine Coast at Maleny, for instance, where a committee set up quite a large interfaith festival, with Council support, and ran a smorgasbord of music, prayer, culture, life-style, and dialogue. It was an ambitious event that was amazingly successful. Unfortunately, the main organiser died recently, and the event is unlikely to happen again.

I work on the national level, however, and that's what I'd like to tell you a little about. I like to think of our national work as complementing what you do in the local area. We want to encourage you, and we need your encouragement in return. National dialogue is really quite hard because Australians tend to think in States, not as a nation.

I will outline three national projects:

1. The Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims, and Jews
2. The Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations
3. The Regional Interfaith Dialogues

1. The Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims, and Jews

This began around 2000, and became formalised in 2002. The purpose is similar to many local groups, including yours in Manningham: To provide opportunity for the national bodies of each faith to come together and build understanding and harmony in the Australian context.

We might be a national group, but there's no budget or staff for the dialogue, so it's not really as grand as it sounds. It's national because national groups have initiated it. It's limited to three religions, because that's all we can manage. There simply isn't the money, or the organisational backup, to allow for a more complicated dialogue. Maybe one day we will be able to manage it.

We use a simple structure. We each have a team of 5-6 people, who gather for dialogue 3-4 times per year. We rotate the venues between the three religions, and whoever isn't hosting shares the chairing. This keeps the involvement of the groups pretty even.

Of course, there are many arguments about who can really represent any religion on a national level. The dialogue involves representatives from the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, and the National Council of Churches in Australia. Not everyone is happy about that balance, but it's an internal issue for each religion to come up with suitable representatives.

The dialogue is a long term project. One of the liveliest cycles so far has examined concepts from each religion that the others regarded as problematic. Jews had to explain Zionism, Muslims had to explain Jihad, and Christians had to explain Trinity. The present cycle is a discussion on visions of redemption, and the Christians are preparing for their presentation in July.

In addition to this kind of activity, the dialogue also makes public statements, usually at times when one or another of the communities is under stress – for example, during the Cronulla riots.

2. The Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations

This is a much wider group that is built more around a ‘communities’ model than a religious one. It was brought together in 2003 by the Council for a Multicultural Australia. The focus of APRO is on religious freedom and equal opportunity, and uses a multicultural, human rights framework to give a voice to government.

At the heart of APRO lies a commitment the members have made not to let changing circumstances drive them apart, and to continue to work for a healthy and productive community. The next major APRO event is a media training day in August. The issue of media reporting continually comes up as an issue in interfaith work, and APRO is attempting to be proactive by organising media orientation and training in interfaith issues.

3. Regional Interfaith Dialogue

Most Australians don’t hear about it, but in countries like Thailand and Indonesia it gets good press coverage. In 2004 the Australian and Indonesian foreign ministers had the idea of gathering teams of religious leaders from across SE Asia, to meet periodically and develop a culture of religious understanding across the region. New Zealand soon became involved, and brought with them Fiji, so the Pacific is now represented, as is Papua New Guinea. This is a costly exercise, and politically and logistically very difficult. It can only happen with government help.

15 countries are involved, and each has a team of about 10 people to represent their religious population. The Minister for Foreign Affairs selects the Australian team, which has so far consisted of 6 Christians, 2 Muslims, 1 Hindu, 1 Buddhist, and 1 Jew, making a little more than 10. No other religions have been included so far, but there have been attempts to include an Indigenous voice. Four Dialogues have taken place – Yogyakarta in Indonesia, Cebu in the Philippines, Waitangi in New Zealand, and Phnom Penh in Cambodia. Delegations are expected to report on interfaith developments in their countries between meetings, and discuss policy issues that will build stronger understanding and relationships.

The dialogues have singled out education and media training as being very important, and some countries have begun specific projects. In Australia's case, our government is regularly bringing over small groups of religious leaders, and arranging meetings for them in Melbourne, Canberra, and Sydney. The ANDCMJ regularly participates in these programs. The most recent week was a mixed group of Muslims and Buddhists last week from southern Thailand. The groups have also included key journalists and newspaper editors from Indonesia.

It is important for me, as a Christian, to be part of interfaith activities. It is part of my faith. My dialogue partners agree from their perspective. Dialogue is healthy, whether or not there is an international security crisis. Because of the crisis, however, it becomes even more important. Our dialogue must de-legitimise all prejudice, vilification, or violence that claims the name of any of our religions. We must stick up for what is right, what we believe in, and stand with those who are attacked. We dare not define people by their difference, but by our common humanity.

The best way I know to say this is that dialogue means learning to live together well. We share this planet, we share this country, and we share our local communities. This is not just about us. What we do now will have a huge impact for the future. We must make a difference now so that we pass on a healthy community to the next generation.

I would like to finish by encouraging your interfaith network here in Manningham, and commend the Council for its support. I pray for your success in fostering harmonious relationships between all people in your city. You're playing an important role in building a healthy and productive Australia for all of us who live here.

John Henderson

1 June 2008