

## **Report for the Australian Human Rights Commission**

### **“Building Community Together” forum**

**Adelaide, 16 June 2009**

#### **Objectives**

The APRO Multi-Faith forum on “Building Community Together” was held at the Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia, 59 King William Street, Adelaide on Tuesday 16 June 2009.

This was a one-day forum, the objectives of which were to:

- Bring members and leaders of the various faiths in South Australia together with APRO in order to facilitate communication and the building of understanding
- Identify opportunities for strengthening relationships between the faith communities through dialogue, interaction and cooperation
- Offer support to smaller faith communities
- Share information and facilitate input into the Parliament of the World’s Religions, to be held in Melbourne in December 2009.
- Provide recommendations that will inform policies and programs across government agencies and faith communities, including the Australian Human Rights Commission’s report on Freedom of Religion and Belief I the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

#### **Participants**

Each faith tradition had been invited to nominate up to ten individuals to attend the forum (twenty from the Christian denominations). There were 80 registered participants including representatives of the Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Sikh.

The participants were men and women, including young people, who had played a leadership role in their respective communities, both within the State and nationally. Representatives of government and a small number of academics also attended.

Members of the host organisation, the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations, organised the forum and travelled from inter-state to attend. Established in 2003, APRO is a peak-of-peak body comprises representatives of major faith bodies as well as national-level multicultural community organisations.

## **Program**

- 9.00 Registration
- 9.30 Official Opening  
**Welcome:** Ms Elizabeth Ho, Director, Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre, University of South Australia and Deputy Chair, Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia  
**Welcome to country:** Major Sumner  
**Opening remarks:** Associate Professor Abd-Elmasih Malak AM, Convenor, Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations
- 10.00 Keynote Address: Faith, community and inclusiveness –  
A South Australian perspective  
**Keynote speaker:** Mr Hieu Van Le, Lieutenant Governor of South Australia and Chairman, South Australian Ethnic Affairs Commission
- 10.30 Morning Tea
- 11.00 **Panel Discussion: The role of interfaith dialogue in building community and facilitating social and religious harmony**  
**Chair/Facilitator:** Ms Josie Lacey OAM, Interfaith advisor, Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia  
**Panelists:**  
Reverend Tara Curlewis, General Secretary, National Council of Churches  
Mr Ikebal Patel, President, Australian Federation of Islamic Councils  
Rabbi Shoshana Kaminsky, Beth Shalom Synagogue  
Ven. Thay Thong Phap, Buddhist Chaplain, Flinders University  
Mr Siva Selva, President, Hindu Society of South Australia  
Mr Baldev Singh Dhaliwal, Sikh Council of Australia  
Ms Arini Beaumaris, National Secretary, Australian Baha’i Community
- 12.30 Lunch
- 1.30 **Musical performance**  
Choir from the Islamic College of South Australia
- 1.45 **Dialogue Circles**  
**The right to freedom of religion and belief**  
**Facilitators:** Mr Conrad Gershevitch and Professor Desmond Cahill  
**Preventing and addressing religious prejudice and vilification**  
**Facilitator:** Mr Ian Lacey AM  
**Education for a multi-faith society**  
**Facilitators:** Ms Arini Beaumaris and Mr Baldev Singh Dhaliwal  
**Religion and the media: challenges and opportunities**  
**Facilitator:** Ms Debra Porter  
**Religion in cyberspace: the good, the bad and the ugly**  
**Facilitator:** Mr Jeremy Jones AM  
**Responding to climate change and protecting the environment**  
**Facilitator:** Bhante Sujato
- 3.00 Afternoon Tea
- 3.30 **Parliament of the World’s Religions**  
**Chair:** Dr Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, Australian Baha’i Community  
**Speaker:** Professor Desmond Cahill, Melbourne Program Director, 2009 Parliament of the World’s Religions
- 4.00 **Forum Recommendations and Close**

## Dialogue circles

The dialogue circles were a key component of the forum program. Their purpose was to enable participants to pool their insights and experience. The facilitators set the discussion in train with some brief comments on the theme and then directed discussion, ensuring that each participant had an opportunity to speak, and that the discussion remained focused on the theme and the overall objectives of the forum.

Each dialogue circle was asked to agree upon a maximum of three recommendations, which were shared with all participants in the final plenary session. The final recommendations were as follows:

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
<b>The right to freedom of religion and belief</b>	Encourage State education departments to include multi-faith and human rights education in their curricula at primary and secondary level in order to achieve ‘religious literacy’ and respect for diversity from an early age.
	Religious leaders should be encouraged to engage in learning about other faiths and interfaith dialogue, and encourage their followers to do likewise.
	Federal government should: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Pass legislation protecting individuals from extreme forms of religious vilification (with careful legal definition) and incitement to violence.</li> <li>b. Amend the Race Discrimination Act to empower courts to issue immediate prevention orders on grounds of extreme vilification (similar to Trade Practices Act)</li> </ol>
<b>Preventing and addressing religious prejudice and vilification</b>	Amend section 18c of Racial Discrimination Act to include ‘religious identity or affiliation’. Make it a summary offence. Retain alternative of civil proceedings.
	Create a serious criminal offence ‘intentional incitement of racial or religious hatred’.
	Procedure for complaints to Human Rights Commission, who will assist in dealing with police.
<b>Education for a multi-faith society</b>	Establish a network of resources within an appropriate government department (eg. DIMIA) to provide information and support activities that promote interfaith dialogue throughout all education levels and workplaces.
	Form a list of key capabilities that will facilitate relationships and dialogue across faiths, and incorporate in education to promote multi faith relationships
	Incorporate a ‘service’ component to education, undertaken in collaboration with faith organisations and/or communities, to embed a culture of openness and interaction across faith/culture boundaries.

<b>Religion and the media: challenges and opportunities</b>	Continue to speak out when religious discrimination occurs (eg. jailed Baha'i leaders in Iran). All religions condemn violence, injustice – even if it doesn't get into the media, it's worth sharing among faith communities.
	Media training for spokespersons to overcome fear of being misrepresented by journalists. Focus on issues which one is passionate about and don't get sidetracked. Small groups to swap notes of how to deal with media.
	More networking. Those interested in media swapped email addresses. We need greater national awareness of good work happening in Adelaide (eg. Project Abraham)
<b>Religion in cyberspace: the good, the bad and the ugly</b>	APRO to work with faith groups to develop a code of conduct to promote positive values and not to promote conflict between religions.
	APRO to develop a database of websites and forums that accurately present religious ideas and concepts and can be recommended as reliable sources
	APRO investigate the feasibility of hosting a forum to discuss and promote best practice in Australian interfaith dialogue
<b>Responding to climate change and protecting the environment</b>	As human beings sharing our planet, developing a respectful and constructive interdependent relationship with our environment is a crucial dimension of our spiritual path.
	In the food that we eat, the buildings we use and in how we travel, environmental values should be foremost, both as an expression of contentment within the community, and to model best practice for others.
	As we act to address global warming, we should be fully aware of the social justice implications: the main cause of global warming is greed in the developed world, while those who suffer its effects are primarily the poor in developing countries.

### **Freedom of religion and belief**

Issues related to the right to freedom of religion and belief were part of the discussion during the day, including in several of the dialogue circles, as reflected in the recommendations above. The following notes, however, relate specifically to the dialogue circle on this theme.

The facilitators opened the dialogue by describing the major research project into the freedom of religion and belief in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that has been commissioned by the Australian Human Rights Commission. They outlined the research strategies and noted some of the key issues that had arisen, including:

- Whether to extend religious vilification laws
- Whether the exemptions from the Equal Opportunity Act granted to religious organisations should be lifted.

- The relationship between religion and the state, and how religious diversity is managed.
- The impact of contracting out government services to faith-based non-government organisations

A question was raised as to whether legal protection of the right to freedom of religion could be used as a defence in the case of honour killings. It was felt that if a religious practice is clearly in violation of basic human rights, those rights must be upheld. This principle would apply to honour killings, female genital mutilation.

Participants discussed the issues of abortion and the “morning-after pill”, and the rights and obligations of medical professionals in upholding their religious beliefs.

There was support for greater legal protection for the right to freedom of religion and belief. It was felt that the law should be able to distinguish between the critique of a religion and vilification. It is extreme vilification and incitement to violence that should be outlawed, not genuine critique and analysis.

Concern was expressed, however, at attempts at the international level to legislate to protect religions themselves from defamation. It was suggested that individuals and groups should be protected, but not religions per se, as this concept has been misused.

It was noted that any legal reform should be accompanied by education that teaches respect for the right to freedom of belief. Education about the diverse religions should be integrated into our educational systems from primary level onwards so that children learn basic “religious literacy” throughout their schooling.

The participants in this dialogue circle agreed to the following recommendations:

- 1) Encourage State education departments to include multi-faith and human rights education in their curricula at primary and secondary level in order to achieve ‘religious literacy’ and respect for diversity from an early age.
- 2) Religious leaders should be encouraged to engage in learning about other faiths and interfaith dialogue, and encourage their followers to do likewise.
- 3) Federal government should:
  - a) Pass legislation protecting individuals from extreme forms of religious vilification (with careful legal definition) and incitement to violence.
  - b) Amend the Race Discrimination Act to empower courts to issue immediate prevention orders on grounds of extreme vilification (similar to Trade Practices Act)