

## **“Inter-faith in Australia: The Way Forward” forum**

**Canberra, 21 March 2011**

### **Objectives**

The APRO forum on “Inter-faith in Australia: The Way Forward” was held at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, 15 Blackall Street, Barton on Monday 21 March from 2.00 to 5.00 pm.

The objectives of the forum were to:

- Bring members and leaders of the various faiths in Canberra 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
- Provide recommendations on a range of issues concerning the future of inter-faith in Australia that will inform policies and programs across government agencies and faith communities.

### **Participants**

Each faith tradition was invited to nominate individuals to attend the forum. There were fifty participants including representatives of the Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, and Sikh communities.

The participants were men and women, including young people, who had played a leadership role in their respective communities, both within the ACT and nationally. Representatives of government 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 that comprises representatives of major faith bodies.

## **Program**

The forum was opened by Associate Professor Abd Malak, Convenor of APRO.

Pino Migliorino, Chair of the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia, delivered a message to the forum on behalf of FECCA.

Hindu classical dancer Vanaja Dasika performed a prayer to Siva.

The formal opening was followed by a one-hour panel discussion introduced by Josie Lacey, inter-faith advisor to FECCA, and moderated by Rev Professor James Haire, Director of the ACCC. The panellists were:

- Professor Emeritus Gary Bouma, UNESCO Chair in Interreligious and Intercultural Relations – Asia Pacific
- Reverend Tara Curlewis, General Secretary, National Council of Churches
- Rabbi Jeremy Lawrence, Chief Rabbi, The Great Synagogue
- Freeman Trebilcock, Tibetan Buddhist monk and representative of the Australian Federation of Buddhist Councils
- Mr Asmi Wood, Australian National University

The panel raised a range of issues in response to the theme “Inter-faith in Australia: The Way Forward”.

## **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. The final recommendations were as follows:

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
<b>Inter-faith cooperation in multicultural Australia</b>	In reviews of multiculturalism, ensure recognition of Australia as multi-religious, with a wealth of inter-faith activity.
	In school curricula, include education on comparative religion and on religious life in Australia. Also use social media to promote and publicise the reality of positive inter-faith activity
	Improve multi-faith training for all engaged in pastoral care in hospitals, prisons and crises.
	Ensure anti-discrimination measures which give recourse to people identified by race, gender, etc also encompass religion

<b>Successful models for dialogue at the grassroots</b>	Involvement of lay people in people-to-people relationships: not just dialogue but activity and tangible projects (eg. gardening), engaging youth in joint activities
	Involving the general community in all its different aspects – schools, universities, local festivals, local government (including by providing funding). Awareness of cultural sensitivities in health care.
	Inviting others to share activities and celebrations, especially inviting schools to mosques, synagogues, temples to promote understanding at a young age.
<b>Education for a multi-faith society</b>	Education in a variety of faith traditions be mandated as part of the citizenship education curriculum for both government and religious schools, at various age levels. Ideally this would take place through a structured series of exposures, possibly as part of the international Inter-faith Week.
	Introduce multi-faith elements into relevant university courses, especially education and media and journalism programs, to address common lack of knowledge and lack of respect for religious traditions.
	A police multi-faith advisory council be introduced with multicultural police units that work with fellow police in educating them at the grassroots level.
<b>Engaging young people in inter-faith dialogue</b>	Young people connect with making a meaningful difference, doing good things for society and the world. People of different faiths already offer community service within their own religious community: but encourage youth to do this together.
	APRO to encourage faith groups in its network to cooperate on existing service projects.
	APRO to organise an inter-faith young leadership gathering to develop the youth to be mentors for their own community. The key focus should be on service (not just a once-off event).
<b>Human rights, discrimination and religious vilification</b>	That the <i>Racial Discrimination Act 1975</i> should be amended to provide for protection against discrimination on the ground of religious identity or affiliation. In particular it is suggested that section 9 of the Act be amended by adding the words "religious identity or affiliation" after "national origin", so that section 9 would read as follows (amendments in red):  It is unlawful for a person to do any act involving a distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference <u>based on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin</u> or religious identity or affiliation which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of any human right or fundamental freedom in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.
	That the <i>Racial Discrimination Act 1975</i> should be amended to add a summary offence of inciting racial or religious hatred. It is suggested that the provision might follow the model of

	<p>Part 3 of the Public Order Act 1986 (UK), and read as follows (amendments in red):</p> <p>In this Part " racial hatred " means hatred against a group of persons in Australia defined by reference to colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origin or religion.</p> <p>A person who uses threatening or abusive words or behaviour, or displays any written material which is threatening or abusive, is guilty of an offence if-</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">(a) that person intends thereby to stir up racial hatred, or</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">(b) having regard to all the circumstances racial hatred is likely to be stirred up thereby.</p>
	<p>The Dialogue Circle does not see a necessity for the enactment of a provision in a Bill of Rights or Charter of Rights to protect freedom of religion.</p>

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

Following the close of the forum, a launch was held for the report on “Freedom of Religion and Belief in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Australia” prepared for the Australian Human Rights Commission. The report was presented to the Human Rights Commissioner, Mr Graeme Innes, by its authors Professor Gary Bouma, Professor Desmond Cahill, Dr Hass Dellal and Ms Athalia Zwartz.