

ACRP National Chapter Report

RELIGIONS for PEACE AUSTRALIA

ANNUAL REPORT 2015 – 2016

This report for 2015 – 16 has been prepared for the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Australian chapter of Religions for Peace in Canberra (June 19th) and for the annual executive meeting of the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace in Seoul on 27th – 31st April, 2016. The past twelve months since the first historic AGM in Canberra for the first time outside Melbourne following its founding in Melbourne in the very early 1970s has been characterized by the further structural consolidation of the RfP Australia network and some very worthwhile activities.

GENERAL REVIEW OF THE AUSTRALIAN INTERFAITH AND MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT AND OF RfP AUSTRALIA

Australia is a successful multicultural and interfaith nation state whose population continues to grow strongly, especially from India and China, and through refugee arrivals as well as the growth of its economy though economic headwinds have arrived with the end of the mining boom. The national political context has remained fluid with another change in Prime Minister and with a forthcoming national election. One continuing saga over many years has concerned asylum seekers, their arrival by boat, their detention in offshore detention centres in Nauru and Manus Island (PNG) and the detention of children though there are now said to be no more children being held in detention. Religious leaders have been very vocal and outspoken in their opposition to government policy in calling for a more compassionate response and a much greater intake of refugees and asylum seekers – this has happened but not to the extent that is needed.

As well as anti-Semitic attacks upon Jewish people, their synagogues and their other facilities as well as increasing concern about the treatment and persecution of Christians in Arabic-speaking countries, Islamophobia has also been increasing, driven by overseas events of religiously inspired terrorism and by small but noisy local racist groups opposed to the spread of Islam in Australia, in particular the building of mosques. Controversy has focused on the regional city of Bendigo where the small Muslim community wishes to build a mosque. It is also the city where the largest Buddhist Stupa in the Western world is being built. Two racist groups and their extremist socialist opponents have clashed several times, but the courts at every level have approved the building of mosques. RfP Australia played a behind-the-scenes role through the Victoria Police Multifaith Council in supporting the Muslim community and facilitating the establishment of the Bendigo Interfaith Council – Professor Cahill was the keynote speaker at its inaugural dinner on *The Challenge of Compassion in a Global Age*, drawing attention to the fact that Islam was practiced on Australian soil before Christianity by the (now) Indonesian fishermen who came across to Australian shores to collect sea slugs for hundreds of years until the start of the twentieth century.

In my last report, I drew attention to the siege on Café Lindt in the heart of the Sydney C.B.D. which gained worldwide attention. The coroner is in the process of his formal hearing and it is very clear that the loner gunman, whilst showing the ISIS flag, was psychiatrically disturbed in a serious way. There has much concern about the radicalization of young Muslims to fight with Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and also about their possible return. The most serious incidents have been when a radicalized young man, several days after his passport was taken from him, was shot by police in Melbourne after he tried to kill them with a knife and another young man in Sydney killed a Chinese police employee in a street attack. However, the overwhelming mainstream population is able to distinguish between Mainstream Islam and the very small radicalized element. The Muslim leadership has remained firm in its denunciations of all terrorist acts as an abuse and misuse of their religious tradition.

Another continuing issue has been the clerical child sex abuse scandal which has been impacting on the Christian, particularly Catholic, communities but also on the Buddhist, Hindu and Jewish communities – a Royal Commission under Justice McClelland is presently addressing this issue, and will make its findings in 2017.

RfP Australia

Regarding the operation of RfP Australia, it has continued to consolidate its national structure and communication network through regular telephone meetings. Links with the Centre for Interfaith and Cultural Dialogue at Griffith University in Queensland have been strengthened through Dr Brian Adams who successfully organized the second G20 Interfaith Summit last November in Istanbul alongside the meeting of the world's political leaders. The 2016 G20 Interfaith Summit will be held in China. At the end of 2015, the interfaith convenor in the Northern Territory participated in the national hook-up for the first time though there is not presently a functioning interfaith group in Darwin. But there had been a special event on the International Day of Peace.

For all groups in the six states and two territories, finances and additional membership, especially of younger members, continue to be stumbling blocks in the functioning and growth of the organization. The major achievement of the year was the sponsoring of the address of the Grand Mufti of Australia within Parliament House in Canberra. Speaking through an interpreter, he gave an eloquent and poetic address on Islam and Islam's links with Australia. The second speaker was the Archbishop of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Australia who had been born in Mosul.

Website

Our website (www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au) through the daily work of our webmaster, Chris Parnell, continues to expand. In 2015, it received 842,401 hits, representing an increase of 18.59 per cent over the previous year. There were 236,932 page reads (a decrease of 5.90%) with 50,039 visits, an increase of 8.4 per

cent. The popular downloads were (1) Living Pope Francis' Vision of Faith (2) The Golden Rule for Interfaith and (3) Discovering Buddha: Special Religious Instruction materials. The most popular articles were (a) Australia's religious profile from the 2011 census (b) the list of worldwide RfP affiliates and (c) the 2004 research study, *Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Australia*. Much online attention was paid to interfaith and climate change, the New South Wales' Women's Interfaith Network and the *Nostra Aetate* event held at the Great Synagogue in Sydney.

In its small but significant way, RfP Australia has played its role at national and State/Territory levels in working for interfaith and multicultural harmony in a country where 43 per cent of the population of 23 million are either immigrants or have at least one parent who was born outside Australia. With its website it has continued to provide a very welcome service not only nationally but internationally.

SPECIFIC DESCRIPTIONS OF ACTIVITIES IN 2015 – 2016

Many customary and some innovative activities occurred across Australia. At the national level, preparation is being made to incorporate acknowledgement of the Aboriginal ownership of the land into the RfP constitution alongside an attempt to have a similar acknowledgement in the Australian constitution. It also worked with the Australian Partnership of Religious Organizations through the New South Wales branch in holding a forum at Parliament House in Sydney on *Building a Community* with special panels on the role of religious leaders, the role of young people and the role of women of faith. The national organization sponsored an Australian representative, Nivy Balachandran of the Hindu tradition, at an international RfP youth forum in Paris. Contact has been made to endeavour to resurrect the New Zealand national chapter but efforts have so far failed.

New South Wales

Additionally the New South Wales branch continued its regular discussion forums with guest speakers, including on *Providing Culturally Sensitive Palliative Care*, and an interactive workshop at the Great Synagogue in Sydney to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Vatican II interfaith declaration, *Nostra Aetate*, with the participation of Archbishop Fisher and Rabbi Benjamin Elton. It also partnered the Sikh community in deepening people's knowledge about the Sikh faith.

Victoria

RfP Victoria supported the Melbourne Interfaith Centre and its director, Helen Summers, also a member of RfP's executive in *Dine with You*, for U.N. Interfaith Week, an outdoor interfaith dinner held in Melbourne's city square. It has gained some research money from the Victorian Multicultural Commission to conduct a study of interfaith chaplaincy in schools, universities, hospitals, prisons etc. In 2015, the state government

introduced a new policy for teaching religion in government schools and RfP Victoria worked with the government in delivering six three-hour briefing sessions for religious instructors from the Baha’I, Buddhist, Greek Orthodox, Hindu and Sikh traditions. The new policy has not been well accepted and some groups are moving to establish their own full-time schools with government support with backing from RfP Victoria. It also sponsored a very well-attended seminar during the U.N. Interfaith Week delivered at Melbourne University by Peter Horsfield, Professor of Communication at RMIT University, on *Human Existence, Religions and the Digital World*.

Queensland

Besides organizing the G20 Interfaith Summit, Queensland’s Centre for Interfaith and Cultural Dialogue has organizing the *Who is My God?* Series with public tours of a mosque and various temples as well as several workshops on icons and religious imagery. It has also presented several Religious and Cultural Diversity Training workshops.

South Australia and Tasmania

The Multifaith Association of South Australia was focused on the challenge of its own revitalization, and its two seminars targeted climate change, including *Humanity at the Crossroads: How Spiritual Leadership Can Affect Climate Change* held at the University of South Australia. The Tasmanian branch remains very active, holding a forum in association with the multifaith chaplaincy at the University of Tasmania on *Remembering Peace: Celebrating the International Day of Peace in the ANZAC Centenary Year*.

IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN OF ACRP

Religions for Peace Australia has been fully supportive of the ACRP Strategic Action Plan that flowed out of the 2014 Incheon Assembly under the guidance of the Secretariat. Whilst Australia has addressed many of its aspects, it has yet to engage systematically with the plan.

Objective One: Engaging in the Promotion of Peace: Whilst some of the activities outlined above are connected to peace, the national chapter has yet to articulate a peace education strategy (1a). Australia already has anti-discrimination and anti-vilification laws but there have been attempts in the last two years to water down their provisions. The Australian chapter alongside many other groups has been active in lobbying to prevent this, and the conservative government has withdrawn its proposals. Regarding tree planting (c), the Canberra Interfaith Forum has established a peace garden in Canberra which it tends on a very regular basis, and the Tasmanian branch has been involved in tree-planting activities. Professor Cahill has begun work on formulating a research proposal on the quality of religious leadership in urban communities across Asia (1d) while many of the state branches have conducted seminars on climate change (1e).

*Objective Two: **Engaging in Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation:*** While the Australian chapter is not specifically engaged in the country specific initiatives (2a – f), it has been involved in initiatives to counter violent extremism, including through the various activities of RfP NSW and RfP Victoria’s work with the Victoria Police. Most importantly, Griffith University’s Centre for Interfaith and Cultural Dialogue has been sponsoring the G20 Interfaith Summits.

*Objective Three: **Building Partnership:*** The four aspects do not directly relate to the Australian chapter but it is fully supportive of efforts to bring about partnerships with ASEAN and other government and non-government organizations (3a) and with Asia-wide religious communities (3b) as well as deepening ACRP’s relationship with RfP International (3c).

*Objective Four: **Implementing the Commemorative Project (ACRP’s 40th anniversary):*** RfP Australia is yet to engage with this objective except that Professor Cahill is leading plans to publish a scholarly accountable book on ACRP’s history and the activities in each member nation.

*Objective Five: **Strengthening the Organization and its Sustainability:*** While most of the aspects of this objective refer to ACRP itself, RfP Australia has had for several years an action plan though not as developed as it could have been. In accordance with 5e, a full plan of action is being further developed, including addressing 5f.

Conclusion

I want to thank all the executive members across Australia for their support and great work, especially our secretary, Sue Ennis, and the office-holders in all our branches and affiliates. I also want to thank the ACRP Secretariat in Tokyo because ACRP is becoming more professional in its operation. Our work is important and is part of building a multicultural and interfaith society and a peaceful and harmonious world.

Desmond P. Cahill (Prof.),
Chair, Religions for Peace Australia.
May 2016.