

## **ACRP National Chapter Report**

### **RELIGIONS for PEACE AUSTRALIA**

#### **ANNUAL REPORT 2016 – 2017**

This report for 2016 – 17 has been prepared for the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Australian chapter of Religions for Peace in Canberra (June 4th) and for the annual executive meeting of the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace in Beijing on 19<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2017. The past twelve months since the second historic Annual General Meeting in Canberra for the first times 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. Religions for Peace Australia has still not been successful in establishing a chapter in Western Australia. Unfortunately, the proposed visit by the Chinese Committee of Religions for Peace could not take place because last minute changes in the visiting schedule made it impossible.

#### **Public Addresses:**

This past year's activity has been very much structured around scholarly and publishing activity together with many other peace-promoting activities. At the 2016 Annual General Meeting in Canberra, the customary address was given by Rt. Rev. Stephen Pickard, executive director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture on *Prospects for Religious Freedom in Multifaith and Secular Australia*. In recognition of the U.N. World Interfaith Week in February 2017, Professor John Warhurst, Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University, at the Australian Parliament House in Canberra, to an audience of politicians, diplomats and interfaith activists examined the separation of religion and state, suggesting that the Australian model, in contrast to the French and U.S. models, was a minimalist model which, among many other initiatives, allowed the government funding of Buddhist, Christian, Jewish and Islamic schools. All religious groups are permitted to apply for funding once they have the capacity and the registered teachers to staff any proposed school. New Islamic schools have had to confront Islamophobic opposition but the Muslim leaders have won every case in the courts in line with Australia's commitment to religious freedom.

The N.S.W. chapter in Sydney has been very active in holding regular forums at the New South Wales Parliament House in Sydney on many issues during the 12 month period, focusing on religious structures, including the structures of the Jewish, Shia Islam and Buddhist structures in Australia while in Victoria, to

celebrate U.N. World Interfaith Week, Emeritus UNESCO Professor Gary Bouma presented an address on the trial induction program for newly arrived clergy and religious personnel who are permitted to emigrate to Australia under a special category of the Australian immigration program to serve their religious communities. Religions for Peace Australia continues to lobby for its permanent extension.

## **Publications**

2016 saw a major publication by our current RfP Australia secretary, Dr Sue Ennis, a English language teacher with the Australian Multicultural Education Services, who published her study of *Religion, Spirituality and the Refugee Experience* in which she showed that at every stage of their refugee experience the Horn-of-Africa refugees were helped and guided by their religious faith. The book was launched in November 2016 by Professor Gillian Triggs, president of the Australian Human Rights Commission. Another smaller RfP Victoria publication, funded by the Victorian Multicultural Commission, looked at multifaith chaplaincy in all the various sectors: armed forces, prisons, police, emergency services, airports, ports, hospitals, schools universities, ethnic communities and youth. It highlighted the changing role of chaplaincy and the worthwhile service they provide.

## **Army Chaplaincy**

In February 2017, the head of the 175 chaplains in the Australian Army, Brigadier Glynn Murphy, approached the chair of Religions for Peace Australia for assistance and guidance in transitioning to a more culturally diverse army reflecting the demographic composition of Australia and to a multifaith chaplaincy containing chaplains drawn from the major world faiths other than Christian. In the last 20 years other comparable armies have begun making this transition but not the Australian Army. This is an ongoing project involving both regional seminars across Australia and strategic planning conferences.

## **Website**

Our website ([www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au](http://www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au)) through the daily work of our webmaster, Chris Parnell, continues to expand even further than in past years. It is accessed by people from around the world, with the highest number coming from the United States and China. It continues to highlight items of interest from across Australia and from around the world.

## **State and Territory Affiliates**

Our state chapters and affiliated bodies have remained active. The Tasmanian chapter sponsored a journey for the recognition of the Aboriginal peoples, not least in the prologue to the Australian constitution. Its spiritual activism was further enhanced by a seminar with the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change, and it

has linked more strongly into the local parliamentary and university networks.

The Victorian chapter has been working in managing the transition to a new way of teaching religion in government primary schools though it has required a diminishing of such teaching. Its leaders joined leaders of other faiths, including the Muslim faith, with the leadership of the Victoria Police Multifaith Council, in the traditional Christmas Carols Service after the police foiled a terrorist attack on St. Paul's Anglican Cathedral in Melbourne, so as to show solidarity with the Anglican community. It also has been helping to support the 26 local government multifaith networks and the 7 networks in regional and rural Victoria though government funding for these networks has been declining.

Links with the Centre for Interfaith and Cultural Dialogue at Griffith University in Queensland have been further strengthened through Dr Brian Adams who successfully organized the first and second G20 Interfaith Summits in Australia and Turkey alongside the meeting of the world's political leaders. Unfortunately the Chinese Government did not sponsor a similar G20 Multifaith Summit in 2016 but several Australians were able to attend a replacement academic conference in Beijing which represented a great opportunity for Chinese scholars of religion to meet with their counterparts from many different countries. The Queensland affiliate has also been holding roundtable discussions on religious perspectives on human rights legislation and on promoting multiculturalism and religious tolerance and is working to develop an organizational structure for the Faith Communities Council of Queensland. It co-sponsored an Iftar dinner with the Muslim community and sponsored a public symposium on domestic violence against women and children among many other activities. The Multifaith Association of South Australia has been revamping itself in order to meet the new challenges.

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.

### **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 begun to engage systematically with the plan. It has been liaising with the Royal Commission on the Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and also has been opposed to the practice of child marriages which are against Australian law. Through the many and varied activities, Religions for Peace has been engaging in a range of activities promoting interreligious harmony and social cohesion and strengthening its own organization through action plans.

## **Conclusion**

The past year was saddened by the unexpected death in Melbourne of our multicultural education co-ordinator, Joyce Rebeiro (1942 – 2016), who had served Religions for Peace very well over many years. Her passing was widely mourned, especially in Melbourne's south-eastern suburbs. An Anglo-Indian born in Kolkatta, she was a social justice and multicultural activist. Her ever quiet poise and dignity and her effervescent friendliness with her open smile were always a gift to family and friends. Her capacity to work diplomatically and sensitively together with her astuteness, her organizational skills and her long experience in government and community work will be sorely missed.

I want to thank all the executive members across Australia in our national organization and affiliated organizations 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 2017.