

**World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP) operating as Religions for Peace  
Australia ABN 49 320 161 142**

## **RELIGIONS for PEACE AUSTRALIA**

### **ANNUAL REPORT 2019– 2020**

Since my last 2018 – 2019 report prepared more than fourteen months ago, which had been prepared for the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Australian chapter of Religions for Peace in Canberra (June 17th, 2019) and initially for the annual executive meeting of the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP) in Japan at Osaka on 10<sup>th</sup> – 13th April, 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has completely changed the world. That previous report had been prepared in the immediate aftermath of the Christchurch massacre of 51 Muslims at two mosques. This year we endeavoured to hold an Australia-wide commemoration, given that the perpetrator was an Australian from the coastal town of Grafton but our efforts with the Prime Minister and State Premiers were overrun by the pandemic.

Australia has changed not only because of the pandemic but also because of the devastating bushfires whose devastation was poorly handled by the Australian Government. However, the Government has handled the virus threat well. Principally because of the virus threat, but also for other reasons it has been an innovative, even trail-blazing and busy year as Religions for Peace Australia has risen to the myriad challenges the year has presented.

#### **RfP Australia and the C-19 Pandemic**

By any measure, Australia has done remarkably well in combatting the virus. As of the June 11<sup>th</sup> figures compiled by the John Hopkins University Coronavirus Data Center in Baltimore, using the deaths per 100,000 population, Australia compares very well, certainly with the US and the European countries as seen in the figures for selected countries: Australia (0.41 deaths per 100,000), Belgium (84.21), China, (0.33), Germany (10.53), India (0.57), Indonesia (0.72), Italy (56.33), Japan (0.73), New Zealand (0.45), South Korea (0.53), Spain (58.08), UK (61.62) and U.S. (34.14). Very soon after lockdown began, on March 20<sup>th</sup> RfP Australia brought together 15 of Australia's senior ecumenical and interfaith leaders to make an interfaith statement (see Appendix A) that asked Australians to be correctly fearful but not despairing as all religious traditions had had much experience with pandemics in their histories, and suggesting that faith can be a sustaining force in times of need and threat. It asked faith leaders not to make extremist or mistaken interpretations of the causes of the plague. The statement prayed for those who had already died, for health care workers and for those living alone as well as for international students and those on temporary visas who were not being cared for by the Australian Government. It commended governments and other institutions for the steps already taken, including by banks.

Subsequent to this, Religions for Faith in their respective states liaised with the Prime Minister and other senior Australian ministers as well as with State leaders, especially in arguing the case for alleviating the plight of international students and temporary visaed workers such as seasonal workers from Pacific Island countries. In Victoria on May 6<sup>th</sup>., Religions for Peace brought together religious leaders with government officials from the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship and the

Victorian Multicultural Commission - this led to a series of recommendations and to a meeting with the Victorian Minister for Multicultural Affairs to discuss the fractionalized nature of service delivery and the over-stretched welfare services of the faith communities other than Christian. The RfP Queensland affiliate, Griffith University's Centre for Interfaith and Cultural Dialogue, under the leadership of Dr. Brian Adams, initiated a series of consciousness and coordination processes to address the pandemic crisis.

On June, Religions for Peace Australia made a detailed submission to the Senate Committee for COVID-19 (see Appendix 2), endeavouring to map a way forward, not least in economic terms and giving scope for the development of energy renewal measures in the task of creating a green economy. All meetings were via ZOOM. At the time of writing, this is still requiring much work from the senior leaders of Religions for Peace, led by its secretary, Dr. Sue Ennis, whom we thank for her commitment and energy.

### **G20 Interfaith Summit Forum, Tokyo**

The 2019 G20 Interfaith Summit Forum, the sixth to be held since the first in 2014 at Surfers' Paradise, was organized partly by our Queensland affiliate, Griffith University's Centre for Interfaith Dialogue and Culture led by Dr Brian Adams but led by the main organizers of this year's forum, Professor Cole Durham, founding director of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University in Salt Lake City and Professor Katherine Marshall, executive director of the World Faiths Development Dialogue and Senior Fellow at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University in Washington D.C.. A major supporter was the KAICIID (King Abdallah bin Ab-dulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue) which with its headquarters in Vienna is a joint project of the Saudi Arabian, Austrian and Spanish governments with the Holy See as a founding observer. The forum was funded by an unorthodox Japanese businessman, Haruhisa Handa, who is also a Shinto religious leader and a performing artist who studied at the WA Performing Arts Centre in Perth. He is the patron-in-chief of Opera Australia. Mr Handa pointed out that at times of natural and medical disasters places of worship become very important as was seen in the ebola epidemic in Africa. Religious leaders are often the most trusted.

The sixth annual G20 Interfaith Forum was held in Tokyo, Japan on June 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019 with the theme of "Peace, People, Planet: Pathways Forward." The 2019 forum was a more prestigious affair with greater gravitas given by the presence of three former prime ministers (David Cameron (UK), Enda Kenny (Ireland) and Sir John Key (New Zealand), the renowned African stateswoman from Mozambique and widow of Nelson Mandela, Graca Machal, and Lord George Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury. A message from Pope Francis was read by the Papal Nuncio to Japan, and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the Green Patriarch, gave a videotaped message. The Pope emphasized that our planet is our common home, a gift from God. The Patriarch raised the issue of children and the dark web. On the second and third days, Japanese people expanded the audience to be about 1,100.

The 2019 theme, covering three of the UN's "Five P's" (peace, people, planet), was tackled by panellists in multiple breakout sessions throughout the forum. A central theme was the role that faith actors with their prophetic voices and expertise can play in addressing global issues such as in regard to refugees by actions of welcoming, protecting, promoting, integrating, conducting scoping briefs and developing policy briefs. Religious institutions were having to adapt their theologies to be inclusive and pluralist.

## **Multifaith Chaplaincy Project**

Soon after the previous annual report and its initial 2017 – 2019 work in the area, Religions for Peace Australia received funding of \$22,000 each year for a two-year project from the Victorian Multicultural Commission. Its aim is to extend and professionalize multifaith chaplaincy by recruiting and educating chaplains from recently arrived religious communities (including the Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities and the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches) through improving small chaplaincy training programs.

Part of the project has been to establish a special website, Multifaith Chaplaincy Australia, by our very committed webmaster, Chris Parnell. This website is in its infancy and is now averaging 15 visitors daily with most visitors coming from Australia. Visitors have unusually tended to stay longer than 15 minutes. Chaplaincy material on the pandemic has been especially popular in recent months. Unfortunately, the interview aspect of the project has been delayed during the height of the pandemic but will resume by the end of June. The lead researchers are Emeritus Professor Des Cahill and Dr. Sue Ennis.

## **New and Continuing International and Australian Partnerships**

Our links with GreenFaith/Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (ARRCC) have continued to grow, specially with Thea Omerod, ARRCC's leader, and Living the Change initiatives have continued, especially in South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria.

Religions for Peace Australia has been involved in other international activities. The most significant event was the World Assembly held in Lindau on Lake Constance in southern Germany in August, 2019, and heavily supported by the German Government whose foreign ministry has come to the view that religions are more part of the solution than part of the problem. It was a very significant moment in the history of Religions for Peace International in its 50-year history when the long-standing secretary-general, Dr. Bill Vendley, stepped down after 26 years at the helm. His replacement is Dr. Azza Karam, originally from Egypt with Arabic as her mother tongue – she had previously worked for RfP International and since 2004 for the U.N., particularly the United Nations Population Fund. Her 1996 rthesis was on political Islam. Steve Killelea, head of The Charitable Fund from Sydney, stepped down from his position as Treasurer and became an honorary International President.

In mid-December, a large planning meeting was held in New York when Nivy Balachandran, our youth leader, represented Australia. Out of this has come a Strategic Vision for Religions for Peace, *Building and Equipping Interreligious Councils (IRCs) for Action* (May 2020). Six strategic goals to advance multi-religious collaboration have been set: (1) Peaceful, just and inclusive societies (2) Gender equality (3) Environment (4) Freedom of thought, conscience and religion (5) Interreligious education and (6) Global partnerships. The document outlines for the regional and national IRCs four methods of operationalization: (a) advocacy (b) knowledge management (c) capacity building and (d) humanitarian support. In IRC development, expected levels of competence were expected to be reached in (1) governance (2) gender mainstreaming (3) management and administration (4) program operations (5) institutional sustainability and (6) global affiliation and networking. The new Secretary-General has mapped out the future path for national chapters, including that of Australia.

## *Beijing – Interfaith Exchanges and Shared Future*

At the same time in mid-December, an international seminar was held in Beijing, sponsored by the China Committee on Religions and Peace and entitled Interfaith Exchanges and Shared Future for

Humanity. The conference had three themes, Climate Change, the Cultural Values of Religion and Religion and Social Harmony. Professor Cahill as Deputy Moderator led the 13-member delegation from Religions for Peace Asia (ACRP) and gave a paper, *Overcoming Environmental Degradation through a Green Growth Economy: The Role of Religious Leadership*.

All participants were taken to meet Xia Bao Long, Vice-Chairman and Secretary-General of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) which sits under the Chinese People's Congress and has been described as an advisory upper house. Xia was previously governor of Zhejiang Province with Xi Jinping as party secretary - the province hosted the G20 Summit in Hangzhou in 2016. The next morning they were taken to meet Zhao Huimin, head of the Beijing CPPCC. In both meetings, the Chinese leaders commented favourably on the results of the Seminar which were explained to them by the leader of the ACRP international delegation and on the work of CCRP under the executive leadership of Deng Zhongliang and the CCRP Secretary-General, Mr Lacan. Formally and informally, the Chinese leaders spoke positively about the 2018 Agreement between the Vatican and the Chinese Government and welcomed a possible visit by Pope Francis. Professor Cahill had a long informal meeting with the two leading archbishops of the now united Chinese Catholic Church.

In February 2020, an informal relationship has begun with the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics which is attached to the Department of Education of the University of Haifa in Israel. In April – June, the Chair has held weekly webinars via ZOOM on the ethical aspects in the wake of the C-19 pandemic, especially as they pertain to medicine, psychiatry, dentistry and education, including of medical students. The webinar summaries have been published on the RfP Australia website.

The Queensland Centre for Interfaith and Cultural Dialogue has been very active at the international level. Its members have given papers either directly or online at Baku in Azerbaijan (Islamic Civilization in the Caucasus) and at the Baku International Youth Forum, in Jakarta (Towards United Human Values), in London (KAICIID Youth Programme), Vienna (Religious Responses to COVID-19), and Brussels (G20 Interfaith Forum).

RfP Australia has been heavily involved with Religions for Peace Asia, particularly in the preparations for the Asian Assembly scheduled for October 2020 in Tokyo after the Olympic Games. However, early in June 2020, the decision was made by the Assembly Steering Committee to postpone the Assembly by exactly one year after the rescheduled Olympic Games. Part of these preparations has been the finalizing of the New Constitution to be approved by the next Assembly. Also the Australian chapter has been at the centre of the process to resuscitate the New Zealand chapter. Negotiations are now proceeding to enable the Religious Diversity Trust in Auckland informally attached to the University of Otago to become the New Zealand national chapter.

RfP Australia has continued its links with FECCA (Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia) by sponsoring a session on interfaith and the multicultural agenda at the Hobart FECCA conference in which the Rev. Tim Costello also participated. This initiative was heavily supported by RfP Tasmania led by the tireless Terry Sussmilch. A similar session was held in Parramatta in February 2020 at the Community Cohesion Conference sponsored by the University of Western Sydney and organized by Dr. Sev Ozdowski, chair of the Australian Multicultural Council. Then four contributors (Dr. Brian Adams, Professor Des Cahill, Dr. Adis Duderija and Dr. Sue Ennis) are all RfP leaders – Dr. Duderija is deputy director of the Griffith Centre on Interfaith Dialogue and Culture and an expert of progressive Islam.

## Website Report

Our website, [www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au](http://www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au), continues to forge ahead, under the global-roving eye of our webmaster, Rev. Chris Parnell, providing an unparalleled service to Australia and the world. As anticipated in the 2017-18 report, the number of hits or total page views for the first time had topped the million with a total of 1,059,701 in 2018-19, an increase of 15.7 per cent from the previous year. The number of unique visitors was 47,116, an increase of 22.3 per cent. There was a rise in the number of visitors from Australia while others were from (in order) the United States, China, Turkey, Germany, France, Canada, Poland, India, Great Britain and The Philippines. As the Table below shows, for the year 2019 - 2020, there were 1,883,961 hits, a massive increase of 77.8 per cent over the previous year although only a small rise (7.4%) in unique visitors.

### **www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au**

	<b>Unique Visitors</b>	<b>Page Reads</b>	<b>Hits</b>
<b>Year 2019 (6 mths)</b>	14,514	98,491	620,994
<b>Year 2019 SSL</b>	9,917	42,519	294,848
<b>Year 2020 (6 mths)</b>	15,136	105,182	631,087
<b>Year 2020 SSL</b>	11,037	50,589	337,032
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<b>TOTAL 2019-20</b>	<b>50,604</b>	<b>296,781</b>	<b>1,883,961</b>

(SSL = *Secure Socket Layer*, it represents all those visitors who surf the web only using the https:// protocol)

The six top downloads were in order: (a) The Muslim Australians document, (b) Diverse Faiths of Tasmania (c) The Golden Rule of Interfaith (d) Religion and Cultural Diversity Report (e) the Child Sex Abuse in the Catholic Church report and (f) the Multifaith Audit of Australia.

The ancillary website, Multifaith Education Australia, averaged 33 visitors per day

	<b>Unique Visitors</b>	<b>Page Reads</b>	<b>Hits</b>
<b>Year 2019 (6 mths)</b>	3,030	12,668	23,540
<b>Year 2019 SSL</b>	581	2,144	2,317
<b>Year 2020 (6 mths)</b>	3,058	14,203	25,995
<b>Year 2020 SSL</b>	299	1,469	2,232
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	<b>6,968</b>	<b>30,484</b>	<b>54,084</b>

The six top downloads were (a) The JCMA (Jewish, Christian, Muslim Australia) Nine-Point Guide Book (b) The RfP Australia Code of Conduct (c) Hindu Special Religious Instruction Materials (d) Discovering Buddha – Special Religious Instruction Materials (e) Beirut Declaration on Faith for Rights (UNHCR) and (f) Baha’I Materials for Special Religious Instruction.

## UN Interfaith Week Addresses

Unfortunately, the UN Interfaith Week Address during early February in Parliament House working in tandem with the Parliamentarian Friends of Multiculturalism, Russell Broadbent (Liberal), Maria Vamvakinou (Labour) and Senator Richard Di Natale (Greens) was not able to be held this year, principally because of the impact of the bushfires during the key organizational period. In Melbourne, Religions for Peace Victoria in conjunction with Melbourne University’s chaplaincy sponsored the

UN Address with David Schutz, executive officer for the Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, who spoke on the interfaith attitudes and initiatives of Pope John Paul II, particularly focusing on the Assisi meetings where he invited world faith leaders to join him at Assisi for prayers and dialogue session.

### **State and Territory Affiliates**

In addition to the above initiatives, our state chapters and affiliated bodies continue to be very active, and Professor Sameena Yasmine of the University of Western Australia has become an observer member of the national RfP executive as has a representative from the Northern Territory. Interaction, the youth network, is currently in a dormant state but we hope to take some new initiatives in the next little while.

#### *New South Wales*

In New South Wales, the state chapter led by Josie Lacey with her formidable longstanding contribution to interfaith and multiculturalism continues to have its regular meetings in the State Parliament House, each led with an overview by Walter Secord MLC. Its members come from the Baha’I, Buddhist, Christian (Catholic, Coptic and Protestant), Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian faith traditions. Zohra Aly discussed Ramadan, and how the Muslim community was managing during the pandemic lockdown. The Women’s Interfaith Network continues its valuable work to meet regularly for sessions of praying and cordial exchange.

#### *Victoria*

In addition to its work on the Multifaith Chaplaincy Project and its COVID-19 work, the Victorian chapter organized its own Living with Change event in September with ARRCC and URI, and has continued its membership of the Victoria Police Multifaith Council after its restructuring. The chapter has also been linking with the Faith Communities Council of Victoria, including participating in the Annual Victorian Interfaith Networks Conference. On the child safety issue, Professor Cahill gave public evidence in Auckland to the New Zealand Royal Commission into Abuse and Care in State-based and Faith-based Institutions and participated in a seminar on the same topic with the Victorian Commission on Children and Young People.

#### *Queensland*

Besides its G20 work and other international presentations presented above, the members of the Queensland Centre for Interfaith Dialogue and Culture have presented at Wisdom College in Brisbane, various Baha’I functions, the Australian Human Rights Commission on Islamophobia in Australia, the Commonwealth Day Multi-Faith Service at St. John’s Anglican Cathedral in Brisbane and at the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women in Brisbane and at the Earth Ethics conference in Melbourne.

The Centre has been especially concerned about the continuing pernicious presence of right-wing and nationalist extremist groups and there needs to be better community partnering in combatting it.

#### *South Australia*

Our South Australian affiliate, the Multifaith Association of South Australia (MFA), engaged in leading interfaith prayers and celebrations. On Australia Day (January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020), Interfaith Prayers for Bushfire Recovery and Resilience were held at St. Peter’s Cathedral with prayers shared by

Anglican, Baha’I, Brahma Kumari, Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu, Latter Day Saints, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Unitarian and Uniting Church leaders. The traditional End of Year Gathering was held at the Unitarian Meeting House in Norwood on the theme of *Engaging with Community – Serving in a Troubled World*. The Interfaith Celebration for the International Day of Peace at the Baha’I Centre for Learning focused on Climate Action for Peace led by the First Nation Kurna Elder, Uncle Allen Edwards. MFA organized an International Prayer Vigil for Healing the Earth on the Vigil of ANZAC Day to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day. Kurna Elder Frank Wanganeen explained the importance of water to his people with each faith community bringing a flask of water to symbolize our connection with the divine to pour into a single vessel and the Elder returned the water to the River Karrawirra Parri.

In February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, their AGM was held and led to a re-invigorated Committee followed by a lively discussion on the implications of the proposed Religious Discrimination Bill from an interfaith perspective. Its president, Philippa Rowland, was the major contributor to the RfP submission on COVID-19 to the Senate Select Committee.

### *Tasmania*

2019 – 2020 has been a red letter year for the vibrant Tasmanian chapter. Its most important achievement was the establishment of a Tasmanian Faith Communities Network with Terry Sussmilch as its convenor. Working with the Speaker, a meeting was organized of faith leaders at Parliament House in Tasmania which was led by RfP chair, Emeritus Professor Des Cahill. The network has proved a crucial channel in funnelling information to faith communities during C-19, especially in regard to temporary visa holders, many of whom are members of some faith communities. This work has also been in liaison with the Emergencies Ministry support person from the Tasmanian Council of Churches.

In September and November 2019, RfP Tasmania organized two workshops at the University of Tasmania’s Multifaith Centre as part of ARRCC’s Living the Change and helped celebrate World Environment Day in June 2020 honouring Tasmania’s Aboriginal peoples, their care for the environment and, as their gift to the world, *dadirri* or deep listening to country.

RfP Tasmania participated in the organization of the Deepavali Tasmania event in November 2019 as part of Diwali. It was voted as the City of Hobart Community Event of the Year 2019. Finally, in October 2019 RfP Tasmania was very commendably given one of the two inaugural Multicultural Awards for 2019 for establishing the Faith Communities’ Network and for the Living the Change workshops.

### *A.C.T.*

In Canberra, the Canberra Interfaith Forum (CIF) under the leadership of Dean Sadhu Khan were hoping to celebrate the eighth anniversary of the establishment of its Environmental Meditation and Healing Garden but this was prevented by the distancing rules of the pandemic. Before the pandemic, in November CIF had a public function for International Day of Tolerance on the theme, “Are we still a tolerant society? Where to from here?” In February as part of the National Multicultural Festival, an interfaith event was organized on the theme, “Valuing our Cultural and Religious Diversity”. In May an online interfaith prayer service was organized, drafted by CIF.

### **Thanks**

I want once again to thank all the RfP members across Australia for their support and great work. Every day, both nationally and internationally, religion continues to figure very prominently in many and varied ways. Our work is important and is part of building a multicultural and interfaith society. But this past year the challenges have been significant. But every crisis presents opportunity and there have been trail-blazing responses to the challenges as well as new initiatives.

Desmond Cahill, O.A.M. (Emeritus Professor),  
Chair, Religions for Peace Australia,  
June 2020.

## APPENDIX A

<p><b>Religions for Peace</b> </p> <p>Australia</p>	<p>Legally known as The World Conference of Religions for Peace Australia, Inc. ABN 49 320 161 142 Email: <a href="mailto:wcrpaust@inet.net.au">wcrpaust@inet.net.au</a> <a href="http://religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au/">http://religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au/</a></p>
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### COVID-19 CRISIS – AN INTERFAITH STATEMENT

**To Australia’s Religious, Political and Civic Leaders and to the People of Australia,**

On Friday, March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020, senior interfaith leaders from almost all Australian States and Territories met electronically. We decided to share this message with the Australian community.

Australia is now engaged in a health war against an invisible enemy. We are entering unprecedented times, not seen since the flu epidemic of 1919 with its 10,493 official deaths. In such times of crisis, our faith traditions insist on spiritual calmness and inner serenity, always mindful that we must take the necessary precautions to protect ourselves and our loved ones in accordance with and beyond government directives. Our faith traditions also insist that we show utmost concern for all vulnerable people in our family network, in our faith communities and in our local networks and neighbourhoods.

We should correctly be fearful, but not be overcome with overwhelming terror and despair. With their centuries-long histories, all major faith traditions have extensive experience of past epidemics. The Australian Government has now closed all indoor places of worship, and we support that decision.

We congratulate religious leaders who have closed down religious services and their places of worship and we congratulate those who have taken the initiative to livestream their worship celebrations. We are not against religious buildings remaining open for private, individual prayer on the strict condition that social distance and cleansing provisions are rigidly and regularly enforced.

Faith can be a sustaining force in this time of need, in this time of isolation. We commend to all Australians, especially those in partial or complete lockdown, to seek solace in (i) participating in livestreamed acts of worship, (ii) meditating and praying in the silence of their houses and apartments, (iii) praying before domestic altars, statues and sacred images, (iv) reading and reflecting on passages from the Holy Scriptures of one’s spiritual tradition and (v) doing spiritual reading.

In this way, we can all adjust to aloneness and loneliness. And reflect on life and its meaning.

The Covid-19 crisis reminds us all of the fragility and precariousness of life. At this time, we beg religious leaders to avoid extremist and mistaken interpretations of the causes of the plague. And we beg all Australians not to scapegoat particular groups for what is happening and not develop a bunker mentality. And we beg all Australians not to binge- or bulk-buy as it reflects selfishness and a lack of care for, goodwill towards and solidarity with our fellow Australians, especially the vulnerable.

We pray for those who have already died and for their loved ones, and for all those who are ill from the virus as well as those who are fearful in the face of the threat of illness and death

We pray for the doctors, nurses and other health workers caring for the sick and perhaps risking their lives, and for the medical scientists working speedily for solutions.

We pray for the health care and emergency services chaplains and their support volunteers who did so much during the bushfires and are now being called upon again to offer their spiritual counselling and pastoral support.

We fear for those who are living alone, especially if they are widowed, and for international students and all others on temporary visas – may they receive the necessary emotional and pastoral support in these times of trial. We are concerned for those living in regional and remote areas to whom we must reach out.

Australia is in an enormous emergency. As the epidemic progresses, we must not underestimate the resultant financial hardship and the mortgage stress that will ensue. We commend the governments, the banks and all other financial institutions for the steps that have already been taken. But more may be needed, not least in multicultural communities who may not have the necessary financial reserves to cope and survive. We ask apartment owners and real estate owners not to evict people and their families when they are unable to pay.

We ask the faith-based welfare organizations to collaborate in mobilising their resources quickly and efficiently to meet the difficulties to be faced by families and individuals, particularly the homeless.

Lastly, we pray for national connectedness and teamwork in addressing the crisis, and call upon all faith communities with their on-the-ground spiritual, pastoral and welfare resources in every Australian local, suburban and rural, community to respond quickly and appropriately. We pray.

**Chair:**

Emeritus Professor Des Cahill OAM, RMIT University and Chair, Religions for Peace Australia

**Members:**

Dr Brian Adams, Director, Centre for Interfaith Dialogue and Culture, Griffith University, Brisbane

Anne Aisutullin, Treasurer, Religions for Peace, South Australia

Ali Ahmed, Secretary, Religions for Peace, Victoria

Dr Sue Ennis, Secretary, Religions for Peace Australia, Victoria

Dean Saku Khan, president, Canberra Interfaith Forum

Josie Lacey AM, Chair, Religions for Peace, New South Wales, FECCA Life Member and Jewish community representative

Ron Mitchell, Secretary, Queensland Division of the United Nations Association of Australia, Logan City, Brisbane

Rev. Chris Parnell, webmaster, [www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au](http://www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au), Shepparton

Philippa Rowlands, Chair, Multifaith Association of South Australia

Wies Schuiringa, NSW Ecumenical Council, Sydney

Terry Sussmilch, chair, Religions for Peace, Tasmania

Rev. Richard Tutin, General Secretary, Queensland Faith Communities Council

Professor Samina Yasmeen, Director, Centre for Muslim States and Societies, University of Western Australia, Perth

**Media contact:** Professor Des Cahill, 0439 995761 (emergency Dr Sue Ennis 0400 069 014)

## **A PRAYER DURING TIMES OF COVID-19**

*This prayer has been adapted from a prayer prepared by the United Church of Canada and may have to be adapted for particular faith communities.*

**In this time of Covid-19, we pray:**

**When we are uncertain, O God of many names, help us be calm;**

**When information comes from all sides, correct or not, help us to discern;**

**When fear makes it hard to breathe, and anxiety is the order of the day, slow us down, O Lord;**

**Help us reach out with our hearts, when we cannot touch with our hands and hugs;**

**Help us to be socially connected, when we have to be socially distant;**

**Help us to love as perfectly as we can, knowing that ‘perfect love casts out all fear’.**

**For the doctors, we pray; for the nurses, we pray**

**For the technicians and janitors and the aides and caregivers, we pray**

**For the researchers and theorists,**

**The epidemiologists and investigators,**

**For those who are sick,**

**And those who are grieving, we pray**

**For all who are affected,**

**All around the world.....we pray**

**For safety,**

**For health,**

**For wholeness.**

**May we feed the hungry, may we give drink to the thirsty,**

**May we clothe the naked and house those without homes;**

**May we walk with those who feel they are alone,**

**And may we do all that we can do to heal**

**The sick....in spite of the epidemic, in spite of the fear**

**Help us, O Divine Being, that we might help each other**

**In the love of the divine Creator,**

**In the name of the spiritual Healer,**

**That is in all and with all,**

**We pray.**

**AMEN, MAY IT BE SO.**

**Religions for Peace** 

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## APPENDIX B

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### Senate Select Committee Inquiry into COVID-19

#### Religions for Peace Australia Submission

Religions for Peace Australia (RfPA). is particularly pleased with the opportunity to make this submission to the Senate Select Committee on Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

RfP Australia is one of the 125 member nations of Religions for Peace International, the world's largest interfaith organization with its headquarters in New York and one of the 21 member nations of the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace with its headquarters in Tokyo.

We honour and acknowledge our First Nations, custodians of the oldest continuing culture of all lands in the world, pay our respects to past, present and emerging Elders and seek their support and wisdom.

#### Overview

Stimulus funding provides an opportunity to reshape our community and our country for the better.

To do justice to this opportunity, we must face the full reality of our current (1) health (2) economic and (3) environmental crises.

Our country has so far dealt remarkably well with the global pandemic of the novel Corona virus SARS 2 COVID-19 (C-19) as measured on the coronavirus mortality database held on the John Hopkins University in Baltimore<sup>1</sup>. It has shown how effective action is when led by the science in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>

partnership with governments, business and community - a valuable lesson on the power of collective collaboration.

Yet Australia remains highly exposed to the increased intensity and frequency of extreme events that are the hallmark of a changing climate. It is in our nation's best interest to heed the lessons of our recent devastating bushfires, floods, hailstorms and droughts and to accept the need to address root causes.

As religious and interfaith leaders we pray that you, our elected members of Parliament representing our community, tackle Australia's role in the global climate challenge with courage and honesty.

Climate change is evident in the Asia-Pacific region, with particularly destructive impacts on small Pacific Island nation states such as Kiribati and Tuvalu and South-East Asian countries of the Mekong Delta, with recent major floods in Kerala, India as well as Iran, floods and heatwaves in Japan, cyclones impacting on the frontline Pacific Ocean state of the Philippines and drought and bushfires in Australia.

These disasters cost lives and impact upon livelihoods and assets. Climate-related disasters are likely to increase in the Asia-Pacific region according to UNESCAP's 2019 *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report*<sup>2</sup>.

## High Level Recommendations

We ask the Senate to recommend that the National COVID-19 Coordination Commission moves to:

**1. Continue dedicated support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities:** including outreach and logistical support through First Nation organisations and community/faith groups across remote, regional and urban areas; prioritising cultural respect and clear materials in language.

**2. Representative Inclusivity to identify and coordinate support for vulnerable sectors:** Social equity in education, employment, training, healthcare, childcare, shelter and financial support must underpin every recovery plan and reach First Nations, migrant/multicultural and faith communities, international students, refugees on temporary protection (TPV) or safe haven enterprise (SHEV)

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unescap.org/publications/asia-pacific-disaster-report-2019>

visas; marginalised populations affected by mental health, domestic violence, homelessness or drugs; young, elderly, isolated and non-English speaking/CALD communities<sup>3</sup>.

**3a. Proactively engage faith groups to build social cohesion and address racism:** establish Emergency Services Welfare Covid-19 Task Force Commissioner (at Federal and State/Territory level); include two faith/religious welfare providers from different states in the Not-for-Profit working group; urge the Minister for Multicultural Affairs to regularly meet 8 major faith representatives (select via census figures) and include key multifaith organisations. Faith/community groups provide mental health, spiritual wellbeing and practical assistance for many suffering deprivation, without financial support.

**b. Act swiftly to prevent the incitement of racial and religious hatred and to promote racial and religious harmony, including measures that:**

- a. Follow the example set by the NSW Crimes Act in penalising the incitement of racial hatred and expand the provisions to cover the incitement of religious hatred.
- b. Promote and support Governments, NGOs and multi-faith organisations in the development and operation of programs for the enhancement of racial and religious understanding and harmony.

**4. Seek Integrated Outcomes by undertaking deep structural change:** optimise Covid-19 Stimulus Funding to address Australia's economic, health, ecological, climate, water crises in line with scientific advice and deliver sustainable change in reshaping how society plans, builds, moves, produces, consumes, shares and generates energy<sup>4</sup>

**5. Demonstrate global leadership in the development of a resilient future for our region:** Deferral of COP26 to November 2021 provides an opening for Australia to demonstrate true regional leadership in responding to global crises, such as climate action. Australia's international standing can only benefit if we take a proactive and compassionate role in Oceania/South-East Asia. We applaud existing DFAT Covid-19 initiatives to assist Pacific island nations and suggest further Australian support, e.g. for enhancement of forest carbon stocks via REDD+ projects in Indonesia and Malaysia.

**6. Address Australia's vulnerability to climate change:** honour Australian obligations under the Paris Agreement by taking swift measures to transition our energy/economic systems & contribute our fair share to reduce global emissions by 7% each year between now and 2030 to limit climate change below 1.5°C Rapid decarbonisation provides opportunity to revitalise our economy in a move to net zero emissions by 2050 – failure to act will incur significant hardship for many.

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<sup>3</sup> Noting that we applaud the efforts to translate Covid-19 materials into 63 languages

<sup>4</sup> Acknowledging Anthony J McMichael (2013) *Globalization, Climate Change and Human Health* – New England Journal of Medicine Review Article 368:1335-43 (DOI: 10.1056/NEJMr1109341).

**7. Deliver inter-generational measures** via financial institutions to assist families and young people to deal with mortgage stress, unemployment/under-employment, housing insecurity/homelessness and other issues as revealed by the Australian Poverty Map and other social research data.

**8. Upgrade communication education and training development opportunities:** timely investment in digital literacy and online education<sup>5</sup> across Australia will reap significant rewards, assisted by design and communication of linguistically and culturally appropriate materials using existing faith/community distribution channels including TV, radio and social media.

**9. Reduce energy poverty in vulnerable households and communities:** Low-income households, children, the elderly and those in poor health are particularly vulnerable to health impacts of heatwaves and rising temperatures. Access to low-cost energy from residential solar, batteries or energy-efficient appliances is out of reach for many, especially those without their own homes. Prioritise investment in access to affordable renewable and energy efficiency measures, including communities in regional and remote areas where rising temperatures may make human habitation impossible unless action is taken.

**10. Drive Transition through Innovative Coordination/Collaboration:** engaging faith, community, business and government sectors in new partnerships will better coordinate resources and target activities, while enhancing scale and rapid uptake of new low carbon technologies and manufacturing.

## Global Trends

Leading economists identify how investment in recovery can strengthen social cohesion while building more sustainable and climate resilient economies. There have been many significant calls for global stimulus funding to ensure alignment to Paris Agreement targets and set the pathway to achieving net zero emissions by 2050.

A recent Oxford/Cambridge study<sup>6</sup> of 200 global central bankers, G20 finance ministry and academics across 53 countries suggest preparation and cooperation are vital to success and identify innovations. These include an informal global Sustainable Recovery Alliance, to be established at COP26 to promote global coherence among recovery packages, build resilience to shocks, and connect existing initiatives such as Mission Innovation and the Carbon Pricing Leadership Coalition.

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<sup>5</sup> Noting many households in poverty cannot afford computers, laptops or tablets to educate their children at home.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.smithschool.ox.ac.uk/publications/wpapers/workingpaper20-01.pdf>

A coalition of 155 multinational companies have reaffirmed their own science-based commitments to achieving a zero-carbon economy and called on governments to match their ambition<sup>7</sup>. The Under2 Coalition, established in 2015, now represents 1.3 billion people from 220 sub-national governments and 43% of the world's economy. They cite research from the Global Commission on the Economy and Climate<sup>8</sup> that moving to a zero-emission future can deliver economic benefits of US\$26 trillion through to 2030, create 65 million new low carbon jobs and avoid 700,000 premature deaths from air pollution.

World health leaders<sup>9</sup>, representing c.40 million health workers at the frontlines of the Covid-19 crisis, warn that climate change, air pollution, fragile health systems and environmental degradation are threats to good health and increase vulnerability to disease and ill-health.

Miguel Jorge, World Medical Association President: *"we are seeing the immense loss of lives because of acting too late. We know now more than ever that healthy lives depend on a healthy planet. As we walk on the road to recovery, we need to build a system that will protect us from further damage."*

## **Australian Priorities**

This submission shares information drawn from the Religions for Peace Australia committee and a wider network of religious leaders closely involved with their diverse communities across Australia. There is an opportunity for Covid-19 recovery plans to address the fundamentally interwoven economic, ecological and social issues that otherwise threaten the health and wellbeing of all Australians.

Our relatively low population on a vast continent with relatively uncongested cities has provided Australia with a natural advantage in combatting the spread of Covid-19, aided by swift government action and a compliant community moving with alacrity, collaboration and generosity to adhere to social distancing and other precautionary guidelines. Considerable effort has gone into protecting all members of our community, including the provision of health information translated into many languages.

This pandemic has shown us how effective our actions can be when led by the science in partnership with our governments, our businesses and our people. This is a powerful lesson. Yet this time of lockdown has also revealed serious weaknesses in our supply chains, our domestic manufacturing capacity, and our capacity to accurately identify and care for vulnerable population segments in our

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<sup>7</sup> <http://ethicalcorp.com/calls-green-covid-19-recovery-packages-companies-and-220-regional-governments>

<sup>8</sup> <https://newclimateeconomy.report/2018/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/26/world-health-leaders-urge-green-recovery-from-coronavirus-crisis>

midst (including but not only international students, workers on temporary protection visas, the isolated elderly and those in remote/underprivileged Aboriginal communities/populations).

## **Healing the Distress and Disadvantage of Social Inequity**

Australia is a lucky country, but only for some. The current Covid-19 pandemic highlights stark social inequity in many forms across our community. Serious intergenerational dislocation and disadvantage forced on our Stolen Generations and ongoing racism continues to ramify through First Nations; and is a contributing factor to high levels of incarceration and low levels of health, employment and self-esteem. Measures can be taken to promote racial/religious harmony and prevent racism/racial hatred of all types.

Across society, housing insecurity means families on low or no income may move frequently from the streets to shelters to poor quality housing. Many slip through cracks in our welfare, health and education systems - children missing school frequently may also miss out on primary health checks, vaccinations and mentoring. Over-crowding can lead to domestic violence. Inhabitants of poor-quality housing stock are more vulnerable to extremes of heat and cold and more likely to suffer energy poverty (when daily choices must be made to pay for food or for power bills).

Australia's international students bring in significant wealth through our tertiary education sector. At this time of global crisis, students are expected to *'look after themselves as declared in their visa applications'*<sup>10</sup>, though most have lost their casual jobs and it has been left to their own cultural or faith communities to feed, care and support them. Given the population of international students (c. 560,000) still effectively stranded in Australia, this situation will create hardship and become untenable in the longer term for permanent residents offering them support. In time, this situation may reflect badly on our nation and could even have repercussions on our international standing in the region.

## **Addressing our Vulnerability to Water Security, Ecological Decline and Climate Change**

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<sup>10</sup> <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/alantudge/Pages/interview-with-ali-moore-abc-radio.aspx>

*“Our present economic, social and international arrangements are based, in large measure, upon organised lovelessness. We begin by lacking charity towards Nature, so instead of trying to co-operate ... we try to dominate and exploit, we waste the earth’s mineral resources, ruin its soil, ravage its forests, pour filth into its rivers and poisonous fumes into its air.”* Aldous Huxley, (1947)<sup>11</sup>

Stimulus funding needs to prioritise investment in ecosystem resilience and nature-based solutions by encouraging climate-ready agriculture, revegetation and restoration of carbon rich biodiversity habitat.

We need to acknowledge and act upon the water issues unfolding across our country. If atmospheric temperatures continue to rise, a proportion of agricultural production may cease or diminish. In 2019, for the first time, allocation of water was prioritized to meet critical human needs<sup>12</sup> in several major rural towns (Stanthorpe, Bathurst, Armidale). Respected scientists now call for declaration of a water emergency<sup>13</sup> and propose principals for a new national water dialogue<sup>14</sup>.

Despite recent good rains, the Murray–Darling Basin remains in drought<sup>15</sup> with rain needed over widespread areas to provide relief from the impact of sustained below-average rainfall. The rural community of the Basin *‘are labouring under a great weight of reform fatigue’* – across 77,000km of rivers, 2.6 million people, forty Aboriginal nations, 120 species of water birds<sup>16</sup> – and all are in trouble. Long-term water security requires better protection and management of both surface and groundwater.

Australia is facing more intense and longer bushfire seasons and more severe heat waves. 2019 was the warmest December on record Australia-wide for all mainland States except Victoria, while large

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<sup>11</sup> Huxley, A. (1947) *The Perennial Philosophy* p109, Chatto & Windus, London – Oxford University Press, Toronto

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.mdba.gov.au/river-information/water-sharing/critical-human-water-needs>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.policyforum.net/declaring-a-water-emergency>

<sup>14</sup> <https://ausi.anu.edu.au/news/australia-it-s-time-talk-about-our-water-emergency>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.mdba.gov.au/managing-water/drought-murray-darling-basin/murray-darling-basin-drought-update>

<sup>16</sup> Simons, M. (2020) Cry Me A River – The Tragedy of the Murray-Darling Basin. Quarterly Essay, Issue 77 2020

areas had their highest accumulated Forest Fire Danger Index based on records that date back to 1950<sup>17</sup>.

Evidence before the Bushfire Royal Commission reveals Australia’s ecological vulnerability to climate change. During our recent fires, 114 threatened species lost over 50% of their range (some over 90%), while other species previously considered secure are now “imperilled” in a list that includes plants, mammals, reptiles, fish and invertebrates<sup>18</sup>.

Aboriginal traditional knowledge can help us look after this vast land. In the words of Victor Steffenson:

*“If we are going to make changes to deal with the environmental challenges that lie ahead, we need to involve the children in the solution, learn how we can play our own diverse roles that contribute to the solutions of looking after the planet. Fire management becomes harder when the rivers are not healthy and the water has been taken away. Sorting out the water issues is key to sorting out our fire problems. No doubt the droughts play a harsh role in wildfires, but we could be smarter and better prepared.”<sup>19</sup>*

## **Building Back Better**

Australian Governments must establish principles to guide the economic recovery with rapid decarbonisation of the energy sector a key priority. This means a strong bias for transition to renewables and phasing out fossil fuels. Our national regulatory and market settings must be updated to spur investment in clean energy, as for too long there has been an unhelpful link between policy uncertainty and investor uncertainty. The world is changing around us.

The Australian Sustainable Finance Initiative<sup>20</sup> encourages recovery plans aligned with our international commitments (eg Paris and Sendai Agreements and UN Sustainable Development Goals), suggesting an inclusive economy is better able to weather future shocks and protect Australian jobs and livelihoods. Australia performs poorly in the Economic Complexity Index, but can seize opportunities to improve our advanced manufacturing capability and reskill our workforce into innovative technologies<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/current/statements/scs73.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6771230/hundreds-of-safe-species-now-under-threat-because-of-fires>

<sup>19</sup> Steffenson, V. (2020) Fire Country – How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia. Hardie Grant Travel.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.sustainablefinance.org.au/s/ASFI-Statement-COVID-recovery-180520-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Bearup, G. *Make Australia Make Again*’ May 23-24 May 2020

According to Deloitte<sup>22</sup>, “Australia has great opportunities to lead the way to become a world-leading energy powerhouse, grow a world-leading green hydrogen industry, powered by our rapidly growing renewable energy sector,” noting that migrants bring “skills, innovation and deep cultural links important to underpin demand and supply in our future economy.” Australia can grow local jobs and opportunities by reducing damaging greenhouse gas emissions and decarbonising our economy.

## **The Views and Actions of Faiths around the World**

All major religious traditions advocate harmony with and care for nature (see Appendix One), and religious leaders have begun to respond, albeit at different rates, as our ecological crises become more evident. Their responses emphasize degrowth in their advocacy of simpler lifestyles and trenchant criticisms of wasteful consumerism. Deep in these respective wisdom traditions are both respect and reverence for evolving nature and serious warnings about the over-exploitation of the earth’s natural resources. Sound ethical and ecological frameworks that incorporate opportunities for green development and growth will enable our society to transition beyond its current inequitable, exploitative and unsustainable economic systems.

Religious communities and their global, national and local organizations have given rise to many aid agencies at the forefront of alleviating human suffering from climate-related droughts, fires, cyclones, floods. These agencies help communities adapt to climate disruption and develop disaster resilience, and their global response to humanitarian crises improves the survival and well-being of countless millions.

Many religiously-based organizations (eg. GreenFaith, the Bhumi Project, OneEarthSangha, Global Muslim Climate Network, the Global Catholic Climate Movement and the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change) have emerged with life-affirming agendas and plans for climate action.

Recently many spiritual and faith traditions/communities called for just and low carbon investments to stimulate recovery from this global pandemic. In May, 42 faith institutions from 14 countries (UK, Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Kenya, Myanmar, Spain and the United States)<sup>23</sup> announced their divestment from fossil fuels<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://thenewdaily.com.au/finance/finance-news/2020/05/26/coronavirus-economic-reform/>

<sup>23</sup>

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/17bL4y1ufCrawR1HMc25OsyPL55F8xSgmu5KlpHofaRM/edit#gid=0>

<sup>24</sup> <https://greenfaith.org/newsitem/Global-coalition-of-42-faith-institutions-divest-from-fossil-fuels>

This included Anglican, Buddhist, Catholic and Methodist institutions – e.g. 21 Catholic organisations with US\$40 billion in assets committed to the Catholic Impact Investing Pledge, while Jesuits in Britain divested a £400million (US\$17.5m) equity portfolio from fossil fuels.

In 2016, at the COP22 global climate talks in Morocco, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)<sup>25</sup> became the first Muslim institution to divest its portfolio, and a more recent 2018 survey found the majority of Muslim Americans<sup>26</sup>

- Correctly understand the origins of climate change (largely human activity)
- Are deeply concerned about the current and future impacts of climate change upon all of Allah’s creation, especially the most vulnerable and future generations
- Support shifting toward cleaner energy sources, and imposing a corporate polluters’ fee

These considered financial actions are underpinned by a deep spiritual morality.

Religious leaders have spoken out as follows:

**Dr. Azhar Azeez, President of the Islamic Society of North America** *“According to Islam’s most basic and fundamental teachings, human beings have been uniquely charged with the great responsibility of being Guardians of the Earth. It goes against the mission of the ISNA to invest in fossil fuel companies whose operations and products cause such grave harm to humanity and to Creation.”*

**The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Reverend Dr Rowan Williams:** *“The current health crisis has highlighted as never before the need for coherent international action in the face of global threat. Can we learn the lesson and apply it to the global threat of climate change? To do so means taking practical and effective steps to reduce our lethal dependence on fossil fuels.”*

**Pope Francis:** *“We need an ecological conversion that can find expression in concrete actions. As a single interdependent family, we require a common plan in order to avert the threats to our common home” From Laudato Si’: “I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.”*

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<sup>25</sup> [https://www.arcc.org.au/interfaith\\_statement\\_islamic\\_divestment\\_media\\_release](https://www.arcc.org.au/interfaith_statement_islamic_divestment_media_release)

<sup>26</sup> <https://isna.net/new-national-isna-survey-finds-strong-support-for-climate-solutions-among-muslim-americans/>

**Father Endra Wijayanta, director of the Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Commission for the Archdiocese of Semarang, Indonesia:** *‘This COVID-19 pandemic is the exact time not only to reflect, but to act. We have to stop our ecological spiral of death. We have to revive our ecological hope, in massive repentance of humankind, by taking the pathway to more sustainable living’.*

**His Holiness the Dalai Lama:** *“Our Mother Earth is teaching us a lesson in universal responsibility. This blue planet is a delightful habitat. Its life is our life; its future, our future. Indeed, the earth acts like a mother to us all; as her children, we re dependent on her. In the face of the global problems we are going through, it is important that we must all work together... No matter how difficult the situation may be, we should apply science and human ingenuity to overcome the problems that confront us.”*

Other faith responses are outlined in Appendix A.

**As UN Climate Change Executive Secretary Patricia Espinosa states:**

*“If done right, the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis can steer us to a more inclusive and sustainable climate path... building a safe, clean, just and resilient world”<sup>27</sup>.*

***Let us do our best to “get it right” for the sake of all Australians and the wider world.***

**Emeritus Professor Desmond Cahill OAM,**

**RMIT University,**

**Chair, Religions for Peace Australia,**

**Deputy Moderator, Asian Conference of Religions for Peace**

**National Committee Members of Religions for Peace Australia and many of the religious leaders participating in RfPA national Covid-19 discussions and preparation of this paper have included:**

**Dr Brian Adams,** Director, Centre for Interfaith & Cultural Dialogue, Griffith University, Brisbane Queensland

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<sup>27</sup> <https://unfccc.int/news/governments-commit-to-take-forward-vital-work-to-tackle-climate-change-in-2020>

**Anne Aisatullin**, Country Contact, United Religions Initiative, Australia

**Ali Ahmed**, Secretary, Religions for Peace, Victoria

**Dr Susan Ennis**, Secretary, Religions for Peace Australia

**Dean Sahu Khan**, President, Canberra Interfaith Forum

**Josie Lacey AM**, Chair, Religions for Peace, NSW, Life- member of Executive Council of Australian Jewry and Ethnic Communities Council of NSW and founding convenor of Women Interfaith Network.

**Dr Edwin Lourdes Joseph JP** President, Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory

**Rev. Albert (Bhakta Dasa) Lange** minister of religion for the Vaisnava Hindu Community and ISKCON. A representative for the Hindu community in Victoria. Chair of Faith Community Council of Victoria.

**Rev. Chris Parnell**, webmaster, [www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au](http://www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au), and Regional Interfaith Network

**Philippa Rowlands**, Chair, Multifaith Association of South Australia

**Wies Schuiringa**, Vice President, NSW Ecumenical Council

**Jasbir Singh Suropada**, Chairperson Sikh Interfaith Council of Victoria

**Terry Susmilch**, Convenor, Religions for Peace, Tasmania

**Rev Ian Smith**, Executive Officer, Victorian Council of Churches

**Rev Alimoni Taumoepeau**, Multicultural Pacific Council NSW

**Rev Dr Andrew Williams**, Minister of the Word, Darwin Memorial Uniting Church Northern Territory

**Professor Samina Yasmeen**, Director, Centre for Muslim States and Societies, University of Western Australia, Perth

## **A MULTIFAITH PRAYER FOR OUR EARTH**

**All-powerful God,**

you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures.

You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.

Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty.

Fill us with peace that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one.

**O God of the poor,**

help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes.

Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it, that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.

Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth.

Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation,

to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.

We thank you for being with us each day.

Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace.

**AMEN**

Reproduced from Pope Francis' Ecological Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Praise Be To You (2015)<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

# APPENDIX A

## **The Role of Religion in a Healthy Society**

In the emerging global era, we live in a very religious world with 84 per cent of the world's population having a religious affiliation according to the Pew Religious Research Center. And research continues to demonstrate that religion, on balance, adds to personal well-being and national social wealth and social capital. According to psychologists, authentic religion is about believing, bonding, behaving and belonging. Its beneficial personal and community outcomes have been empirically demonstrated by the social sciences. A healthy society needs healthy religion, and in the governance and management of religion and religious diversity, the State has a responsibility to protect the right to religious freedom and to intervene when bad religious practice is producing harm such as religiously inspired terrorism. The right to religious freedom and practice is not an absolute and unfettered right, but it is a relative right. Central to the religion-state relationship is quality religious leadership. In the playing out of this relationship, such religious leadership is one of the keys to successful outcomes whereby the spiritual needs and aspirations of the people are met and religious communities contribute to national welfare and social cohesion.

## **Religion and the Attitude to Nature**

The various anthropological frameworks (e.g. Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck) that describe the deep-seated cultural value orientations that differentiate societies suggest that there are three fundamental attitudes to nature, namely, (i) subjugation to nature (ii) harmony with nature and (iii) mastery or control over nature. Most religions, especially nature religions, reflect the subjugation attitude in fearing and trembling before the dangers and hazards that nature can inflict upon humanity such as earthquakes, cyclones, tornados, bushfires, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, floods, landslides and droughts as documented in the 2015 *Natural Hazards Risk Atlas*. Religious responses vary from explanations in terms of the revenge of the evil spirits, the wrath of God against humanity's sinfulness to an acquiescent acceptance of the damage and destruction done.

## ***Taoism***

In Asian cultures with their rich pools of wisdom, love of and harmony with nature is central. The major Asian traditions insist that the increasing threat of natural hazards shows that nature is not in harmony. We see this in Taoism, for 'humanity follows the earth, the earth follows heaven, heaven follows the Tao and the Tao follows what is natural'. In working to achieve this harmony, human beings should cultivate the way of no-action and let nature be itself. If the pursuit of development

and profit runs counter to the harmony and balance of nature, people should restrain and curb themselves. Insatiable human desire will lead to the over-exploitation of natural resources. To be too successful is to be on the road to defeat.

### ***Confucianism***

The rich 2,500 year-old Confucian tradition which is re-emerging in new ways in contemporary Chinese thinking sees the solution to the world's environmental problems in terms of uniting the trinity of heaven, earth and humanity in an alternative worldview. For example, China through its five-year plans is moving away from its huge dependence on coal which has fuelled 70 per cent of its past energy needs to a growing commitment to renewable resources. Modern Confucians have in 2013 produced a *Confucian Statement on the Environment*. It proposes the self-cultivation of virtue, responsibility and a caring attitude in every person. "Nature is an unending process of transformation rather than a static presence, and as such is a source of inspiration by which we understand the dynamism of Heaven. As the first hexagram in the Book of Change symbolizes, Heaven's vitality and creativity are without ends and we humans must emulate its ceaseless vitality and creativity".

### ***Buddhism***

According to Buddhism, changeability and impermanence are central features of nature and of living - nothing is static. According to the *Agganna Sutta* which contains the Buddha's discourses to two Brahmin monks, the world passes through alternating cycles of evolution and dissolution, each of which lasts for a long period of time. Hence, suffering is at the very centre of Buddhist thinking with its Four Truths about Suffering, but Buddhism believes that, while change is inherent in nature, humanity's moral decline accelerates the change process and results in changes that are adverse to human well-being and happiness according to the five sets of precepts: physical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, moral laws and causal laws. The One Earth Sangha led the effort in the lead-up to the 2015 Paris Climate Conference to issue *The Time to Act is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change*.

The Buddhist leaders declared the climate change crisis to be 'the greatest challenge that humanity has ever faced', adding that 'human activity (is) triggering environmental breakdown on a planetary scale'. As the root problem, 'the compulsion to consume is an expression of craving, the very thing the Buddha pinpointed as the root cause of suffering. They thus emphasized the moral dimensions to reversing climate change.

### ***Hinduism***

Hinduism is a religion which is very near to nature, asking its followers to see the divine in every object in the universe. The Mahabharata (109, 10) says, "Dharma exists for the welfare of all beings. Hence, that by which the welfare of all living beings is sustained, that for sure is dharma". At the

2009 Melbourne Parliament of the World's Religions, which was the occasion for a special gathering of global Hindu leaders, the *Hindu Melbourne Declaration* proclaimed, "The Earth is my mother, and I am her child", adding that "a radical change in our relationship with nature is no longer an option...We cannot destroy nature without destroying ourselves". In 2015 in the lead-up to the Paris Climate Conference, the second *Global Hindu Declaration on Climate Change* was issued. It called for meaningful action to slow and prevent climate change that is scientifically credible and historically fair in the transition to 100 per cent clean energy.

### **Islam**

The Qu'ran states that "Mischief (fassad) has appeared in land and sea because of the deeds that the hands of men have earned, that God may give them a taste of some of their deeds in order that they may turn back (from evil)" (Qu'ran 30, 41). Whilst the World Muslim Congress has not made any formal statement, in 2015 a conference in Turkey led to the *Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change* which led to the formation of the Global Muslim Climate Network.

The declaration crafted by five leading Islamic scholars called on the world's 1.6 billion Muslims to play an active role in combatting climate change pointing to the example of the Prophet (pbh) who banned the felling of trees in the desert and established protected areas for the conservation of plants and wildlife. The Islamic leaders pointed to the scientific consensus to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere and the need to set clear targets and monitoring systems. They called upon well-off nations and oil-producing states to phase out their emissions by 2050 and to have a zero emissions strategy. It also called on the business sectors to reduce their carbon footprints by committing to 100 per cent renewable energy sources. As well, there have emerged calls for a 'green jihad', and the concept of *zohd* or degrowth, that is, living lightly on earth in a green lifestyle.

### **Christianity**

Within Judaism and Christianity, there has always been a reverence for creation beginning with the creation stories in the Book of Genesis, the first Book of the Bible. Christian Orthodoxy began its initiatives that date back to the 1970s and the 1980s, and September 1<sup>st</sup> was designated as a pan-Orthodox day to offer prayers for the preservation of the natural creation. Since his election in 1991, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has become known as the Green Patriarch, defining environmentalism as a spiritual responsibility. In 1997, a symposium on the Black Sea was held and subsequent symposia have focussed on the Danube, the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea, the Amazon Basin, the Arctic Circle and the Mississippi River. The Patriarch has drawn attention to the word 'ecology' which is derived from the Greek word meaning 'home' or 'dwelling'. "The world is indeed our home. Yet it is also the home of everybody, just as it is the home of every animal creature and of every form of life created by God. It is a sign of arrogance to presume that we human beings alone inhabit this world. Moreover, it is a sign of arrogance to imagine that only the present generation enjoy its resources".

In his 2015 Papal Letter or Encyclical, *Laudato Si: Care for our Common Home*, Pope Francis insists the world must ‘hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’. He severely criticizes both consumerism with its throw-away culture and irresponsible development because he believes humans no longer see God as the creator of time and space and the universe. The Pope laments environmental degradation and global warming, calling for ‘swift and unified global action’. But he admitted that it would not be easy to achieve consensus. He condemned the use of highly polluting fossil fuels, especially coal and oil. He blames apathy, the reckless pursuit of profit, excessive faith in technology and political short-sightedness. In combatting the climate crisis, the developed nations are morally obligated to assist the developing nations. The recent Amazonian Synod in October 2019 in Rome condemned the destruction of the Amazon’s rain forests.

### ***Judaism***

In 2015, 425 US rabbis signed a *Rabbinic Letter in the Climate Crisis*. They called for a new sense of eco-social justice that includes the healing of our planet. “For about 200 years, the most powerful institutions and culture of the human species have refused to let the Earth or human earthlings have time of space for rest”. In their view, the Earth is overworked, “precisely what our Torah teaches we must not do”. They concluded that “our ancient earthy wisdom taught that social justice, sustainable abundance, a healthy Earth and spiritual fulfillment are inseparable.

