

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

RELIGIONS for PEACE AUSTRALIA

ANNUAL REPORT 2020– 2021

RfP Australia and the C-19 Pandemic

My last 2019 – 2020 report was prepared exactly twelve months ago for the online Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Australian chapter of Religions for Peace (June 6th, 2020) and for the online annual executive meeting of the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP) when the COVID-19 pandemic had completely changed the world. Although we had thought the pandemic would be behind us by the time of this 2021AGM, such has not been the case. Melbourne, as the Australian city most affected, is currently in its fourth lockdown. 2020-2021 has been a difficult year with one serious setback in Queensland as well as dealing with the pandemic.

As I reported last year, by any measure Australia has done remarkably well in combatting the virus. Last year, I cited the mortality figures compiled by the John Hopkins University Coronavirus Data Center in Baltimore, using the deaths per 100,000 population from COVID-19. It is interesting to compare those figures with the figures almost a year later (see Table One).

Table One: Comparative Mortality Rates 100,000 Population for Selected Countries, 2020 and 2021

SELECTED COUNTRY	June 11th. 2020	May 31st. 2021
Australia	0.41	3.59
Belgium	84.21	217.01
China	0.33	0.35
Germany	10.53	106.35
India	0.57	23.86
Indonesia	0.72	18.57
Italy	56.33	208.97
Japan	0.73	10.20
New Zealand	0.45	0.53
South Korea	0.53	3.78
Spain	58.08	169.73
United Kingdom	61.62	191.57
United States	34.14	181.06

In June 2020, Religions for Peace Australia made a detailed submission to the Senate Committee for COVID-19 (see Appendix One), 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. In May 2021, Religions for Peace Australia publicised a Statement on Overcoming Vaccine Hesitancy, (Appendix Two) to encourage people to have one of the vaccines.

Religions for Peace also received a grant of \$11,500 from the Victorian Government through the Australian Multicultural Community Services to update its video equipment, employ technical support personnel and to prepare a series of short videos on combatting the pandemic. One looked at mental health and spirituality issues during the pandemic crisis, a second examined the history of interfaith interaction in Australia and a third looked at combatting racism and stigmatization of certain groups, especially Asian groups, during the pandemic. Religions for Peace Australia also worked with the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics in holding weekly webinars in many aspects of the pandemic, including religion where we worked with the RfP India delegate, Professor Deepali Bhanoth, an expert in Hinduism and Sanskrit (see report in Appendix Three).

The highlights of the year were the 2021 U.N. Interfaith Week Address and the First Interfaith National Day of Prayer held on 18th October 2020 and there was one major setback as already mentioned.

First Peoples and UN Interfaith Week Address

In 2020, Religions for Peace Australia made the decision to focus on Australia's First Peoples and Aboriginal spirituality as well as their quest for reconciliation built around the Uluru statement. Australia's indigenous peoples are the longest, continuously existing culture in the world having lived on the Australian continent for 63,000+ years. It, in tandem with two parliamentarians, Maria Vamvakinou (Labor) and Russell Broadbent (Liberal Conservative) and the Canberra Interfaith Forum led by Mr Dean Sadhu Khan, invited Senator Patrick Dodson, Australia's foremost First People's leader, to present the UN Interfaith Week address at the Notaras Multicultural Centre in Canberra and it was relayed via zoom across Australia. He interfaced Aboriginal spiritualities with Christian spiritualities, noting that Aboriginal spiritual traditions and practices were orally known thousands of years before the Christian Bible was written down. He noted how the so-called Doctrine of Discovery of New Lands such as Australia and the Americas was nested in a false Christian theology.

The Aboriginal lands were stolen from the First Peoples by the white invaders and they became refugees in their own lands. Truthfulness and dialogue were now necessary to achieve reconciliation. The evening was completed with a reading of *Dadirri; The Practice of Aboriginal Contemplative Listening* (see end of this report) by the 2021 Senior Australian of the Year, Miriam-Rose Ungermerr, who comes from the Arrernte Aboriginal people around Alice Springs.

National Interfaith Prayer Day

On the 18th October, 2020, under the leadership of Chris Parnell, Religions for Peace Australia held a National Interfaith Prayer online session across Australia. This was the first time this had occurred, using the zoom technology. Later on, special prayers from the different traditions were held with the title, Prayers in Times of Crisis and Danger.

Closure of Griffith University's Centre for Interfaith Dialogue and Culture

The major setback for 2020-21 was the sudden closure of Griffith University's Centre for Interfaith Dialogue and Culture, the only such research centre in Australia. It was as a direct result of the pandemic as Australian universities have had to close many such centres because of the huge drop in the numbers of international students coming to study in Australia. It was a sad day for Australia's interfaith movement committed to inter-religious dialogue, joint inter-religious action, inter-religious harmony and social cohesion at all levels of Australian society.

The Centre, with its links across the world, has been a source of knowledge and action in the pursuit of its multifaith mission. It has highlighted how, as social research has demonstrated, faith communities, on balance notwithstanding the negativities and the extremism, add to a nation's social capital and social wealth; faith communities that are led by leaders in the spirit of religious moderation contribute to social cohesion, not least in a multicultural country such as Australia. Faith commitment necessarily means positive inter-faith engagement. Hence, the closing of the Centre for Interfaith Dialogue and Culture is a severe loss to Australia, to Asia and to the world.

In recent times Dr. Brian Adams has been at its helm. He has been its heart and soul and he provided wonderful and farsighted leadership based on his personal and professional experience, obviously in the U.S. but from many other parts of the world, including Tanzania, Mali and other West African countries. But his greatest achievement which brought great honour and global standing to Griffith University and to Religions for Peace Australia has been his founding of the G20 Interfaith Summit alongside the G20 Summits of the leaders of the world's 20 leading economies. The first one was held on the Gold Coast in Queensland in 2014 alongside the G20 meeting in Brisbane. That annual tradition continues today and that has not been without its challenges along the way. This is Australia's greatest gift to the global interfaith movement, and Griffith's Centre was the key player led by Brian. The Centre is truly a victim of the pandemic. And we mourn its loss with Brian and all those who worked with and supported the Centre.

Multifaith Chaplaincy Project

Last year we reported that Religions for Peace Australia had received funding of \$22,000 each year for a two-year project with 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. The lead researchers are Emeritus Professor Des Cahill and Dr. Sue Ennis. Unfortunately, the project has been badly delayed by the pandemic. However, the interviews with head chaplains of the various sectors have now been completed online and a report is being compiled before approaching the recently arrived religious communities.

Part of the project has been to establish a special website, Multifaith Chaplaincy Australia, by our very committed webmaster, Rev. Chris Parnell. This website remains 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.

The impact of COVID-19 and chaplaincy can be observed from the annual statistics. Many resources and narratives about chaplains and providing services during the pandemic have been placed on this site.

The pages created from the overview document (healthcare chaplaincy, education chaplaincies, industrial chaplaincy, sports chaplains, chaplaincy to migrants and refugees, emergency service chaplaincy, military chaplaincy, youth chaplaincy) all have had comprehensive page reads. The foundation of this site has been vigorously pursued by - in the main - chaplaincy professionals and chaplaincy/pastoral educators.

Table Two: Multifaith Chaplaincy Website Statistics 2020

Month	Unique visitors	Number of visits	Pages	Hits	Bandwidth
Jan 2020	10	22	60	78	1.60 MB
Feb 2020	8	17	31	47	1.90 MB
Mar 2020	19	36	48	102	4.35 MB
Apr 2020	27	61	63	166	3.43 MB
May 2020	32	45	75	101	5.13 MB
Jun 2020	137	296	844	3,186	67.96 MB
Jul 2020	247	595	1,367	4,878	94.21 MB
Aug 2020	316	648	1,532	5,684	153.88 MB
Sep 2020	309	666	1,295	4,818	94.50 MB
Oct 2020	370	744	1,938	8,228	204.34 MB
Nov 2020	320	680	1,869	6,593	146.12 MB
Dec 2020	322	682	1,952	5,810	102.74 MB
Total	2,117	4,492	11,074	39,691	880.16 MB

Top downloads on this site included the Islamic Centre of Victoria Handbook for Caring for Muslim Patients, the Kantar School Chaplaincy report, Guide for Movement Chaplains, Caring for those who care, The Corona pandemic as challenge for those who care, Cert IV in Chaplaincy Flyer, Position Description for Muslim Chaplain, Capability Framework (Spiritual Care Australia) and Contemporary Paganism and Chaplains.

The Forthcoming ACRP Assembly

RfP Australia has been heavily involved with the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (Religions for Peace Asia), particularly in the preparations for the Asian Assembly which had to be re-scheduled from October 2020 in Tokyo to an online and scaled-down Assembly scheduled for October 19th – 22nd, 2021. Because of the pandemic, an additional session on the pandemic has been added, and the theme was changed to *Asian Religious Communities in Action: Moving towards an Inclusive, Healthy, Prosperous, Peaceful Asia*. The New Constitution has been finalized, and terms of reference for the new Advisory Council and the ACRP Board of Trustees are being prepared.

Australia has been specially honoured that our secretary, Dr Sue Ennis, has been chosen to be the resource person for the Commission No. One on Education for Peace and Human Dignity and Philippa Rowland, head of our South Australian affiliate, has been chosen to be the resource person for Commission No. Four on Development and the Environment in Diversifying Societies.

New and Continuing International and Australian Partnerships

As indicated in previous years, 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. A special event was the *Sacred People, Sacred Earth* celebration in which Australia joined with 420 events in 49 countries. As well, much groundwork was done on the divestment issue to encourage divestment from companies that still support fossil fuels, "aligning your faith with your finance".

As part of the 50th. year celebrations of Religions for Peace International, Australia participated in October in an online conference, *Faith for Nature*, jointly sponsored by the United Nations Environment Program, the Government of Iceland and RfP (International and Asia). It was led off

with a prayer by the Japanese Anglican Archbishop and included a presentation by Cardinal Bo of Yangon. The very active Japanese chapter presented its Climate Emergency Declaration, and presentations came from all continents

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.

Australia was an active participant in an online conference sponsored by the China Committee of Religions for Peace on ***Solidarity and Co-operation: Multi-Religious Response to COVID-19 and Shared Well-Being***. The various Chinese and other religious leaders stressed how religion can have a positive value in prevailing over the virus. Leaders of the Australian and Chinese chapters of Religions for Peace subsequently met in March 2021 to discuss Chinese chairship of Commission No. Four on Development and the Environment and how to increase China's role in ACRP and the work of the Tokyo secretariat.

Philippa Rowland participated as a speaker in ACRP's Asia-Pacific two-day consultation on ***Women, Faith and Diplomacy***, also as part of the golden jubilee in October, 2020. She spoke on climate change, zootic diseases and animal pathogens. Many speakers, in speaking of the trafficking of women and girls, highlighted the U.N's 4 Ps: prevention, protection, prosecution and partnership. Diplomacy is not just for the diplomats and women have to play a greater role in addressing the key issues.

Throughout 2020, there was great emphasis on Interreligious Councils (IRCs) with seminars held by RfP International and ACRP under the leadership of the RfP Secretary-General, Professor Azza Karam. Every chapter is encouraged to have a fully functioning IRC in its own country and the document produces a worthwhile typology of IRCs. She said that religious silos have to be avoided, and stressed the need to have a better financial base for the work of the IRCs.

Websites Report

Our website, www.religiousforpeaceaustralia.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 does our second website, Multifaith Education Australia.

Religions for Peace Australia Website 2020

The average number of daily visitors was 166. The majority of visitors came from Australia, 125,688 visits from Australia making 1,129,655 hits on site, which implies they are looking at an average of 8-9 pages per visit. After Australia, the visitors rank (in visits) USA, India, Great Britain, Germany, Unknown, Ukraine, Russian Federation, China, Canada. "Unknown" are the visitors who use their own VPN or a private window in browsing.

The top downloads for the year were (in order) Muslim Australians, Golden Rule for Interfaith, Diverse Faiths of Tasmania, Child Sex Abuse and the Catholic Church, Multifaith Calendar, Religions for Peace Refugees and Migrants Guide, Chaplaincy and Specialist Spiritual Care in Multifaith Victoria (Overview), Living the Change in Multicultural Australia, Australian Multicultural Commission Interfaith Report, Living the Change Seminar, Religion and Social Cohesion in Australia - an overview.

Table Three: Religions for Peace Australia Website Statistics 2020

Month	Unique visitors	Number of visits	Pages	Hits	Bandwidth
Jan 2020	1,347	1,784	6,145	37,460	655.47 MB
Feb 2020	1,753	2,407	6,465	47,386	972.07 MB
Mar 2020	2,168	2,959	8,707	57,292	1.04 GB
Apr 2020	1,687	2,217	5,884	47,640	978.34 MB
May 2020	2,922	3,975	18,092	105,882	2.27 GB
Jun 2020	4,038	6,012	20,220	181,152	4.83 GB
Jul 2020	4,805	7,170	28,959	205,029	5.51 GB
Aug 2020	5,682	7,951	27,702	237,939	8.18 GB
Sep 2020	4,951	6,864	22,825	187,533	6.94 GB
Oct 2020	5,057	7,059	25,143	198,389	5.96 GB
Nov 2020	4,625	6,995	27,771	215,156	6.48 GB
Dec 2020	3,600	5,687	23,244	133,182	3.37 GB
Total	42,635	61,080	221,157	1,654,040	47.12 GB

The top search terms which has brought visitors to the site include "religions for peace australia", interfaith dialogue in australia, religions for peace, interfaith, peace, prayer, covid, dialogue, halal and religion.

Multifaith Education Australia Website 2020

The average number of daily visitors was 20. The impact of Covid and home-schooling can be seen as parents and teachers have been searching for home schooling materials in their faith. The majority of visitors came from Australia, 8,842 visits for the year, who read pages 23,764 times looking at an average of 3 pages per visit. After Australia, the visitors were in rank order according to the number of visits, from the US, Sweden, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, Russian Federation, India, China, Ukraine, Japan and then the EU.

Table Four: Multifaith Education Australia Website Statistics 2020

Month	Unique visitors	Number of visits	Pages	Hits	Bandwidth
Jan 2020	85	254	294	320	2.75 MB
Feb 2020	33	186	289	386	11.25 MB
Mar 2020	22	195	258	432	14.55 MB
Apr 2020	50	255	303	404	9.10 MB
May 2020	76	175	234	457	12.93 MB
Jun 2020	297	489	858	2,737	89.93 MB
Jul 2020	372	785	2,547	7,475	287.96 MB
Aug 2020	443	868	2,435	6,065	260.95 MB
Sep 2020	525	966	2,775	7,880	927.39 MB
Oct 2020	421	846	2,011	5,632	613.71 MB
Nov 2020	423	855	3,126	6,364	380.52 MB
Dec 2020	420	894	2,866	5,702	259.88 MB
Total	3,167	6,768	17,996	43,854	2.80 GB

The top downloads for this site were the Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission Interfaith Education Guidelines, Baha'i SRI program materials, Hindu SRI, Discovering Buddha (SRI program), JCMA

Comparative Guide to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, RfP Code of Conduct, Beirut Declaration on Faith for Rights, Our Stories (Jewish Commitment to a Better World) and the Special Religious Instruction – Parent Consent Form.

Top search terms which bring visitors to this site include multifaith group religious instruction, respecting all religions, Sikhism, education program in religious instruction

Once again, the majority of visitors come from Australia, with 6502 Australian visitors looking at pages 26,350 times, suggesting that these visitors were looking at 4 pages per visit. Strong interest in this site comes from the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Germany, Vietnam, Italy, India, China and European Country, followed by France and The Netherlands.

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. Every national executive meeting has had a representative from the Northern Territory since the outbreak of the pandemic. Edwin Lourdes Joseph reports that discussions are being held in Darwin to forming a branch, and the Northern Territory Government Administrator has agreed to hold a reception to launch the branch in the near future. Across Australia several events could not be held because of the pandemic.

New South Wales

In New South Wales, the state chapter led by Josie Lacey continued to have its meetings in the State Parliament House on a quarterly basis, 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. Among the speakers were the Venerable Gayatriprani who spoke about Diwali and a Zoroastrian, Zarir Bamji, spoke of his faith that is not well understood in Australia. Adjunct Professor George Newhouse, CEO of the National Justice Project, spoke on the issue of Aboriginal deaths in custody. The Women’s Interfaith Network continues its valuable work to meet regularly for sessions of praying and cordial exchange.

A milestone achievement representing the voice of youth under the leadership of Fr. Patrick McInerney, a member of RfP New South Wales and director of the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations was the publication of **The Sydney Statement** (www.thesydneystatement.org.au), prepared by the youth of Sydney as an interfaith charter for building bridges between believers from different religions through commitments to a Dialogue of Life, a Dialogue of Action, a Dialogue of Knowledge, a Dialogue of Religious Experience and an Intra-Faith Dialogue.

Queensland

Following the closure of the Griffith University interfaith centre, negotiations have begun to have a replacement affiliate body to represent the State of Queensland.

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.

South Australia

Our South Australian affiliate, the Multifaith Association of South Australia (MFASA) led by Philippa Rowland, engaged in leading interfaith prayers and celebrations. Aside from its Living the Change and divestment initiatives, MFASA has become more diverse in its faiths profile, and this has enabled it to strengthen its relationships with faith communities.

Tasmania

After the red letter year of 2019 – 2020, the vibrant Tasmanian chapter with Terry Sussmilch as its convenor pushed ahead with the Australian Compassion Council to declare Hobart as a Compassionate City. This remains a work in progress. The newly formed Tasmanian Faith Communities Network met in March with 12 participants to commemorate the Christchurch massacre as well as Harmony Week and to discuss key issues regarding *Leading Faith Communities in Difficult Times*. The Anglican Dean of St. David's Cathedral spoke of the *Show Hope* event as a way of overcoming people's anxiety and showing resilience. He spoke of his own leadership fatigue. Master Wang of the Tantrayana Buddhist tradition spoke of raising \$110,000 to help those in need. The lead chaplain of the Tasmanian Emergency Services Ministry remarked how C-19 had changed everything. As part of this, RfP Tasmania had worked with the migrant support network during the pandemic.

The Tasmanian members participated in the Eid festival, a pandemic vigil for India and the Jewish Day of Holocaust Commemoration. As well, the Tasmanian chapter joined in the interfaith service for nuclear disarmament on Hiroshima Day.

Victoria

Besides the chaplaincy and video projects mentioned above, RfP Victoria made a submission (see Appendix Four) on the 2021 social cohesion consultation held by the Australian Minister for Migrant and Multicultural Services, highlighting the role of religion in social cohesion and the role of government in the governance of religion and religious diversity. RfP Victoria continued its membership of the Victoria Police Multifaith Council, especially in regard to gay conversion practices by any religious group which is now illegal.

A.C.T.

As well as its joint organization of the U.N. Interfaith Week address, the Canberra Interfaith Forum (CIF) celebrated in April 2021 the tenth anniversary of the establishment of its Environmental Garden on the banks of Lake Burley Griffin. Seven youth faith groups and an Aboriginal singer presented cultural and spiritual items at the outdoor event and a peace pole ceremony was also performed. CIF is to be congratulated for this remarkable Garden. In June 2021, it will hold a seminar on 'The common basis of all faiths and their relevance to current global challenges'.

Conclusion

Once again I want to thank all the RfP members across Australia for their support and great work during a very difficult time of stress and crisis. In particular, I want to thank Sue Ennis for her work as secretary, and the work of Rev. Chris Parnell, our webmaster and all the chairs and secretaries of our affiliated bodies. Our website is certainly the best in Asia of all the ACRP websites, if not the world. Our balance sheet is in a reasonably healthy state with a balance of \$AUD42,431.15 in the two bank accounts.

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.

Please keep safe and well in these C-19 days, and work for the common good.

Desmond Cahill, O.A.M. (Emeritus Professor),
Chair, Religions for Peace Australia,
June 2021.

Another file contains the four appendices:

- One: Submission to the Senate Committee on COVID-19**
- Two: Overcoming Vaccine Hesitancy**
- Three: UNESCO Webinar on Religion and COVID-19**
- Four: Social Cohesion submission**

THE PRACTICE OF *DADIRRI*: ABORIGINAL CONTEMPLATIVE LISTENING

Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr
Senior Australian of the Year 2021

Dadirri recognizes the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us. This is the gift that Australia is thirsting for. It is something like what you call ‘contemplation’. When I experience *dadirri*, I am made whole again...A big part of *dadirri* is listening. My people are not threatened by silence. They are completely at home in it. They have lived for thousands of years with nature’s quietness. My people today recognize and experience in this quietness the great Life-Giving Spirit, the Father of us all.

Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and to wait, we do not try to hurry things.....

We wait on God. His time is the right time. We wait for his word to be made clear to us. We don’t worry. We are River people. We cannot hurry the river. We have to move with its current and understand its ways.

We hope that the people of Australia will wait. Not so much waiting for us – to catch up – but waiting with us, as we find our pace in this world.

There is much pain and struggle as we wait. The Holy Father, John Paul II, understood this when he said to us: “*If you stay closely united, you are like a tree, standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burnt; but inside the tree the sap is still flowing, and under the ground*

the roots are still strong. Like that tree, you have endured the flames, and you still have the power to be reborn”.

As the Holy Father said, it is time for re-birth. Jesus comes to fulfil, not to destroy. If our culture is alive and strong and respected, it will grow. It will not die.

We know that in time and in the spirit of *dadirri* – that deep listening and quiet stillness – his way will be clear. We are asking our fellow Australians to take the time to know us; to be still and listen to us. And I believe that the spirit of *dadirri* that we have to offer will blossom and grow, not just within ourselves, but in our whole nation.

Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, born in 1950, was baptized in 1965. She became the Northern Territory’s first indigenous teacher. She was for many years principal of St. Francis Xavier School at Daley River.

Religions for Peace Australia 

www.religionsforpeace.org.au

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Australia ABN 49 320 161 142**

RELIGIONS for PEACE AUSTRALIA

ANNUAL REPORT 2020– 2021

APPENDICES

APPENDIX ONE

Senate Select Committee Inquiry into COVID-19

Religions for Peace Australia Submission

 Religions for Peace Australia	Legally known as: The World Conference of Religions for Peace Australia, Inc. ABN 49 320 161 142 Email: wcrpaust@iinet.net.au Website: http://religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au/
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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 Baltimore¹. It has shown how effective action is when led by the science in 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

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

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*².

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) visas; marginalised populations affected by mental health, domestic violence, homelessness or drugs; young, elderly, isolated and non-English speaking/CALD communities³.

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 multifait 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 energy⁴

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

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

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

⁴ Acknowledging Anthony J McMichael (2013) *Globalization, Climate Change and Human Health* – New England Journal of Medicine Review Article 368:1335-43 (DOI: 10.1056/NEJMra1109341).

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.

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 education⁵ 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 study⁶ 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.

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

⁶ <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 ambition⁷. 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 Climate⁸ 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 leaders⁹, 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 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

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

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

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

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*'¹⁰, 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

"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)¹¹

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 needs¹² in several major rural towns (Stanthorpe, Bathurst, Armidale). Respected scientists now call for declaration of a water emergency¹³ and propose principals for a new national water dialogue¹⁴. Despite recent good rains,

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

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

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

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

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

the Murray–Darling Basin remains in drought¹⁵ 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 birds¹⁶ – 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 areas had their highest accumulated Forest Fire Danger Index based on records that date back to 1950¹⁷.

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 invertebrates¹⁸.

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.”*¹⁹

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 Initiative²⁰ 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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 technologies²¹.

According to Deloitte²², “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 (e.g. 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)²³ announced their divestment from fossil fuels²⁴.

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.

²¹ Bearup, G. *Make Australia Make Again* May 23-24 May 2020

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

²³

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

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

In 2016, at the COP22 global climate talks in Morocco, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)²⁵ became the first Muslim institution to divest its portfolio, and a more recent 2018 survey found the majority of Muslim Americans²⁶

- 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."*

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 are 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."*

²⁵ https://www.arrcc.org.au/interfaith_statement_islamic_divestment_media_release

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

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”*²⁷.

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

**Emeritus Professor Desmond Cahill OAM,
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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:

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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, and Regional Interfaith Network

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

Rev Alimoni Taumoepeau, Multicultural Pacific Council NSW

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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)²⁸

²⁸ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

APPENDIX TWO



RELIGIONS for PEACE AUSTRALIA

www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au

VACCINATING for the COMMON GOOD

PUBLIC STATEMENT

This statement is directed to the whole Australian community as well as being for Australia's own faith communities. As your interfaith leaders in Australia, we need to congratulate you, the Australian people, and our elected and medical leaders and health care workers in combatting the C-19 virus. The figures²⁹ show that our C-19 mortality rate is 50-60 times lower than for comparable countries such as the U.K. and U.S.A.. This is an outstanding achievement.

As Australians, we understand danger: the danger from cyclones, the danger from floods, the danger from bushfires. We commend the whole Australian community for confronting the danger and committing to the Common Good, observing so very well the restrictions, regulations, lockdowns, masking etc. as recommended by our medical leaders. And we thank the divine for our frontline workers in our whole health care and transportation systems – they have risked their lives for our wellbeing on this deadly virus journey. And the journey has not ended!

During this pandemic, we have endured much. The ancient principle of the Common Good states that the good of each human person is inextricably linked to the good of the whole

²⁹ John Hopkins University Coronavirus Center, Baltimore

community. Certain goods can be achieved only through collective citizenship, collective action and active participation.

The world is now more integrated and interconnected. And the COVID-19 virus continues to attack the Common Good. Thanks to the progress of modern medical research, in double quick time we have at our availability vaccines to protect us, as members of the Australian community.

We understand vaccine hesitancy. People have various reasons for being hesitant. However, for the Common Good of the Australian community, as your interfaith leaders we want to encourage you all to be vaccinated as soon as possible, each one of us.

Vaccines provide widespread immunity. The World Health Organization (WHO) in its list of vaccine-preventable diseases lists 29 such diseases which have been severely restricted, if not totally eradicated, such as diphtheria, measles, polio, rubella, tuberculosis, typhoid, whooping cough and yellow fever. We understand the hesitancy about side effects. But adverse effects are generally mild while severe side effects are very rare. Life everyday is a risk, and we all understand the reality of those risks. We learn to live with those risks.

Accordingly, as religious and interfaith leaders, we beg you to be vaccinated as soon as possible. It is for the Common Good of all our fellow citizens. The Common Good says that we cannot all be safe until each one of us is safe. The Common Good is reached when we work together to improve the safety, wellbeing and good health of every person in our society.

Now is the time to take the next step in the war against this mortal virus. Vaccination for everyone!

APPENDIX THREE

INTERFAITH AND RELIGION'S ROLE IN PROVIDING ETHICAL SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE TO THE COMMUNITY IN MITIGATING THE IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

DEPARTMENT of EDUCATION, UNESCO CHAIR in BIOETHICS,
UNIVERSITY of HAIFA

TWENTY-FIRST AND TWENTY-SECOND WEBINARS SUMMARY REPORT

Prepared by Emeritus Professor Des Cahill, RMIT University, Melbourne and Member of the Australia Bioethics Unit of the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics, University of Haifa. Please note that Professor Cahill was also a panellist in these two webinars. Professor Deepali Bhanoth has checked the long section on Hinduism.

This report is different from previous summary reports inasmuch as the rapporteur was also a panellist and because it reports on two webinars. Its mode of presentation will also be different. The twenty-first and twenty-second global webinars of the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics focused on the interfaith and religious aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic looking at the ethical support and guidance as well as support generally provided by faith community leaders and interfaith organizations in responding.

It was held on Sunday nights (Melbourne time), 23rd and 30th . August, 2020 under the sponsorship of the Department of Education's UNESCO Chair in Bioethics located at the University of Haifa which works to encourage the teaching of bioethics in the medical and health sciences and law courses across the world with 250 centres across the world. The meeting was chaired by the Melbourne-based Professor Russell D'Souza, Chair, Department of Education (International Program) of the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics with the co-chair, Professor Mary Mathews, the director of the Indian component of the Chair.

Input came from twelve panellists from six countries, namely Australia, Canada, Greece, India, Indonesia and the U.S.. Infection and mortality rates for these countries are currently (September 2nd) (with the % of deaths per 100,000 population from the John Hopkins University data centre in Baltimore): Australia (2.63), Canada (24.75), Greece (2.48), India (4.83), Indonesia (2.77) and the U.S.A (56.12). The webinars began at about 9.35 p.m. (Melbourne time) with the first webinar finishing at 12.12 a.m. with about 90 - 120 participants at all stages of the webinar and the second finishing at 11.45 p.m. with 50 – 70 participants.

Professor Russell D'Souza as chair of the webinar welcomed the participants in examining the relationship between religion and science, and science and spirituality. "As a psychiatrist I know their closeness in the East whereas in the West the relationship is more problematic". He noted that at the First Parliament of the World's Religions held in 1893 in Chicago the star was Swami Vivekananda, the great Indian spiritual leader, who believed that religious leaders had a role to play at the frontline, especially in reflecting their faith in providing solace and comfort.

Hinduism, its Religious Leaders and Faith Communities

Two Hindu speakers led the discussion. Professor Matcheri Keshavan from Harvard University in Boston suggested that Hinduism strongly attested to the relationship between spirituality and science, particularly psychology and neuroscience, as well as assisting the process of recovery and resilience. According to the Hindu Scriptures, the Upanishads and the Bhagvad Gita, there are three paths in understanding ourselves in the science of the self and the path to self-knowledge in achieving an I-WE mode of thinking. These are (1) the path of knowledge or the path of cognition that assists us in having an accurate knowledge of ourselves. (2) the path of selfless action (Karma Yoga) and (3) meditation or reflective mindfulness. The WE mode is designed to protect ourselves and others in the move towards selfless actions in the face of consequences. It provides us with a moral compass. This framework applies to each Hindu tradition as they all emphasize the unity of body and mind for healthy living and in the building of resilience, including the strengthening of the immune system.

Professor Vishwanath Karad, an engineer by training and President of the MIT Peace University in Pune in India who holds the UNESCO Chair in Peace focussed on Hindu's dependence on the Vedic scriptures, referring to the important role of Swami Vivekenanda (1863 – 1902) in emphasizing the unity of spirituality and science with data calls, knowledge and wisdom. The universe is a manifestation of pure intelligence and consciousness. It is real and conscious and has the capacity to understand everything. Religion means performing one's duty faithfully towards the family and towards all as this whole universe is one family, '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*'. This includes a consciousness not to misuse science and technology for destruction. All religious scriptures show the path of right conduct. Professor Karad spoke of 'the spiritual science' and that the concept of God and Truth is one. He was of the opinion that there is at the moment a tremendous fear of death. Hence there is a need to develop a positive mindset to combat the virus and it was necessary to start a school of consciousness. He also read out a long and a very technical message to the gathering.

At the second webinar, Professor Karad expanded further, suggesting that science and religion really do not differ though religion has some special qualities. Can a mindset change? First, the human element must change and then the spiritual. Religion is unifying and cannot divide, and thinking must be given to mitigating religion if it is not to become divisive. He spoke about a young saint called Sant Gnyaneshwara who was a great poet and saint who became immortal about seven hundred years ago.

He was convinced that the coronavirus had been man-made but it was the media that was dividing society. "We must not disturb the balance. We must not play with nature". Some sections of the media had generated fears. Professor Karad referred to the Multifaith Dome that he has built at his university, suggesting that one of its inspirations was the need for a value-based education based on the universal laws of nature. He said that he was speaking to the webinar as a human person, not as a Hindu. "We must construct pools of consciousness and show the nature of this virus". The Vedic texts are at one with nature.

Professor Aggarwal, a cardiologist, made a third contribution. He began by saying that the medical literature is the most ancient literature. Any medical practitioner will act only if there is a receptor just as the virus needs a receptor. His advice, "Just do it, do not ask questions". He emphasized the importance of introspection and the role of doable knowledge as reflected in Vedic knowledge. "Have I used my ten senses?" This refers to the five entrance senses and the five exit senses. He stressed that the 'Ayurveda', a medical science of ancient India answers all the unanswered questions of modern medicine. In Hinduism, there are six philosophies: 1. Samkhya, 2. Yoga, 3. Nyaya or logic, 4.

Vaisesika, 5. Mimamsa and 6. Vedanta. There are six evidences or pramanas: 1. Perception, 2. Inference, 3. Comparison and analogy, 4. Postulation derived from circumstances, 5. Non-perception or negative/cognitive proof and 6. Word or Testimony provided by past or present reliable experts.

In the second webinar, Professor Aggarwal gave a mini-lecture as a medical doctor, suggesting that we all are reaching towards a new, universal religion based on dharma and unity in religious diversity. He explained there were six types of people: (a) people who look for logic e.g. the logic of social distancing, (b) people who look for evidence so they are always questioning, (c) people who look for examples, especially from the religious books which provide support and solutions, (d) people who want to interpret consciousness e.g. not wearing a mask and (e) people who look to the inner God to give guidance for the outer God since our bodies are energized fields of intellect and energy. Finally he spoke of the difference between the synthetic nervous system which allows the body to function under stress with a fight-or-flight response and the parasyntetic nervous system which maintains our bodily functions such as through rest and digestion and maintains the counterbalance with the sympathetic functions in gaining healing from the pandemic.

A fourth contribution came from Professor Deepali Bhanot from the Department of Sanskrit Studies at the University of Delhi. She began by emphasizing that the concept of ethics in the Hindu way of life is based on 'Dharma'. The concept of Dharma is very complex and represents the principle of morality that encompasses all the factors that contribute to the development of the individual, his/her surroundings and the society. Each person is responsible for one's own actions, thoughts and speech and there is a great responsibility on the part of the individual not to transgress Dharma, which is the support for the maintenance, progress and well-being of the society and the whole world.

There are two types of Dharma, namely the universal virtues appropriate to all humanity and the virtues that promote individual actions in accordance with one's age and place in a society. The virtues of truthfulness, kindness, austerity, purity, gratitude, non-violence and hospitality are eternal in nature to be followed by all. Self-control, charity and compassion are very important for an individual as these virtues lead to actions that bring about purity of mind and soul.

She also spoke about the path of devotion to the Gods or '*Bhakti*' mentioned in the Bhagvad Gita that provides mental solace to people afflicted with emotional stress, anxieties and feelings of loneliness in the present crisis due to the pandemic.

At the moment the temples are closed so Hindus are urged to pray at home in front of their domestic altars. Worship through the arts and music have a great therapeutic effect. Mental health can be maintained through the practice of 'Yoga' or mind control.

Later, Professor Bhanot was asked the question: how can religion help in the present epidemic? She responded that religion plays an important role in the present situation. "As Hindus, we look to prayer to the Almighty as an effective tool that provides solace and mental peace. As congregating in the temple for collective worship and sermons by the priest (*satsang*) is not possible at present, with an altar in each home, praying together with the family is possible. Virtual worship services also keep people connected. Keeping ourselves healthy is also a duty at the moment. As a religious community we are expected to reach out to distressed relatives, domestic workers and reaching out to vulnerable members of the society". During this pandemic which has taken a toll on the social and economic life of people, especially on the large number of migrant workers, in India community kitchens have been set up under the care of the religious communities. Religious communities are also providing medical help and medicines to the needy. Hindu gurus have been giving virtual talks to combat mental stress.

She said that at the time of the various religious festivals people use to get together for community worship and celebrations. But as this is not possible due to this pandemic, it has not deterred the people from enjoying the festivals as they are celebrating these at home with their families and sharing the joy with others virtually.

Religion also helps people to cope with grief and the sense of loss during bereavement. Due to the pandemic the last rites of cremation or burial of Corona patients have become a challenge. Although death is seen as a “a passing over” of the soul from the mortal body, the last rites of cremation or burning the body on the funeral pyre is very important. Religion helps people in getting over the trauma through virtual services.

Buddhism, its Religious Leaders and Faith Communities

The Buddhist input began with Rev. Dr. Masaki Matsubara, a Japanese Zen Buddhist monk – at the first webinar, he spoke from his temple in Japan while he spoke from San Francisco at the subsequent webinar. In his opening message, he said that he was in New York in April living with infected workers. Outside the hospitals there were trucks ready to take away the bodies. “Everyday it was terrifying for me. I made my life as simple as possible in fear of the pandemic”. He said that from a Buddhist perspective it was very important to take action and to act for the benefit of others. This meant that people are to be compassionate but also another moral imperative was self-care. Taking preventive action is a necessity. Emotional distancing is not the same as physical distancing. Also important were harmony, respect, empathy and compassion.

From San Francisco, he compared the responses of Japan and the U.S.. In terms of public health and ethical values, he felt that U.S. citizens needed to cultivate their minds with ethical responsibility, especially in regard to public exclusion and unemployment. When the Tokyo hotspot in Japan occurred, there was an immediate lack of jobs and schools were closed while families went to their holiday homes to get away from the danger. “Nothing can exist on its own. We need to speak up from our moral consciousness and we need to rehabilitate the moral ground”.

Venerable Thich Phuoc Tan, an Australian Buddhist monk, recalled Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths about suffering and its overcoming. Such truths feed into the medical sciences in establishing a path to ending the pandemic as enunciated in the Fourth Truth about the eightfold path to the cessation of suffering. Science can help with its many theories. “Buddhism speaks a lot about the interconnectedness of life and creating the right conditions for the disappearance of the virus. The virus is impacting upon mental health, domestic violence and so on”. The Venerable spoke of emptiness, and fighting it through non-action because staying at home is helping others. Also important is compassion, especially for health care workers. He also highlighted the importance of meditation and mindfulness of which there are 84,000 types. He raised the issue of the high-rise government apartments for poor and disenfranchised people like immigrants and refugees in Melbourne where religious groups had come together to give food as the residents were not allowed outside their rooms because there had been virus outbreaks. The local Catholic priest, like the Venerable from Viet Nam, had made special arrangements for the 50 children with their families who attend the local Catholic parish school and set up a phone tree to keep in contact for the week of very strict lockdown. The Venerable noted how stressed are doctors and nurses. The government needed to consult more with religious communities by taking a holistic approach.

Islam, its Religious Leaders and Faith Communities

The Muslim input was led by Professor Din Syamsuddin, Chair of the Indonesian Conference on Religions for Peace and Moderator of Religions for Peace Asia with its headquarters in Tokyo. He was previously Head of Muhammadiyah, the 30 million member moderate, community-based Islamic organization and the interfaith adviser to President Jokowi. He spoke of the Islamic perspective through the decisions of the Indonesian Ulama Council, saying that there is no contradiction between Islam and science and highlighted the relevance of Islamic teaching in regard to the pandemic. The pandemic “is both a disaster and a test from the Creator. We need to be patient and re-orientate ourselves to God, and not have a secularist outlook. This is what gives psychological support”. Cleanliness was a central concept of Islam and it had been a blessing in disguise. Nine fatwas had been issued by the Ulama to prevent re-infection. Friday prayers in the mosque had been stopped for the prayers can be done in the home. In the ablutions before prayer, it is required to wash the nose with water. Recommendations have been made to the Indonesian Government, and advice has been based on the philosophy of Avicenna (Ibn Sina 980-1037). With regard to the major festivals, these could be celebrated at home.

An Ismaili Shia Muslim, Professor Shafique Virani from the Department of Islamic Studies at the University of Toronto, began by drawing attention to the letter from their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, which said that we are all compelled to fight the virus. Professor Virani mentioned the bubonic plague at the end of the 19th century beginning in 1886 which eventually led to a vaccine by the Ukrainian Jewish bacteriologist, Waldemar Haffkine. Visionary leadership is needed, including reaching out to areas like eastern Africa. Immunization programs are socially just, and religious leaders can lead in the care of vulnerable people.

Dr. Armani Haji said that the concepts of faith and world are intrinsically linked and life is to be approached holistically with spiritual guidances to be provided at every historical epoch. All human beings emanate from one soul and they are all custodians of the earth. His Muslim community was providing seminars for community members and connecting them vertically and horizontally.

Baha’I Faith, its Religious Leaders and Faith Communities

The Baha’I perspective was begun by Dr. Natalie Mobini, Australian co-ordinator of the Baha’is who said that Baha’I thinking was that religion and science are completely complementary and vital systems pursuing truth. Her first point was that the physical, health and economic aspects are central to religious thinking in providing health and food. The response to the physical, social and spiritual aspects was to form small communities as ‘micro-networks’ giving prayer and support and producing hope. Thirdly, also important is how to re-shape our community by developing a transformational agenda based on spiritual values and reaching higher levels of unity in recognizing our inherent oneness.

The role of faith communities is to build community and the qualities that foster resilience. People of faith should be outward-looking, and faith is a powerful motivator. ZOOM prayer meetings have become very important as have online spiritual education classes.

Professor Rodney Clarken from North Michigan University said that the Baha’I faith sees the world as one country in which we are all citizens. It is a crisis but it is a crisis we must address together. To serve humanity, Baha’is try to serve as a leaven in society, and so classes are offered to their children. He singled out the three ethical virtues of truth, unity and justice. Trying to find the truth can be achieved through science and religion as complementary truths. Justice in particular is very important during a pandemic because it exposes all the injustices against the poor, causing harm to everyone.

Unity emanates from compassion for the love of God brings compassion. Without truth and justice there can be no unity. “We are all part of this unity”.

Judaism, its Religious Leaders and Faith Communities

The Jewish perspective was presented by Rabbi Ira Bedzow from the U.S. who began by saying that the relationship between religion and science was a loaded question with the conflict between scientism and scientific evidence. Scientism is the promotion of science as the best and only objective means by which to determine society’s values and way forward. However, there had been a growing rapprochement between religion and science which will lead to peace.

Judaism from a public health perspective emphasizes the communitarian aspect, and we all need community action. Judaism is a duties-based religion, so the question is: what is our duty towards others? What is our effect on others? Our focus should be on the clinical and social factors. During this pandemic, the Jewish community has become even more strongly bonded but the focus has always remained outward. What about those who don’t agree with the restrictions? They represent the particularist or individualist, and not the communitarian approach. The focus must be upon following the government’s directions.

Christianity, its Religious Leaders and Faith Communities

Fr. Filotheos Maroudas, a Greek Orthodox priest speaking from Greece, said that all Greek Orthodox Churches had come together to issue universal church guidelines, as had the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in making recommendations for the protection of all his 220 million Orthodox Christians across the world, especially in Russia, and for all humanity. The Church helps provide social stabilization. During the Eucharist, the sign of peace is given in sign language rather than the customary handshake, and in worshipping, social distancing of 1.5 metres is maintained. This has now switched to videotaping and streaming worship ceremonies. The focus is on protecting the believers. The Church had been cooperating with the civil authorities, and providing social support, including with social media.

The last speaker who summed up at the end of the second webinar was Emeritus Professor Des Cahill of RMIT University in Melbourne and who is Chair of Religions for Peace Australia and Deputy Moderator of Religions for Peace Asia. He spoke from a Catholic and then an interfaith perspective.

He began by drawing attention to the iconic photograph of Pope Francis on Easter Sunday at the end of the Midnight Mass early in the morning giving his Easter blessing with no one in St. Peter’s Square. He cut a lonely figure but this image transmitted globally sent a very clear message to the 1.4 billion Catholics that government regulations (in this case, those of Italy) were to be followed. In his weekly audiences, he has very regularly spoken of the pandemic.

It is NOT God’s judgement on a wicked world but a call to live differently and more simply with prayer and service. The Pope said, “The pandemic storm had made most people realize that we are all in the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented. Our vulnerability has uncovered our false certainties. It is the time to decide to live differently, to live better, to love more and to care more”. More recently, His Holiness has said, “On the one hand, it is imperative to find a cure for a small but terrible virus which is bringing the whole world to its knees. On the other hand, we must cure a great virus, that of social injustice, inequality of opportunity, marginalization and the lack of protection of the weakest”. He has also linked the virus to the lack of care of creation, our common home, and he has continued

to call for debt reduction, even debt forgiveness for the poorer nations. Pope Francis thinks the pandemic is 'the harbinger of future crises'.

Local Catholic parish communities across the world have been following government directives, and livestreaming Masses and closing Catholic schools to deliver home schooling. As with other faith communities, hundreds of bishops, priests and nuns have died, not least in Italy. Religious income had been seriously impacted, and global religious welfare services such as Caritas and the St. Vincent de Paul Society were being severely stretched.

Regarding religion and science, Professor Cahill said, "They are not at war" though the relationship had had a troubled history with the Galileo saga and the evolution debate. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) had spoken of the "rightful independence of science". The Church's message to the scientists was 'Get on with it and find a cure!'. But observe ethical norms with proper testing without taking short cuts and made sure of the universal availability of any vaccine.

Lastly, he spoke of the importance of hope, "No one can live without hope. Christian hope includes the embracing of the known and the unknowable. For in the present are the seeds of a new normal and a new future, and we must hope in the Divine's ability to draw good out of the suffering of the present". At the second webinar, he elaborated on this by speaking of Christian resilience which is based on recovery with the ability to bounce back and on sustainability with the ability to keep going under stress. Hence, a purpose in life was absolutely key in having the required cognitive and spiritual fitness.

The Interfaith Perspective

Professor Cahill began by speaking of the various initiatives of interfaith organizations, especially the largest, Religions for Peace International, with its 95 national chapters. In Australia, Religions for Peace had lobbied Federal and State parliamentarians and senior public service officials from very early on about the plight of international students and temporary visaed workers. The situation had highlighted that the right to religious freedom was a relative and not an absolute right, and so the State had correctly closed religious places of worship.

Australia had done very well in combatting the virus though a serious problem had been occurring in Melbourne which was presently in lockdown with a curfew. He contrasted his country with the health and governance chaos in the United States which is thirteen times larger in population than Australia with its 25 million – the U.S. has had 186,000 deaths compared to Australia's 737, a ratio almost 20 times less.

He emphasized that research had shown that 84 per cent of the world's population believed strongly or very strongly in a religious faith. Research also shows that on balance religion adds to the social capital of a nation. Religion and spirituality were concerned with the fundamental values of love, care, hope and interconnectedness, and the strength of faith communities was their grassroots connectedness and their interface with government leaders and authorities. Griffith University's Centre for Interfaith Dialogue and Culture in Brisbane had in April researched and published a study on mobilizing faith communities and how they can be immensely valuable during a pandemic but governments were not adept at co-ordinating religious groups.

Lastly, Professor Cahill drew attention of all participants to the website of Religions for Peace International (www.rfp.org) and its online *Multi-religious C-19 Hub* with its six Strategic Priorities and eight Calls to Action, working in partnership with UNICEF. More recently, it has published its

New Guidance: Practising Our Faith in a Pandemic focused around three elements: (1) Adapting how we gather, pray and practice rituals, (2) Communicating to end misinformation, discrimination and to instil hope and (3) Helping people who are at risk. In particular, he mentioned how it was incumbent on religious leaders to combat wrong and dangerous ideas such as *The pandemic is God's punishment on a wicked world* and *Because I am a good Christian or a good Muslim, God will not allow myself to be infected*. It was also critical faith leaders combatted stigmatization and quelled false rumors.

Conclusion

The webinar concluded with a special greeting from Professor Ashrif in Pakistan who congratulated the organizers, emphasizing “I have to have self-negation as understood by Sufis”.

Professor Mary Mathews said the two webinars have been a delightful experience and generated real learning. Professor Derek D’Souza said there had been many, many appreciative comments in the chatbox. Professor Russell D’Souza said it had been a very rich platform and it was important that the conversation is continued which it would be at some future time by the UNESCO Chair.

*** Please note that Professor Aggarwal died from COVID-19 in May 2021.

APPENDIX FOUR

Religions for Peace  Australia	Legally known as The World Conference of Religions for Peace Australia, Inc. ABN 49 320 161 142 Email: wcrpaust@iinet.net.au http://religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au/
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SOCIAL COHESION ROUNDTABLE SUBMISSION

Emeritus Professor Desmond Cahill, O.A.M.

on behalf of

RELIGIONS FOR PEACE AUSTRALIA
(www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au)

Introduction

This submission to the Honourable Alex Hawke M.H.R., Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs follows on and expands upon comments made at the webex online roundtable held on Monday, 19th April. Religions for Peace Australia is Australia's most extensive community-based interfaith organization founded in the early 1970s with affiliates in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania and with representatives from Perth and Darwin.

Amongst its recent major achievements have been (a) a 2004 research study for the immigration department, *Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Australia*, examining how Australia had handled 9/11, and a 2011 Study for the Australian Human Rights Commission on *Freedom of Religion and Belief in 21st Century Australia*, (b) it was the lead organization in Melbourne's winning bid to stage the December 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions, the world's largest interfaith gathering with 6,500 participants at the Melbourne Convention Centre, (c) inaugurating through our Queensland affiliate and Griffith University the first G20 Interfaith Summit alongside the G20 Summit held in Brisbane in 2014 through the work of Dr. Brian Adams, (d) its strong participation as one of the 21 member nations in the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace also known as Religions for Peace Asia, which represents more than half of humanity, including both China and India and (e) its participation in the work throughout the pandemic, especially through webinars, of the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics and Ethics located at the University of Haifa. Currently it is completing a major study of multifaith chaplaincy for the Victorian Multicultural Commission.

This submission is comprised of five sections:

- 1. The pillars and outcomes of peaceful, socially cohesive societies***
- 2. Basic structures and unifying principles***

3. Australia as a multireligious/multifaith nation

4. The primacy of neighbourhood

5. Three recommendations

The Pillars and Outcomes of Peaceful, Socially Cohesive Societies

Australia is one of the most successful multicultural and multifaith countries in the world with a high level of peacefulness and social cohesion. In the 2019 Positive Peace Report produced by the Institute of Economics and Peace (IEP), funded by the Sydney businessman, Steve Killelea, out of the 163 countries ranked according to 25 social, economic and peacefulness indicators, Australia ranked 13th behind countries such as Norway (1), Finland (2), Switzerland (3), New Zealand (9) and Canada (10). It is our strong suggestion that the writers of the social cohesion statement examine IEP's work over many years. Its concept of positive peace has many parallels with social cohesion and is empirically validated. Among its eight empirically validated key pillars of peaceful, socially cohesive societies are:

- 1. A well-functioning government**
- 2. Equitable distribution of resources**
- 3. Free flow of information**
- 4. Good relations with neighbours**
- 5. High levels of human capital**
- 6. Acceptance of the rights of others**
- 7. Low levels of corruption**
- 8. Sound business environment**

High levels in the eight pillars lead to:

- (a) Stronger national and local resilience**
- (b) Better environment outcomes**
- (c) High measures of well-being**
- (d) Better performance on development goals**
- (e) Higher per capita income.**

Basic Structures and Unifying Principles

The Australian Values website of the Department of Home Affairs is, to be blunt, a mess. The English language is not a value in the normal usage of the word. The list seems to be based on the list in the 1989 document, *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia.....Sharing our Future*, in the description of, *What is Multiculturalism?* (p. vii) where they are described as **Basic Structures and Principles**. Whatever the title, the list should contain some reference to the Constitution as well as to the role of law, an independent judiciary and competent police force. I also would prefer some explicit reference to the equality of the genders. I like the reference to the value of a 'fair go' and the four values listed as dot points. As well, in the opening paragraph, there ought to be a strong reference to 'an

overriding and unifying commitment to Australia, to its citizens and its permanent and temporary residents'. I like the reference to 'compassion'.

Our suggestions for the list of these **Basic Structures and Unifying Principles**:

- A unifying and overriding commitment to Australia, its interests and its future, including to its First Peoples
- Adherence to the Australian and State constitutions, to parliamentary democracy and its institutions and to compulsory voting
- The rule of law, an independent judiciary and impartial and competent police forces
- English as the national language unifying the nation, and the right of all Australians to share their languages and cultures
- Freedom of speech and association, and mutual respect for all with the equality of all genders
- Freedom of religion with a moderate model of the separation of religion and state
- Acceptance, tolerance, prosperity and equitable sharing of the nation's resources
- A fair go for all with equality of opportunity, compassion for all and good health for all
- Commitment to and preservation of the land and the environment with its beauty to be enjoyed by all and its productiveness to be shared in Australia and globally

Australia as a MultiReligious/MultiFaith Nation

The draft social cohesion statement prepared by the Department of Home Affairs is to be commended for its reference to Australia as a multireligious/multifaith country. The renowned Pew Research Center has shown empirically that 84 per cent of the world's population believes strongly or very strongly in a religious faith. Research also shows that on balance, notwithstanding its negativities, religion adds to the social capital or social wealth of a nation. Religion and spirituality are concerned with the fundamental values of love, care, hope and interconnectedness, and the strength of faith communities is their grassroots connectedness and their interface with government leaders and authorities though Australian leaders do not always interact well with the nation's religious communities.

The seven positive functions of authentic religion are: (1) religious communities inspire and sustain human dignity (2) religion offers spiritual comfort, hope and healing as well as moral wisdom (3) religious communities are a practical source of volunteers, more so than the non-religious (4) religion has the surge capacity to respond to immediate needs (5) religion has unique connections between the micro- and macro-levels of any society (6) religious communities have important diversity sources for interfaith and intercultural expertise and (7) each religious community brings into the national arena unique spiritual, moral and historical experiences.

Unlike countries such as France and the United States but like Canada, Australia has a moderate model of the separation of religion and state. In the governance of religion and religious diversity, firstly, the Australian State has a **facilitating role** in allowing citizens to exercise their right to religious freedom and to practise their religious beliefs according to their traditions and modes of worship. However, it is important to note that the right to religious freedom is a relative, not an absolute right. Secondly, the State has a **brokering role** in brokering the relationship between the various faith traditions, whether Catholic or Anglican or Presbyterian or Jewish or Hindu or Muslim or Sikh or Buddhist in ensuring there is interreligious harmony and social cohesion. On balance, notwithstanding the negative aspects associated with religion, religious communities contribute much to a nation's social capital. Thirdly, the State has the responsibility and **the monitoring role** of

monitoring religious communities in order to ensure their compliance with the law and the common good of Australian society because there is always the possibility of bad religion and spiritualities and bad religious and spiritual practice. Lastly, and following on, the State has a responsibility and **the protective role** towards its citizens from damaging and destructive religious beliefs and practices.

The moral philosophical debate has historically been framed around the Hindu practice of *suttee* (where the widow was obliged to throw herself on the funeral pyre) which was forbidden by the British Raj, and more recently in the legislation allowing doctors to override parents' refusal to allow blood transfusions to be administered to their sick child, based on the Jehovah's Witness interpretation of a Biblical text. Furthermore, the Australian Royal Commission in one of its recommendations has asked the Jehovah's Witnesses to "abandon" their two-witness rule involving complaints of child sexual rule, based on a particular interpretation of Deuteronomy 19, 15 (Rec. 16.27). In more recent times, the State has been forced to take action against religiously inspired terrorism, albeit based on a bad or false interpretation of Qu'ranic texts, and clerical sexual abuse of children.

The Primacy of Neighbourhood

Religions for Peace Australia would like to see the social cohesion statement contain a strong reference to the importance of neighbourhood and liveability, whether within a city, town or rural area. The pandemic and the various lockdowns have highlighted the mateship of our local neighbourhoods with their face-to-face interaction. Neighbourhoods highlight the old adage, your best social worker is your neighbour. Bushfires and floods have also highlighted the importance of the neighbourhood and the values of cooperation, coping and resilience in the face of grave adversity. The role of creative and agile neighbourhoods is to cement social cohesion at the local level. Neighbourhoods have had neighbourhood watch for many decades, now we need to develop more and more the notion of neighbourhood care, especially with more and more aged persons living in neighbourhoods.

Recommendations

In the final section of this submission by Religions for Peace Australia, we would like to make three recommendations as part of furthering social and religious cohesion:

1. InterReligious Council of Australia

The pandemic has highlighted that the communication channels between religious leaders and their communities and both Commonwealth and State government leaders, though it varied between the States and Territories, could have been improved. We wish to suggest that like countries such as Singapore and South Korea, an InterReligious Council of Australia be established with a small secretariat in Canberra attached to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Its structure would have to be determined with allowance made for communication between larger and smaller religious communities.

Religions for Peace Australia is currently conducting discussions with selected faith leaders and other experts in the formation of an InterReligious Council of Australia, and we would be happy to share the fruits of such discussions when appropriate.

2. Induction Programs for Newly-Arrived Immigrant Religious Personnel

Positive discussions regarding induction programs for newly-arrived immigrant and refugee religious leaders have already taken place with Hon. Alan Tudge when minister. Religious leaders have a special responsibility for social cohesion and interreligious harmony. Religious leaders in particular need to be well-educated and trained in how to exercise quality leadership in culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse societies such as Australia. As Professor Andrew Markus has reminded us, social cohesion is usually defined in terms of a shared vision held by a well-functioning core group or community that acts in a continuous and interminable process of achieving social harmony through creating a sense of belonging incorporating shared values, trust and psychological identification with the nation state and with the religious group, ensuring social justice and equity in terms of access to government services and funding, encouraging participation by all majority and minority at-risk groups in civic, political and social life as part of creating this sense of belonging, bringing about acceptance of newcomers and minorities as ‘welcoming agencies’ and working against racism and discrimination and forging a sense of worth incorporating people’s general happiness, life satisfaction and future expectations, all having a sense of their personal worth as individuals, generally happy that hard work has brought rewards, generally satisfied with their lives and with achievable and realistic expectations. Religious leaders and their communities have a special role to play in all aspects of community cohesion.

The Need for Quality Religious Leadership

In implementing a community cohesion agenda, the interfaith and multicultural agenda by its very nature has a special responsibility in the education of immigrant and refugee religious leaders and recently arrived religious communities. According to empirical social science research as we have already noted, religion at its best contributes to the social and economic capital of a nation. This demands quality and enlightened religious leadership, and this requires that, in the religious academies and institutes of religious formation whether Buddhist, Christian or Muslim, enlightened programs about social cohesion, peacebuilding, human dignity and shared well-being should be part of the curriculum. Part of this is for religious leaders to offer religiously inspired counter narratives against violence and extremism. Another central aspect in teaching and preaching about human dignity are gender equality and the inclusion of women and girls in educational planning, and complete respect for LGBTI persons.

Genuine leadership relates to the capacity for community building. The challenge of immigrant and refugee religious leaders is to act as catalysts and enablers in their own community development; to open up the processes of communication, face up to issues within their own multicultural communities and to develop a positive vision and the strategies to get there in reaching their spiritual and community goals and their social and economic betterment. A local religious community leader in addition to meeting the spiritual and religious needs of his or her own community ought pursue the following tasks among many others:

- serve as a multicultural and interfaith model for personal integrity and responsible behaviours
- articulate forward-looking but realistic goals and the accompanying strategies for community cohesion
- work to achieve a high level of wider community acceptance
- engage in strategic planning and action aimed at integrated settlement facilitated by their faith commitment
- identify issues and find practical solutions for social problems where religions may be involved or can contribute to the solution

- encourage and facilitate collaboration and cooperation between the various sub-groups within their own religious faith tradition
- display resilience in the face of difficulties and disappointments
- develop leadership potential within their religious communities
- promote the need for local faith community councils

An important aspect here is that newly arrived religious leaders whether Buddhist monks, Muslim imams or Anglican or Orthodox priests, whether on permanent or temporary visas, need to undergo an interreligious induction and orientation program soon after arrival because the exercise of quality religious leadership in multifaith, socially cohesive Australia needs to be well understood.

A further point to be made here is that many temporary entrants, business immigrants and international students do not undergo any induction program such as that delivered by the AMEP, and that may impact upon social cohesion.

3. Broadening the Commonwealth Chaplaincy Program

Chaplaincy and spiritual care is a distinctive form of religious ministry or service. Contemporary chaplains and spiritual carers stand at the intersection between the historic presence of religion in the public square, the onset of secularization where faith belief is no longer axiomatic, contemporary spiritual expressions in civic and a-religious settings and direct engagement with the fundamental realities of people's lives. The chaplain's capacity and creativity to negotiate this space determines its success and flourishing, and hence the place of chaplaincy in the various locations and sectors has had to be constantly negotiated and re-negotiated.

The main forms of chaplaincy that have come to our attention in Australia can be categorized as follows:

1. **Military chaplaincy**, which incorporates army, naval and air force chaplaincy
2. **Health care chaplaincy** which incorporates hospital, hospice, mental health, aged and HIV/AIDS chaplaincy
3. **Education chaplaincy** which incorporates school and university chaplaincy, including to international students
4. **Criminal justice chaplaincy** which incorporates police, court and prison chaplaincy
5. **Emergency services chaplaincy** which incorporates fire, ambulance and disaster chaplaincy
6. **Industrial chaplaincy** which incorporates chaplaincy in factories and including airports and seaports
7. **Sports chaplaincy**
8. **Migrant and refugee chaplaincy** to migrant and refugee settler communities
9. **Youth chaplaincy**

During our research process for the Victorian Multicultural Commission, it has become clear to the researchers:

(a) the chaplaincy and spiritual care sector is struggling because of a lack of funding and a lack of well-trained personnel. The worthwhile nature of emergency services chaplains and their volunteer assistants has been demonstrated during the bushfires and in such incidents as the Bourke St. Mall killings in Melbourne. Ambulance Victoria has recently begun renovating its chaplaincy services

because of the increases in suicides amongst their frontline workers. The Salvation Army has recently withdrawn its chaplaincy service to Melbourne Airport and other sectors.

Our recommendation is that the current Commonwealth Schools Chaplains Program be quadrupled in size and extended beyond the school sector to the following sectors: (1) health care (2) criminal justice (3) emergency services (4) selected areas of industrial chaplaincy (5) sports and (6) tertiary education.