



Religions for Peace Australia
Legally known as The World Conference of Religions for
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RELIGIONS for PEACE AUSTRALIA

ANNUAL REPORT 2023 – 2024

Prepared by the Chair, Philippa Rowland, BSc. Ag, Grad Dip. NRM

for the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace Executive Committee Meeting in Colombo, Sri Lanka May 28-31, 2024 and the Religions for Peace Australia AGM on June 12th, 2024.

KEY NATIONAL ISSUES

A. First Nations: How to Support Communities after Rejection of the 2023 Voice Referendum?

Australia's Referendum on a Voice to Parliament for First Nations was defeated on 14th October 2023, setting back meaningful reconciliation in Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were disheartened, with some worrying signs of "backlash". RfPA has sent letters of condolence and support to our First Nation contacts. Prof Des Cahill and RfPA Webmaster Chris Parnell attended a major national 'Raising Our Tribal Voice' Conference run by First Nation Christians. A request was made to add Professor Cahill's report on this conference to the formal proceedings as an insightful contribution to the dialogue on pathways towards peace and reconciliation between First Peoples and subsequent settlers.

A World Interfaith Harmony Day event in Parliament House Canberra included a supportive First Nations Statement to begin an event of heartfelt prayers shared by many diverse Australian faith communities.

Religions for Peace Australia (RfPA) remains involved in upholding the spiritual aspects of the reconciliation journey with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, through sharing prayers in solidarity. Progress can still occur on Truth-telling and Treaty, the other two elements of the Uluru Statement from the Heart. As people of Faith, we continue our efforts to build our friendships and collaborations between First Nations and our various multicultural multifaith communities across Australia.

B. Youth

Robi Alam from Western Australia represented RfPA at the recent Asia and Pacific Youth Interfaith Network (APYIN) Youth Peace Camp held in Seoul, Korea, 20-23 February 2024. Robi joined over 30 youth representatives from Cambodia, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, India, Thailand, Pakistan, Indonesia, East Timor, and Australia in discussions on the topic of Asia Youth as Peacebuilders.

Here is a brief excerpt from his full report:

We have learned so much during our interactions with our fellow delegates, learning about their religious backgrounds and beliefs, cultural traditions, and peace-building work. Our workshops allowed us to discuss the actions that we can take to welcome the stranger through empathy and understanding. We had our reflections on our role in promoting peace, advocating for unity, and empowering humanity. We also discussed and developed programs that would protect our common home, the Earth, to ensure that future generations have a safe, healthy environment.

Our Korean friends also taught us the value of unity and its importance towards lasting peace. Our trip to the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) allowed us to see the pains of separation and division, the horrors of war and conflict, and the sorrow of losing our families and the values we hold dear. The stories we heard allowed us to deeply understand how dialogue can build bridges of understanding toward unity. We join our Korean friends in their desire for peace in the Korean Peninsula.

C. Progress towards a MultiFaith Council of Australia (MFCA)

We received a grant to enable our project towards the creation of a Multifaith Council of Australia as a central inter-religious multifaith voice and a representative advisory body promoting social cohesion and peace to our national government and to faith community councils in each state and territory of Australia.

The work of the current Multifaith Council of Australia (MFCA) project will:

- Provide direct links for improved communication, dialogue and information exchange between faiths communities, with the Commonwealth Government and its agencies, with state and territory governments and their agencies and with other social and business sectors.
- Facilitate interreligious collaboration, dialogue and harmony to build and maintain social cohesion.
- Mobilize the unique spiritual, moral and social resources of people of all faiths and religions to address shared concerns and respond to national and local emergencies.
- Ensure the freedom of religion and its authentic practice in our society is present, thereby working to resist religious bigotry, racism and discrimination and to protect Australians against dangerous religious cults and destructive religious practices.

D. Interfaith Harmony and Social Cohesion - Peace-Building at Home

The RfPA 2024 Annual UN World Interfaith Harmony Lecture, held in Parliament House Canberra, was presented by Professor Pal Dhall from the Hindu faith. Prof Dr Dhall served as Chair of the Sathya Sai Education Committee, and currently advises Human Values organisations in Australia and India. He is a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in UK and Australia and has held positions as Visiting Fellow and Adjunct Professor of Bioethics at the University of Canberra. Professor Des Cahill also spoke at this meeting on the need for a Multifaith Council of Australia (MFCA). This was one of many opportunities for RfPA to seek feedback from and engagement with representatives of the many faith communities present in Australia on our current national project to establish such a Council.

Our actions to create understanding and deepen friendships between peoples of all faiths remain crucially important in these times of increased global unrest.

Australia has been shaken by recent dreadful hate crimes: the stabbing murders of innocent bystanders in a shopping centre and the knife attack on an Assyrian Bishop at prayer in church, both in Sydney. Our faith communities stand together against all violent acts, including those that are religiously motivated.

RfPA Raising Peace online event - September 2023

Speakers included Mary-Anne Cosgrove, CEO of the Humanists Australia and Ros Harris who shared beautiful Taizé style singing and led us in a reflection *Where in my life do I long for peace?* Then we discussed how we can each and all lose joy and reflected, in silence and then in sharing quietly together

1. *Where do we find joy/peace in our lives?*
2. *How do we sustain this and not lose hope?*

“It is better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness.” ... “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.” ... “Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.”

RfP Australia and the Conflict in Israel and Gaza

21 October 2023 - prepared and shared a Statement [“A Call to End Conflict in Israel and Palestine”](#) :

We recognise and uplift the humanity of all peoples living across the lands of Palestine and Israel. We call for an immediate ceasefire from Hamas and Israel. We urgently call for humanitarian aid and basic requirements of life to be restored to all residents of Gaza, including food, fuel, water, electricity, and medical care. We support all movements of reconciliation and justice that recognize and affirm the humanity, dignity, and desire of all peoples to live in peace.

14 February 2024 – [Urgent Call for Peace and a Letter of Thanks to Foreign Minister Penny Wong](#)

We thank you, as Australia’s Foreign Affairs Minister, for calling for an urgent Humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. We now add our call for all people of goodwill to support international progress on a just two-state solution that recognises the crucial rights of both Jewish and Palestinian communities to exist. Finding a way to reinstate Peace is a matter of global urgency. The potential for the escalation of hostilities widening across our world is a real threat to consider in our hearts. The urgency of this moment outweighs other considerations. Our world must find the willpower and a way to prevent future atrocities like 7 October and the deaths of innocent Palestinian refugees sheltering in makeshift tents around Rafa.

22 October 2024 – Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability <http://palestinenature.org/> . Multifaiht SA, Interfaith Matters! and RfPA co-hosted Professor Mazin Qumsiyeh, a Palestinian medical geneticist, scientist and author, recently travelling in Australia and New Zealand. Professor Qumsiyeh is the founder and director of the Palestine Museum of Natural History (PMNH) and the Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability at the University of Bethlehem where he teaches.

E. Global Peace-Building and Nuclear Disarmament Issues

Australia’s active support for the AUKUS alliance continues to lead our country further down the path of armaments and reliance on the United States and the United Kingdom for our security, rather than taking the time to forge and maintain strong relationships for peace across our region. This is concerning. RfPA is discussing opportunities to support global nuclear disarmament efforts.

Chair Philippa Rowland is invited to apply to join a new initiative of World Federalist Movement-Institute for Global Policy to establish a Trans-National Working Group on [Values, faith-based perspectives and global governance](#), to focus on connections between religious and faith/values-based principles, and development of better global governance to address issues affecting our common future.

The working group aims to educate and engage those from values and faith-based perspectives in global governance initiatives, such as [Mobilizing an Earth Governance Alliance](#) (MEGA), [Legal Alternatives to War](#) (using the International Court of Justice to solve international disputes), and [1 for 8 Billion](#) (civil society engagement in selecting the UN Secretary General) and more (see [WFM-IGP programs](#)).

F. RfP Australia and Climate Change

At the global level, the wave of climate extremes continues to climb to unprecedented levels. Climate records were broken in 70 countries and territories worldwide in the first five days of May. In the recent heatwave across Asia, temperatures rose over 46 degrees Celsius in some areas, and Indonesia, Malaysia, the Maldives, and Myanmar all recorded new heat records. The United Nations has warned that heat is a ‘silent killer’ and deaths due to heatstroke are often widely underreported. Sadly we already have reports of dozens of people of heatstroke in Thailand alone, and the full death toll across our region is unknown.

RfP Australia continues our commitment to see our nation move away from damaging fossil fuels and towards a renewable energy future. This includes participation in recent non-violent Rise Up events around the country, and support for online Australian Religious Response to Climate Change events providing information on how best to divest ourselves from investment in climate-damaging industries. We have moved our RfPA funds to a Green Bank that provides good security and return on investment without supporting climate-damaging industries. This change was made with the approval of our national committee and carried out by our Treasurer Ann Aisatullin working alongside our Secretary Sue Ennis.

RfPA has a website dedicated to interfaith climate change issues, currently at <https://cop26interfaith.com>

Meditate for Earth - Since 2020, on the first Wednesday of each month, members of the Coast and City Sangha led by Anna Markey and Multifaith SA gather for a silent peaceful meditation on the steps of SA Parliament House, with a focus on climate change and care for our living earth.

Within ACRP, our Executive Committee of RfPA has given their full support to further development of climate projects, including the second year of the Asia Pacific Women of Faith Climate Flagship Project.

There is a keen interest in seeking collaboration with other Member Chapters of ACRP to progress the development of a shared work program of voluntary climate change action also at the national level.

A separate paper on this climate flagship proposal will be tabled at our ACRP Colombo meeting.

At the international level, the [Board](#) of the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage convened its first meeting 30 April to 2 May in Abu Dhabi, UAE, and successfully adopted key decisions on its final day, including selection of the host country of the Board and operationalisation of the Fund as a World Bank-hosted financial intermediary fund (FIF).

A useful overview of the background, mandate and the status of pledges to the Fund for responding to loss and damage is provided here (See [TWN Update](#) at 12 April 2024)¹ I note with gratitude that the final adopted decision “*welcomes pledges received to date, acknowledges the role of the COP28 Presidency, and welcomes contributions by the Government of Japan for the operation of the interim secretariat*”.

¹ https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/Status%20of%20resources_final-Rev1.pdf

G. Brief National Overview from RfP Australia Members and Affiliates

Reports from Canberra Interfaith Forum, Northern Territory, Queensland, Multifaith South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia are not included in this national report. Reports identify concern across Australia on the impact of current international conflicts, particularly that between Israel and Gaza:

Annual Iftar dinners were cancelled in several states, in part because the expenditure on an extravagant dinner seemed inappropriate given the deprivation being endured in Gaza. Also the ICV would not support an interfaith event at this time, given frustrations over the response to Gaza.

Palm Sunday Walk for Refugees (2024 Walks for Justice and Peace)

Organisation was problematic in some States, where the usual place for Palm Sunday Walk now host Free Palestine rallies each Sunday. The ICV President was unwilling to share the stage with a Jewish representative for the 'faith leaders' segment. Instead, an interfaith segment was held with 8 presenters at the start of the gathering with short readings was much appreciated and meaningful.

Strains on Interfaith Relations – especially on Jewish Christian Muslim Abrahamic groups

The Jewish representatives withdrew immediately after 7th October. It is unlikely that the Jewish representatives will return any time soon and it is possible that JCMA will conclude altogether. Eid celebrations to mark the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting continued in all states, with food, arts, performance, dance and significant participation from the general public.

Meditation and Peacemaking

Bishop Philip Huggins, Kalvinder Shields and Meditation Australia organised a Meditation and Peacebuilding Forum II: Inner Peace, Outer Peace as a heartfelt response to the call of these critical times. *“Faith leaders and individuals from all faiths, meditation teachers and meditators, and all interested in building pathways to peace, are warmly invited to come with the integrity of their own practice to sit together for a silent meditation as a healing space for all the suffering in our world is held collectively. There is power in collective meditation and wisdom dictates that the more demanding the times, the more the need to deepen meditation, prayer and connection”*. Following meditation, our next steps are reflection and dialogue on shared peace-building. Integrating meditation into peace-building at every level is our possibility frontier.

H. Religions for Peace Australia's Website Analytics

The main RfPA main website is <https://religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au>
From January - May 2024, our website received 5,022,165 hits.

Conclusion. The Peace of Wild Things (Adapted from Wendell Berry)

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the birds
rest in their beauty on the water.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.
I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light.
For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*