

Relations with Other Faiths in Queensland - First Steps



Relations with other faiths is a relatively new area for the Uniting Church in Queensland. That is not to say that nothing has been happening in past years, but it was only in the last 12 months that any group within the structure of the Uniting Church in Queensland has taken on responsibility for this.

In September 2003 I was approached to be part of Relations with other Faiths reference committee of the Assembly by the Queensland Synod General Secretary, Rev Dr Jenny Tymms. I was a bit nervous about this and replied:

I would be willing to be on the committee, although I find it a little daunting. It would also be a huge learning curve for me - while I probably know more about other faiths than the average church member, I don't know much and only what I've read and heard, rather than related.

What's happening in Queensland?

Since then I have learned quite a bit about what the church is doing here in Queensland in relations with other faiths. Most of it is happening on local or informal levels. Even in regional cities like Mackay the Uniting church was represented at the opening of the first Buddhist temple in that town late in 2005.

One great example is the stuff happening at **Aspley Uniting Church**. A report and a couple of pictures about this are on pages 4-6 of this presentation. It shows the kind of thing a local church can do.

Another example is the establishment of a **multi-faith centre at Griffith University** over the last few years. This has had Uniting Church support through our involvement through Queensland Churches Together. For more information visit their web-site at <http://www.gu.edu.au/centre/mfc/>

In just the last twelve months **The Queensland Synod's Ecumenical Relations Committee has taken on responsibility** for relations with other faiths within the Synod. To see what they are up to have a look at their web page at <http://www.ecumenical.ucaweb.com.au/> and

click on the Interfaith link. The front page of the interfaith material is included in this document on page 3 of this report.

Or contact Revd Don Whebell
 Phone: (07) 3715 6485
 E-mail: donwheb@dovenetq.com.au

Why get involved?

Like a lot of Uniting Church members in Queensland I'm pretty conservative in my theology. We sometimes get a bit nervous about stuff that's "outside of the box". Even so I can think of two reasons off the top of my head why we need to be in dialogue with people of other faith. First because Jesus said the second most important commandment is to "Love your neighbour as yourself." To illustrate this he then went on to tell a story about how a Samaritan, a person of another faith, saved the life of a Jew.

The second reason we need to be involved in dialogue is that with the current world and national political situation there is a vital need for people of different faiths to get to know and understand each-other. We need to overcome ignorance so that violence, hatred and suspicion can be overcome by truth, respect and friendship.

How can I get involved?

If like me, you're not sure where to start and you're a reader, then you could do worse than reading John Dickson's *A spectator's guide to world religions: an introduction to the big five*. Published by Bluebottle Books in 2004. It was the Australian Christian Book of the Year in 2005 and gives a straightforward overview to the major world religions.

Better still why not get out and meet and befriend your 'other faith' workmates and neighbours? Or have a look at the things that are happening at Aspley Uniting Church, perhaps you could do something like that?

Who to contact.

If you'd like to contact someone in Queensland about the Uniting Church and relations with other faiths then you can either contact me:

Rev Andrew Gillies gilswort@bigpond.net.au
(I will cease to be the Relations with Other Faiths working group Queensland representative following this Assembly, but I would be happy to forward your details to the new representative.)

OR

Contact the Queensland Synod's Ecumenical Relationships committee:

Revd Don Whebell
Phone: (07) 3715 6485
E-mail: donwheb@dovenetq.com.au

Below is an extract from the front page of the Queensland Synod's Inter-Faith pages

(To get to this Page go to <http://www.ecumenical.ucaweb.com.au/> and click on the Interfaith link.)

Inter-faith

Papers exploring faith issues from inter-faith perspectives.

Uniting Church Assembly's Reference Group on Relations with Other Faiths 1

From the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly's website: [Download file](#)

The Assembly's website is at www.nat.ca.org.au Go to the Doctrine Working Group and click on 'Resources' to find the Reference Group's page.

Uniting Church Assembly's Reference Group on Relations with Other Faiths 2

Revd Ray Richmond describes the work of the Reference Group in a presentation to the December 2005 meeting of the Synod's Ecumenical Relations Committee.

Through a Glass Darkly A novel by Revd Ron Ramsay based on a true story. This page includes a description of the novel and a download of the first chapter- which will give you a 'feel' for the story and Ron's approach. The book is self-published and is in the Brisbane City Council libraries. It is freely available on Ron's website at www.ramsaybook.com

Jesus, the Religions and the Truth Revd Dr Geoff Thompson explores fundamental questions that confront Christians in a pluralist society.

Geoff Thompson is Academic Dean and Director and Director of Studies in Systematic Theology at Trinity Theological College, Brisbane.

Judaism and Christianity Revd Dr Ray Barraclough explores the relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

Ray Barraclough lectures in New Testament for the Brisbane College of Theology. He is also Dean of St Francis' Theological College, Brisbane. Before his current appointment, he was the senior Lecturer at St George's College, Jerusalem from 1989 to 1993. Together with his wife, Dorothy, he accompanied students and pilgrims in many journeys through Galilee, Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

Muslim Faith and Spirituality - building a culture of peace Article by Dr Mohammad Abdalla exploring Islamic religion - faith and spirituality: building a culture of peace.

Mohammad Abdalla is Director of the Islamic Research Centre at Griffith University, Brisbane. He is also Imam at the Kuraby Mosque.

ASPLEY UNITING CHURCH Interfaith activities



The Aspley Uniting Church has established *Interfaith Relationships* as one of its outreach and community service priorities. Several different events have been held over recent years and each of these has been strongly supported by members of the morning and evening congregations.

2003

The first event involving members of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities was held in August 2003. The focus of this event was on prayer and worship. It was held on a Saturday evening to coincide with the end of the Jewish Shabbat (Sabbath). The evening began in the hall where Rev Garth Read interviewed Rabbi Uri Themal about the significance and importance of Shabbat. The Rabbi, along with members of his congregation, then invited the audience (70 people) to gather in a circle while the Jewish people performed the rituals and prayers associated with the closing of Shabbat. This *Havdalah* ceremony marks the end of the Sabbath and includes the symbolic use of wine, spices and the light of a plaited candle. Light refreshments were then served after which the audience moved into the church.

When everybody had gathered in the church Garth Read interviewed Rev Ted Hutton about the significance and importance of Sunday worship for this local Christian congregation. The Aspley choir sang an Introit, an Elder read the scripture for the day and the minister offered prayer, followed by the singing of the Lord's Prayer. Light refreshments were again served in the courtyard.

Everybody assembled again in the hall where Imam Muhamad Abdullah from the Kuraby Mosque was interviewed about the significance and practice of the Muslim five daily prayers. The Muslims present then assembled facing the Kaba, the central feature of the Great Mosque in Mecca, and performed the last of the five daily prayers (*'isha'*). The evening closed with a moment of silence followed by handshakes and greetings of peace and goodwill.

2004

The second event was held in April 2004 when the theme was 'Festivals, Food and

Faith'. During the first half of the evening the audience (100 people) was seated at tables of 8/10. Samples of the symbolic foods used during three festivals were placed on each table.

1. Jewish:- Samples of two of the symbolic foods (*Matzah* - unleavened bread and *haroset*, mixture of chopped nuts, apples and cinnamon mixed together with wine) used during the Seder Meal at the beginning of *Pesah* or Passover were set on each table.
2. Christian:- Samples of the symbolic foods of Bread and Wine, used during Holy Communion and on Maundy Thursday during Holy Week, were also set on each of the tables.
3. Muslim:- Samples of the symbolic foods used by Muslims as *Iftar* at the end of each day's fast during Ramadan, glass of water and dates, were placed alongside the Jewish and Christian symbolic foods.

Rabbi Uri Themal, Rev Alan O'Hara and Ismail Moola in turn gave a short commentary on the festivals of Passover, Easter and Ramadan. Details were given about the symbolic significance of the foods and how they are used in the context of each festival. All present were invited to sample each of the symbolic foods and were then served light refreshments.

Everybody then moved into the church where Rev Prof. James Haire spoke about Interfaith Dialogue. A panel of young people from the three Faiths responded to Prof. Haire's address. The evening closed with a moment of silence and everybody exchanging greetings of peace and goodwill.



2005

The emphasis during 2005 was on strengthening relationships between the Aspley congregation and the local Muslim and Hindu communities.

In August a group of 12 members of the congregation visited the Hindu Temple at Boondall for their celebration of Lord Krishna's Birthday. In September, the Aspley Uniting Church held its annual Congregational Dinner and invited representatives from the local Anglican, Catholic, Muslim and Hindu communities to attend. In all

130 people sat down for dinner prepared by the Ladies' Fellowship. The meat dishes used Halal meat purchased from the local Muslim butcher and vegetarian meals were available for the Hindu and others who preferred such meals. Archbishop John Bathersby of the Catholic Church gave the address. In October a few members of the Aspley congregation attended the Brisbane Divali (Hindu Festival of Lights) celebrations in a pavilion in the RNA Show Grounds. The Muslim community is looking forward to the completion of their new Mosque (Masjid Taqwah) at Bald Hills and the additional opportunities this will give for further opportunities for meetings between people from the three communities.

2006

In April 2006 the emphasis changed quite significantly. Members of the local Christian community (Aspley Uniting Church), Muslim community (Bald Hills Islamic Society), Hindu Community (Boondall Temple), a local Maori group (*Ngati Kotahi Ra*) and some young Scottish dancers, sponsored and presented an Interfaith Multicultural Concert. Over 200 people attended this concert and enjoyed an evening of entertainment and interfaith fellowship. The proceeds of the evening (\$1800) will go towards the secondary education in Suva of three girls from the village of Qeleni on the island of Taveuni in Fiji.

Conclusion

One obvious outcome of this focus on interfaith relationships is the willingness of a significant number of members of the Aspley Uniting Church, the Bald Hills Mosque and the Boondall Hindu Temple to extend and accept invitations to significant events in each other's communities.

Garth Read
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