

Relations with Other Faiths Working Group

Introduction

The Uniting Church exists within a multifaith and multicultural context. As such, talk about cultural diversity should also include religious diversity and vice versa. Although the term multicultural can imply religious diversity, the public emphasis has been on cultural diversity in terms of ethnicity and race. However, as research on migration and settlement continues to show, cultural and religious diversity are interrelated and should not be treated in isolation.

Migrants, Christian and non-Christian, are often haunted by the memories and stories of their cultural and religious relations in the home of origin. This places the Uniting Church in both a challenging and unique position. As the Uniting Church engages with people of different faiths it raises questions for Christians who have been persecuted by another faith in their country of origin. They are often left wondering why or how the Uniting Church engages in positive relations or dialogue with those who have caused them pain and harm. When the Uniting Church stands decidedly in solidarity against the violation of human rights there are implications for dialogue and relationships. Relationships with people of other faiths are complex on many levels. It raises theological and pastoral issues both of which the Church needs to continually address. The question of how we relate to and dialogue with people of other faiths and hold to the integrity of our Christian claims will continue to pose a challenge for the church. Australia's growing multicultural and multifaith context will continue to raise missional and theological questions, for the Uniting Church in Australia.

In keeping with the Basis of Union and in the tradition of renewal and reform, the Uniting Church is called to be faithful to God by listening afresh to the Word of God both in Scripture and in the preaching of the gospel, so that the church may discern and do God's will in each situation (BOU, 1992). The Uniting Church is called to draw on faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture as well as literary, historical, and scientific enquiry to sharpen her understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought as well as understand its own nature and mission in relation to contemporary society (BOU, 1992).

Interfaith relations are an integral part of the mission of the Church. The Working Group seeks to serve and resource the church by "promoting knowledge and understanding of other living world faiths and their communities in Australia and to advise the Assembly on appropriate ways to foster relationships with such communities."

Projects and Activities

The Working Group's projects and priorities in this triennium are to be viewed as long-term goals. They relate to key areas of the life of the church: Education, Resources and Theology and the Assembly Key Direction #2 Peacemaking (06.08).

2. To engage in Jesus' ministry of peacemaking within the world and the church by:
 - (i) developing resources that will assist our members and councils to develop skills and strategies to live together in peace in a multicultural, cross-cultural and diverse UCA;

Resources for the Church

Website Resources

The Relations with Other Faiths website is currently being reconstructed and will be launched in July 2009 at the Twelfth Assembly. The objective of the website is:

- To create an ongoing awareness of the importance of Relations with other Faiths and the theology that underpins the Uniting Church's understanding of other faiths.
- To create awareness of what Relations with Other Faiths and other agencies, as appropriate, are doing in the area of interfaith relations.
- To resource congregations, Councils of the church, students and other interested parties or persons by providing resources for theology, dialogue, religious gatherings, and links to state, national and international organizations.

Resources for Religious Gatherings

An important aspect of the website is the Resources for Religious Gatherings. This section of the website will contain resources for religious gatherings such as interfaith concerns and issues, interfaith orders of services, prayers, hymns for civic and religious gatherings and general information on etiquette and protocol at religious gatherings.

Interfaith Education

In our interactions with communities and organizations of other faiths, it has become apparent that interfaith education, both formal and informal is something that all faiths need to take seriously. For the last three years Relations with Other Faiths has, in consultation with Christian Education, begun exploring how the Uniting Church might contribute to this national agenda. This conversation is continuing with the objective of presenting the outcome of the research and its implications to the Twelfth Assembly. In addition the working group will be exploring how theological colleges may be able to resource the church through theological education and training.

Uniting Church Theology of Other Faiths

In 2007 Relations with Other Faiths and the Working Group on Doctrine hosted a Colloquium with the purpose of revising the statement "Living

with the neighbour who is different: Christian vocation in multi-faith Australia" adopted by the Ninth Assembly in 1997. A number of UCA theologians and scholars were invited to present papers in one of the following fields: biblical studies, theology, practice and contextual models from Asia Pacific. These papers inspired rich theological discussion and provide a framework for ongoing theological reflection in this area of the church's life. There are two outcomes from the colloquium:

1. That the 1997 statement 'Living with the Neighbour who is Different' be revised. Relations with Other Faiths will develop in conversation with relevant agencies, a UCA theology of other faiths using the Trinity as a basis.
2. That the papers presented at the colloquium be published and made available to local congregations, presbyteries and theological colleges as a resource.

Ongoing Activities

Dialogue Groups

Dialogue is an important part of our work. The Working group currently supports the Uniting Church's National Dialogue of Christians and Jews, which meets twice a year with both groups taking turns at hosting the dialogue. Relations with other Faiths is a member of the Australian National Dialogue of Muslim, Christians and Jews, which meets three times a year with each faith taking a turn at hosting the dialogue. At both these dialogues, meetings take place around a theme agreed to by the group. A perspective of the theme is given by each faith. These discussions often raise up sensitive issues, but generate discussions that often lead to a deeper understanding of faith.

The Uniting Church has since 2004 been invited by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to be part of the Australian delegation to the Asia Pacific Interfaith Dialogue Forum. This Forum is a positive step forward in that governments are now acknowledging the role of religion and religious leaders in creating and sustaining communities. These Forums also contribute to interfaith dialogue activities on many levels including the important role of interfaith education as a tool for the transformation of neighbourhoods and communities for peace. The Uniting Church has also been invited and participated at National events hosted by Griffith University Multifaith Centre and the Australian Partnership of Religious Organizations through the National Council of Churches. Various members of Relations with Other Faiths are involved in the Women's Interfaith Network, multifaith chaplaincy and education and various projects that promote and engage with people of other faiths through dialogue.

Events

Encountering the religious other is an integral part of interfaith relationships. Understanding begins with relationships. Members of the working group are involved in planning and hosting interfaith events in their Synods. These events help to

deepen understanding of the religious other and are usually the first step to working collaboratively on community projects and peace building.

Staff

Relations with Other Faiths has until recently operated without a staff member and minimal resources. Members of the Working Group serve on a voluntary basis. In November last year, Relations with other Faiths welcomed its first staff member, Ms Shannon Dillon. Shannon is the Educational / Administrative Assistant for Uniting Faith and Justice. Half of Shannon's time in this role is allocated to the work of Relations with Other Faiths. This appointment has enabled the working group to accelerate the production and completion of various projects.

Membership 2006-2009

Rev Seforosa Carroll (Convener)
Ms Joy Balazo (to 2008)
Rev Heather Griffin
Rev Tim Hodgson (to 2008)
Rev David Pargeter
Rev Mary Pearson (to 2008)
Rev Marie Wilson
Rev Matthew Wilson (co-opted)
Mr. Geoff Boyce
Mr. Stewart Mills (to 2007)
Ms Deb Porter (co-opted)
Ms Wilma Viswanathan

Ex-officio: Rev Glenda Blakefield, Associate General Secretary

Future Directions

Although Relations with Other Faiths is the key working group that acts on the church's behalf on matters of interfaith and interfaith relations, interfaith engagement has, through different agencies such as Uniting International Mission, Uniting Justice and Multicultural and Cross -Cultural Ministry, always been a part of the church's life and mission. The challenge and growing reality of living alongside people of different cultures and faiths within the current Australian context will necessitate ongoing theological thinking and resourcing as it continues to challenge our understanding of evangelism and mission in the context of many faiths. It therefore becomes increasingly important and necessary to continue to support and allocate resources for the ongoing work of Relations with Other Faiths.

In the next triennium Relations with Other Faiths will continue researching and developing the following three areas with the objective of providing a statement to the next Assembly on the progress and / or the completion of each:

1. Developing further a Uniting Church theology of other faiths.
2. Interfaith learning in schools.
3. Interfaith learning in theological colleges.

Relations with Other Faiths will continue to provide resources for the church and the public through its website and other publications. It continues to value the importance of this work in the life of the church

as it relates to a multicultural and multifaith
Australia.

Rev Seforosa Carroll
Convener

Rev Glenda Blakefield
Associate General Secretary