Issues Paper

embracing our religious diversity

federal election 2007

your faith, your vote, your voice

Uniting Church in Australia
National Assembly
embracing our religious diversity

OUR VISION

Our differences, in relationship,
have the potential to bring us true strength as a human community.

Christ, by his example, showed us that we have a responsibility to recognise and embrace the differences between and among human beings. The early church in response to Christ’s call in action broke through the barriers of race, culture, class, gender and even faith. We are called to live out God’s will for reconciliation in the world. While our capacity to destroy each other has never been greater, and at a time when religious fervour is being identified as a source for so much of the violent conflict in the world, people of faith have a critical role to play in bringing about peace. We hope for a world where religious leaders and communities of faith are working together to build communities of inclusiveness that create a space for people to hope. We have a vision of a world where Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists - people of every faith and people of no faith - live together in peace.

THE ISSUES WE FACE

The 2006 Census reports that 22.2% of Australians were born overseas and earlier figures from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship show that 43% of Australians were either born overseas or had at least one parent born overseas. We are a multicultural society, with a wide variety of cultures and many faith traditions. Diversity of faith tradition has been a feature of Australian society since its inception, and as our society has become more varied in makeup our diversity has come to the forefront of our national identity. At the 2006 census, over 69% of adult Australians reported their participation in some religion and although Christianity is still the dominant religion (63.9%), other religions are now growing at faster rates.

The policy of promoting multiculturalism, or difference, as a positive and necessary aspect of life together in Australia, has been part of the Australian political and cultural landscape since 1978. It has shaped Australian society, and been strongly informed by our desires for a peaceful, respectful nation. However, since the September 11 attacks in the United States and the Bali bombings, life in Australia for people of different faiths, especially Muslims, has changed, and the Federal Government’s commitment to multiculturalism appears to have waned.

Over the last six years, Australian Muslims, in particular, and especially women wearing the hijab (veil), have experienced a growing amount of verbal and even physical abuse. In 2003 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission conducted interviews with more than 1400 Muslim and Arab Australians and found that women in particular were suffering religious and racial discrimination. They heard stories of:

women anxious to walk their children to school in fear of being spat on, abused or ridiculed; people who felt they had been refused employment because their name was Mohammed, their resume said they spoke Arabic or because they were wearing the hijab; young men and women who felt that they were being targeted by police; and to the stories of women and girls who said they had been abused, had objects thrown at them from moving cars, sometimes causing injury.

2 ‘Australian Muslim Women: participating in positive social change’ speech by Omeima Sukkarieh, Acting Senior Policy Research Officer, HREOC, 8 March 2007
In a time when expressions of a person’s religious faith can delineate them as very different from the ‘mainstream’ of Australian society, and when religious and racial intolerance are inextricably intertwined, it is very important that we continue to promote awareness and respect both for each other and for the very fabric of our multicultural nation. In early 2007, however, the Australian Government officially removed responsibility for multiculturalism from the ministerial portfolio for immigration, renaming the relevant department the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Many commentators have seen this as a step away from the principles of mutual respect and mutual inclusion that have shaped our multicultural policy and our national identity.

**GROWING A NATION OF HOPE**

Growing a nation of hope will require us to embrace the generous nature of God and the nature of each of us as people made in the image of God, and demand that we are generous to our neighbours who are different. New Testament examples of hospitality to the stranger and to the community are abundant. There is strength echoing from the stories of individuals and communities that work together to provide safety, shelter and love.

Social cohesion and peace are dependent on our understanding and acceptance of our country as a multifaith and multicultural society. Hope for peace in our communities as well as the wider world demands that we work together as a nation for an end to the violence of racism and xenophobia, while maintaining respect for each other and for our differences. Working together, sharing our experiences, our hurts and our expertise will develop communities of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunities based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity among all Australians. We can live the visions of hope and peace that lie at the heart of all religious traditions.

**THE POLICIES WE SEEK**

We seek to ensure that Australian society continues to encourage harmonious and respectful relationships. In particular, encouraging peaceful multiculturalism must remain a very high priority for our Government, promoting peaceful and productive communities where difference is viewed as strength through education, advocacy and service provision.

**religious freedoms belong to everyone**

Religious freedom is a fundamental human right, enshrined under article 18 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. All people are entitled to practice their faith, and to be free from discrimination on the basis of their adherence. As people of faith we assume religious freedom for ourselves in Australian society, and we have a responsibility to promote religious and cultural freedoms for members of all faiths living in Australia. The Australian Government also has the duty to promote fundamental human rights, and to ensure that all religious traditions are treated with equal respect under the law. No person should be discriminated against, outcast or stigmatised on the basis of the peaceful expression of their religious faith.

We also have a responsibility to those in our world who are not allowed the same freedom of religion that we in Australia enjoy, including to those refugees who have fled their homelands due to religious persecution in their country of origin. Australia must continue to accept refugees who have fled such persecution, and to promote community harmony by funding appropriate education initiatives among the Australian community about the reasons that asylum seekers seek our protection.
creating spaces of acceptance
It is important we recognise that all people in our community have an equal right to be heard and to contribute their voice to a democratic Australia. Too often, certain communities are stigmatised in the media and political discourse based on faith and cultural affiliation - delineated as somehow separate to Australian society rather than a part of ourselves. Public debate around issues of multi-faith and multicultural harmony in Australia must instead recognise that Australians of all faiths and cultures have responsibilities of neighbourhood towards each other.

We seek public policy that promotes peaceful relationships between different groups, through education, dialogue and activities that bring communities together. Language use must be respectful and peaceful, not accusatory or scapegoating. The relationship between racial and faith-based discrimination needs to be explicitly acknowledged and its sources and causes addressed by sound public policy. As Church, our responses to religious discrimination recognise that its sources often originate in cultural and racial discrimination, and we seek to approach these issues with sensitivity. Australia is a multi-religious society. This reality raises many questions. It also presents many opportunities. Sharing Australia with people of other faiths results in opportunities to better understand ourselves, to work for justice, and to live in a world shaped in peace.

recognising the strong and positive role of faith communities
In times of tragedy and hardship, Australia has seen an increasing occurrence of religious leaders and communities joining together in worship and support. We share our prayers, our sadness, our comfort and our compassion. Through programs such as the Government sponsored Harmony Day, we see diverse communities joining together in celebration on special occasions.

Faith communities also play a valuable role in the day to day life of their members, and contribute their diverse voices to the wide array of community and civil society voices that advocate for greater acceptance and understanding of all people. Faith organisations provide fundamental community and welfare services and advocacy that enables them to gain and share expertise in vital areas of social welfare. The Christian institutional tradition, for example, places great emphasis on serving the vulnerable and voiceless in our society, and many religious and benevolent service providers are staffed in part by community volunteers. We support public policy that recognises the value of this spirit in delivering key community services and supports, and understands the legitimacy of faith voices in public discourse as part of civil society and the community sector.

educating for community
We welcome policies that promote religious diversity as a resource rather than as a disadvantage. We seek a deeper commitment to providing and funding services that are responsive to the specific needs of members of our diverse Australian community, and to educating for an inclusive Australia where the rights and beliefs of everyone are valued and respected. While we support education and services which enable new migrants to become more involved in the Australian community, we equally believe that education programmes promoting understanding and acceptance are relevant for the whole community, and that as a community it is our duty to ensure that all members are well treated and respected.

Language is a fundamental part of community, and language and cultural education programs provide a valuable foundation to a socially cohesive society. Every person has a right to know about their cultural and faith heritage, and to be supported in learning different languages that will enable better interaction between communities. While English education is very important in increasing social and economic opportunity for new migrants, it is important too to fund education in other community languages.
working free from discrimination
In our places of work, some find difficulty maintaining practices of faith. Practicing a faith tradition gives many an ethical basis on which to live. It is important that governments and employers value the faith commitments of employees, and respond flexibly to employees’ reasonable requests to attend prayer or faith commitments. Employees must be assured the right to negotiate flexibility of hours and leave entitlements to enable faith commitments to be practiced.

WITHIN THE UNITING CHURCH

Christ is the foundation of Christian conviction. Supporting an Australian multicultural and multi-religious society is not denying the centrality of Christ in Christian belief. We must, however, constantly return to Scripture to evaluate our participation within the Church, within our communities and within the world.

At its 4th National Assembly, the Uniting Church adopted its statement on multiculturalism *The Uniting Church is a multicultural church*, in recognition of its multicultural makeup and the strong role played by a variety of cultural traditions in the life of the Church. The Church aims to be “a sign of hope within the Australian community, and particularly to those who are pushed to its fringes on racial and economic grounds.”

Within the Uniting Church, we aim to practice our faith in a way that recognises the diversity of Uniting Church members and communities, and the strength that comes from uniting in our diversity. As well, we hope to model our interactions with other faith communities on similar principles of mutual respect for diversity and commitment to sharing and working for a reconciled future. We are called to develop hospitable and respectful relationships with people outside of the Uniting Church. In the Basis of Union and in the document adopted by the 9th Assembly, *Living with the Neighbour who is Different*, it is affirmed that in responding to Christ today we must live with all peoples in contemporary society.

Christ teaches us to listen, respect and take action. Many Uniting Church congregations, groups and members follow this path in building understanding and respect between people of different faiths. From participation in formal national dialogues to the hosting of local inter-faith forums, from church-sponsored exposure visits to different places of worship in Australia to working with our Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim neighbours in the care of people who are vulnerable in our society, the Uniting Church lives out its commitment to peace and understanding.

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3 *The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church*, statement of the 4th National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, May 1985
FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about the Uniting Church’s Relations with Other Faiths Working Group, visit our website at http://nat.uca.org.au/relations.

Obtain a copy of the 1999 report to the Assembly Living with the Neighbour who is Different. Call your synod office or the UCA Assembly (02) 8267 4200.

Find out about the National Council of Churches’ interfaith dialogue with other peak faith groups in Australia at their website: http://www.ncca.org.au/departments/interfaith_dialogue

Find out more about our national policy agenda by visiting the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, http://www.minister.immi.gov.au, and enter the word ‘interfaith’ in the search box.


Visit the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website, http://www.dfat.gov.au, and enter the word ‘interfaith’ in the search box.

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