

A Religious Perspective on 'Building a Model City of Peace and Harmony'

(part of the Toowoomba contribution to the conference at UNESCO 23-25 May 2013)

Every One Matters – whoever they are, wherever they come from and whatever they believe – *Every One Matters*: this is a truth at the heart of all the great religions. Yet this is not always honoured. Christian history alone has many examples: where people are cast aside, oppressed, even killed, because they are different: not quite the same, in race, class, culture, or in political or religious belief. For centuries, Catholic and Protestant Christians thus feared, mistreated, and even killed one another. Today, in Toowoomba, as elsewhere, we are trying to learn history's lessons. We have to learn to love one another, even to love those we have long regarded as enemies. This, ultimately, is the only real path to peace and genuine reconciliation.

Toowoomba is a place which is still quite young (160 years old) in its modern guise. So we try not to repeat the divisions which have caused violence elsewhere. Unlike many places, our different Christian denominations therefore all work quite closely together. We do not agree about all things but we seek to find the good in one another and have, for example, joint chaplaincies to hospitals and to our university. This is the *Christian* reconciliation on which our work for peace and harmony with other religions is based. In Toowoomba, the Anglican and Roman Catholic dioceses even share a Covenant together, recognising one another as partners in the Christian Faith. With others of different religion altogether, and of no religion, we also share many practical and prayerful activities which in the past were unimaginable. For we recognise that every genuine expression of religious faith must be valued. It may be that one religious group predominates in numbers, as in Toowoomba with Christianity. Yet even the smallest group must be given proper recognition. This not only avoids alienation and violence. More positively, it means that *every* one's gifts can be used for the good of *all*. We simply need *every* bit of love and wisdom from *wherever* it comes in order to create peace and justice and heal our ailing planet. We cannot afford to cast anyone aside. Slowly too we are also welcoming all genders and races into leadership. In Toowoomba indeed, several of our religious leaders are now women and our worship includes people from all across the globe, not least vibrant African communities. As a matter of fact, our Sudanese Christians now form the largest single Anglican congregation in Toowoomba. All this gives us strength.

Toowoomba is hardly perfect. Like Australia as a whole, we still need to work through some of the festering wounds of history. What happens elsewhere in the world also affects us. Sadly too, we do still have a few who believe that *their* culture, *their* religion, *their* hurts, *their* history must dominate others. And, above all, as a community, we still need fully to recognise the first peoples of our land: the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who, over many years, were so cruelly dispossessed, abused, humiliated, and often simply destroyed, when others came to their land. The wounds of such violence can be healed, and are being healed, but it often takes much time and patience. Yet the important thing is that we are on what we call a 'Journey of Healing', a genuine pathway to peace and reconciliation for all.

So what are the marks of a genuine journey of healing to peace and harmony? Let me offer four key themes, which are at the heart of the Toowoomba Churches' commitment. They come out of work our churches have done, since 2001, initially in accord with the World Council of Churches' 'Decade to Overcome Violence' and the United Nations' own 'Decade for a Culture of Peace for the Children of the World'. They are big challenges for us all, wherever we live and whatever we believe.

The Revd. Dr. Jonathan Inkipin

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The first crucial element is Truth. Gandhi called it 'satyagraha'; or 'soul force'. For where there are lies or distortions, cover-ups, or hypocrisy, there can be *no* peace. We are simply kidding ourselves and fooling no one. Some years ago in Toowoomba for instance, there were some cases of child abuse perpetrated by religious people. Until that was admitted there was no chance of restoring harmony. The wells of peace were poisoned. Slowly, our faith groups are also admitting that truth is not limited to any one religion. For God speaks through many channels and to block our eyes and ears to others is to deny truth. For Toowoomba to be a model city of peace and harmony we therefore not only need to know our own religious truths but to hear what God's Spirit says through others. Some of our great Aboriginal teachers call this deep listening 'dadirri', and it is one of the great Aboriginal gifts to the world. For dadirri is a 'tuning' in to the peace which lies at the heart of all things, in-between and beyond us all. All great spiritual traditions have their own forms of this, in the world's great contemplative practices. For in inner attentive listening, we free ourselves from our little selves and the fundamentalist leanings in all of us. We start living from our true centre, our true Self, which is found in all things, and we become gateways of peace for others. We allow religion to be a force for genuine human *transformation* and not a reinforcement of mere tribal or political identity.

For, secondly, peace involves valuing Diversity. This involves intentionally exploring a variety of ways to share our different faiths and outlooks. For us, these include the Toowoomba Languages and Cultures Festival; multicultural celebrations on what we call Harmony Day; joining together for particular faith community events such as the Baha'i New Year and Christmas; and the candle lighting ceremonies for peace which we hold at St Luke's Anglican Church on the International Day of Peace. It is also beautifully expressed by groups such as Toowoomba's 'Women on Harmony' choir, which includes women from many different faiths and cultures. For to build a model city of peace involves what some of us call 'soul', on a personal and community level. That journey is not always an easy one, for it also involves us hearing songs and stories, dreams and dramas, which are sometimes alien and even deeply painful or challenging for us. Yet only when heart speaks to heart, and soul to soul, is that deep peace made, which some of us call shalom or communion.

For, thirdly, a model city of peace and harmony must nurture the call to Justice. This is the heart of our Journey of Healing with Aboriginal people and also with refugees. For our Aboriginal people could not feel peace and harmony until the truth of their past mistreatment started coming out, until genuine apologies started being made, and until recompense for human rights abuses began to be addressed. Similarly, there can be no genuine peace and harmony until we close other gaps of poverty in our world and until human rights and equity are real for minorities and for women.

Nurturing Truth, valuing Diversity and doing Justice: all these three themes are therefore fundamental to our work for peace and harmony. And each is bound up with, and one other key shared religious theme, namely Compassion. For me, the best expression of this in Toowoomba is our work with refugees, work which began from churches like my own, reaching out to those who came to us with nothing. The Toowoomba care of refugees is about Compassion, irrespective of race, religion, culture or political difference. Through this we show that *Every One Matters* and in this we endeavour to offer a small sign of hope and direction for the world.

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