

**RESOLVING CONFLICTS, PROMOTING RELIGIOUS COOPERATION**  
*some reflections by the Revd. Dr. Jonathan Inkipin*  
(for the Interfaith Forum: *'Resolving Crisis through Religious Education and Cooperation'*  
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I acknowledge the Jarowair and Giabal, the Indigenous people of this ancient land, whose stories, rituals and sacred places served as bearers of meaning, and reconciliation, long before any of the great religions of this world came to our shores. For resolving conflicts and promoting sacred cooperation is hardly a new phenomenon. It goes to the heart of ancient law and practice. Sadly, we are always in need of re-learning what we have ignored, or torn apart. Yet always there are encouraging and inspiring ways back: and this conference is a delightful part of that journey.

I am going to speak this morning primarily out of my experience working for Christian unity and for Reconciliation, as part of the National Council of Churches in Australia, and its state partner in New South Wales. For, simply *within* the Christian community, Christians have been actively seeking to promote religious cooperation for many, many years: in some ways, of course, since the first decades of Christianity, and, certainly, formally and impressively, over the last hundred years and a bit. That should really be an encouragement to us all. For of course there are still, sometimes strongly expressed, differences among Christians. Yet the long centuries of internal bitterness and brutality *between* Christians have largely come to an end: a little miracle of conflict resolution which many may have thought impossible. So, as a human race, we *can* promote religious cooperation and we *will* resolve many of our conflicts. Indeed we already are doing so, now on an *inter*-religious, as well as an *intra*-religious, basis. I hope therefore that what I have to say can draw out some of the learnings of the Christian journey towards religious cooperation and underpin what others may also have to share.

Let me begin therefore by sharing with you a brief part of one of the steps I have taken. It was a little project I organised a few years ago, which brought together a group of young Sydney Christians, Jews and Muslims in a time of encounter at a number of different levels. We called it, deliberately, the 'Journey of Promise'. We did not quite know what we would discover but we did share a common conviction that we would all know ourselves, each other, and God, more fully on the journey. For, like Abraham, a shared hero of our different faith traditions, Muslims, Jews and Christians all look to a God who can never be boxed in: a God is always seeking for us to travel on into deeper truth, mystery and relationship. We were also living out a vital insight from the *Christian* journey towards religious cooperation: namely that, 'to (come to) love another, we need to know one another, and to know one another we have to *meet* one another.'

*(play the 'Bonus Montage' from the 'Journey of Promise' DVD)*

Now, it is always possible to exaggerate a good personal experience. I would not want to make inflated claims about that one little project. Yet I think it encouraged others, not least in developing inter-religious partnerships between schools. Since then some of the participants have also become leaders in other avenues of religious cooperation and conflict resolution. For we never quite know, as Jesus famously said, how or where the seed of good news will take root. Some may seem overwhelmed by other things. When

sown in God's spirit however, we can trust to a good harvest. For, as that project's participants put it, if we aim at understanding we may at least cultivate respect, and if not respect, then at least tolerance.

So much for the 'Journey of Promise' for the moment. Let me say something more about the thinking behind it. For that project was an element in our Australian involvement in what the World Council of Churches called the 'Decade to Overcome Violence': ten years from 2001, when the world's Churches were encouraged actively to address the conflicts of our world, and to work with all people of goodwill in seeking peace and reconciliation. As you can imagine, especially after the Al Qaeda attacks on the USA in 2001, inter-religious conflict became an even more significant feature of that journey.

Now the Decade to Overcome Violence is formally over, but not its search for peace and reconciliation. Let me therefore, very briefly, offer to you the four key themes of that quest which are still vital today. Each I approach as a Christian, but each I hope may resonate with other faith perspectives and none. For I share the view of Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, the distinguished Malaysian Muslim proponent of peace, that what is needed, in this era of globalisation, is a new moral consensus: a new moral consensus which draws on the best of all our traditions. Our task is therefore not that of a religious 'striptease', in which we give away the unique clothing of our faith traditions. Rather the opposite: in our common search for religious cooperation, we need all the resources we can find. Let me then briefly offer four ways forward.

Firstly, there is Justice. This is what, symbolically, our right hand might represent. The biblical law and prophets, and the great Christian teachers, are quite explicit. Without justice there can be no real peace. Jesus is particularly clear when he speaks of how the nations will be judged. Nothing is said about how many, or what kinds of, religious activities are carried out, or even what name of God is on our lips. The criteria are simply: did you feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, care for those in need? If we ignore that person, we ignore God. We are to embody God's desire for religious cooperation, and this means using the right hand of power to work for justice. Indeed, quite frankly, I do not see how we can promote religious cooperation without the promotion of justice for all. Until, for instance, there is a common commitment to end the injustice of minorities, and of oppressed groups across the world – be they Jew or Arab, Muslim or Christian, Baha'i or other, the victims of so-called 'honour' killings or other religiously-based violence – until then, we will not seriously reduce religious conflict. Let us not, in any way, gloss over the bitter reality that unconscionable religious sanctions, and downright murderous religious persecutions, which make a hideous misery of the lives of so many. My heart thus rejoices: for all who stand up for the rights of all, across the bounds of narrow religious allegiance; and for all who seek shared human rights.

One hand is not enough however. God's peacemaking is about active nonviolence and that involves *two* hands. For, secondly, there is Mercy. This is what, symbolically, your left hand might represent – the hand that in some cultures has been related to weak and shameful things. Perhaps mercy is also seen as weak by some, and forgiveness as something shameful? Well that is profoundly mistaken. Instead, we need to affirm

mercy and forgiveness as part of the hard-headed, practical way to resolve conflict and promote religious cooperation. For you can use your hands as fists, but they will never bring resolution. I hit. You hit back. I hit back. It goes on. Maybe you and I might even both feel religiously justified, strong, and righteous, but our fists remain closed, our bodies bloodied and bruised. So it can be between religious groups, literally and metaphorically. Instead, we need to use our two hands differently. One, yes, to stand for justice. Stop, says the right hand, resisting: no more. A second hand offers forgiveness however. Come, says the left hand, let us be good neighbours. The hand of justice is not enough. We have another hand that must offer forgiveness, just as God constantly offers forgiveness to us. It is easier, and safer in one sense, to keep our fists closed. To keep our hands open invites pain. Yet only open hands can heal and love. I am inspired therefore: by those of so many different faiths who are willing to keep opening their lives to others even in the face of great calumny and even violence; by those who take time to listen and to create spaces where the perspectives, and sometimes the great pain, of one another can be acknowledged; and by those who simply keep praying, and loving.

For what links Justice and Mercy? Thirdly, there is Truth, and truth-telling. This is where your head, and your heart, and your stomach - your core - must point, or what they need to be full of. This is key to genuine religious cooperation. *'The truth'*, said Jesus, *'will set you free... repent (turn around - face the right direction).'* Satyaghara, Gandhi called it - soul force, truth-telling - and with it he humbled the British Empire. This comes about when we articulate the *inner* truth and compassion of our religious standpoints. The religious 'objective' then becomes the human 'subjective', and we meet in what one great inter-religious mystic called 'the cave of the heart'. Furthermore, without naming the truth of what has gone *before*, we also cannot have any real peace. That has been at the core of contemporary Truth and Reconciliation processes which, beginning in South Africa, have sought to heal the underlying pain which needs addressing, even when there is surface resolution. Can we hear one another's pain and not recoil? Can we offer one another forgiveness and apology? I believe that we must, and that religious leaders have wisely begun to do so. I think for example, of the way in which Popes have apologised for Christian involvement in such horrors as the medieval Crusades and the Holocaust. Can we continue to be truthful in this way about all our histories? And can we be truthful too, about the way our religious texts themselves have been used, and are still used, by some, to justify violence? That is a hard call. Indeed it may be difficult for outsiders to comment without causing offence or reaction. Yet, if so, there is all the more need for those of us *within* our own particular faith traditions to be truthful about what helps and what hinders. This is not about cutting bits out of sacred texts, as if we were able to be God rewriting them. I myself certainly do not want a politically-correct, anaemic, Bible. It is sometimes the most difficult passages that really help us, if we are willing to wrestle with them. Yet we must be truthful that there are some aspects of our faiths which *can* become 'texts of terror': if, that is, we take them selectively from the whole, and apart from the love that underpins them. We should no longer preach, act, and pray, as if we have no relationship with others.

For the final, and most fundamental, theme of conflict resolution, is that of (inclusive) Community. To promote religious cooperation, we need to nurture a Community that

values and respects Difference. Each great religious tradition will do this in its own way, as we seek for what I would call a 'committed pluralism': one that for each of us, shines with integrity with our own received experience of the divine, but which also acknowledges, and even celebrates, what we see of the divine in others. For Christians, this is represented in the distinctive doctrine of God as Holy Trinity, a community of love, in which each person of the Godhead is different yet equal, bound together in inextricable unity through the power of mutual love. This is the foundation of Christian lives, the ground of being on which we stand, and where our feet must walk in the search for peace. Others will not talk of God in that way, but the same truth, I believe, lies within all. In such a, genuinely *religious*, understanding, God is not God of our *particular* religious tribe alone, but the God of the *whole* universe. For some reason too, God reveals justice and mercy and truth in *many* places. The Judaeo-Christian Scriptures of course affirm that we are all created in the image of God, whoever we are, and whatever our, possibly horribly misconceived, beliefs and practices. In journeying towards Christian unity, Christians have thereby found that it is possible to grow, often very close, yet without discarding those things which, in conscience, we can not yet agree upon. The same is possible, in different ways, in inter-religious cooperation. For God is both our true Self and Wholly Other to us, and the great religious traditions teach us that God often comes to us in the stranger, as One Unknown. Religious cooperation, in other words, is predicated on religions of *transformation* not religions of territoriality. For God always seeks transformed relationships.

So, to draw towards a conclusion, of what should those transformed relationships consist? That is part of the promise of the journey: we do not yet quite know! It will consist in some surprising, as well as expected, new connections, including in the area of spiritual understanding. Crucially however, to be worth anything long lasting, such relationships need to face *away* from ourselves: facing both to God in Godself, and to God in others *beyond* our own midst. For that was one of the findings of the 'Journey of Promise' which I touched on earlier. It has certainly been one of the learnings of the Christian journey to religious cooperation. We can, as religious people of different kinds, learn from, and come to respect and even understand, one another. Such relationships are sustained and really grew however when we look out beyond ourselves, seek the 'big picture' of God and share the common suffering of our world.

(play 'Day Five' from the 'Journey of Promise' DVD)

Let me conclude: conflict is inevitable. Without conflict, there is no life and no growth. What matters is how we *handle* conflict and how we seek to promote cooperation with, and alongside, our genuine differences. Let us therefore stand up, hold out our hands to others, face the right direction, and, planting our feet in inclusive community, walk onwards together. Thankyou.

For, grounded in relationship with that mystery of Love who creates us all, may we thereby share in these beautiful but challenging words of blessing for the way:

*'May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.*

*May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you will work for justice, equity and peace.*

*May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you will reach out your hand to comfort them and change their pain to joy.*

*And may God bless you with the foolishness to think that you can make a difference in the world, so that you will do the things which others tell you cannot be done.'* Thankyou.

David...

Drawing in part on my years spent helping Australia's churches find each other, let me offer a few practical suggestions for taking further our Jewish/Christian/Muslim relationships. I propose ten points for your consideration. Ten – a good biblical number. But they are not commandments, not on tablets of stone, and I make no claim to be a Moses.

2

*Ten Tips for Togetherness:*

1. Remember that before we are Jews, Christians, Muslims or anything else, we are human beings. We share our mortality, our hopes and dreams, our follies and foibles, our need for divine mercy. With all people everywhere we struggle to make sense of life, yearning for light in the darkness, for love in the loneliness, for meaning in the madness, for grace in the emptiness. This shared human identity precedes and outweighs all other identities – be they religious, national, ethnic, political, whatever. Never lose sight of the fact that the people of our three faith traditions, with the people of other faith traditions and indeed with people of no faith tradition at all, have so much in common.
2. Treat other religions the way you would like their people to treat yours. It is too temptingly easy to compare my religion at its best with someone else's at its worst. Better, and fairer, to look at both in terms of what at their best they aspire to be, not just what they are. In particular, watch out for negative stereotyping. There is a lot of it going around right now, and the anti-religious mood of the moment in this country means that we are all likely to find ourselves its victims.
3. Remind yourself regularly that none of our religions has captured God. The divine Reality is vastly more mysterious than our feeble minds can grasp or our stuttering words express. "God, the eternal Presence, does not permit himself to be held," warned the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. "Woe to the man so possessed that he thinks he possesses God". Woe too to our religious communities when they labor under the same illusion. Cherish your doctrines, by all means, but do not confuse them with the divine Mystery itself.
4. Recognize the common challenge that is facing our three faith communities, stemming from the shallow secularism of contemporary Australia. I cannot recall a time when religion here was under more sustained attack from so many different quarters. Census figures suggest that many of our compatriots, especially the young, are turning their backs on our teachings, rituals and traditions. While this may be an institutional problem for us, it is a human tragedy of vast proportions for those who have left us. Yet our religious communities are the improbable trustees of a treasure trove of wisdom, beauty and sanctity that testifies to a transcendent Reality and invites people to find their ultimate fulfilment in the divine purpose. Helping people who feel alienated from religion rediscover the treasure we seem to have hidden from their eyes -- that challenge, awesome in its scope, is one we share.
5. Be alert to other opportunities that may present themselves for our three faith communities to stand together. We have done so, in the past, when

synagogues, churches or mosques found themselves under attack, and our leaders stood together saying that an attack on one house of prayer anywhere is an attack every house of prayer everywhere. We have done so when hysteria was being whipped up against one group or another by populist politicians and irresponsible media. In the present political climate, I would suggest, the faith communities may need to stand together publicly once again, to affirm the presumption of innocence and the rule of law in this nation and to challenge the dangerous new doctrine of guilt-by-association.

6. Some in each of our religious communities carry bad memories, from other times and places, of treatment meted out to them by people of other religions. The scars are real. But unhappy memories need not limit what we might do, in Australia today, by way of new beginnings. Some of the bad memories, however, point to problems that are still with us. Some hurts we continue to inflict on each other, often without being aware of it. Emerging relationships must provide for the frank discussion of these problems, with a view to doing something about them. A current example: Christian evangelism long has been an irritant, not only to Jews and Muslims but to others as well and even, in the form of proselytism, to other Christians. The World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, with the participation of evangelical and Pentecostal churches, are now developing a “Christian code of conduct on religious conversion”. To identify such problems, then fix them, each of our faith communities will find itself facing new agenda items.

7. Prepare yourself for a paradigm shift. For centuries our religious communities have defined themselves *over against* one another. The focus was on what made “my” religion different from “yours” with the invisible sub-text all too often dealing with how that difference then justified “my” attitude of superiority and “your” destiny of being discriminated against. We are now being invited to think in a new way and define ourselves *in relationship* with one another. For most of us this will be a new exercise. Expect some lively debate, not least with nervous co-religionists who take fright at the prospect.

8. Seize every opportunity to build mutual understanding and confidence. When the history of Australia’s interfaith relations eventually gets written, perhaps a footnote somewhere will mention that one morning, around the turn of this century, three people in national leadership roles -- Amjad Mehboob (Muslim), Jeremy Jones (Jewish) and myself (Christian) -- had coffee together, liked each other, decided they could work together and determined to do everything possible to build harmony – for the benefit not only of their respective faith communities, but of the wider Australian society as well. In synagogues, churches and mosques across the land, many people, similarly, have been demonstrating that more things are wrought by simple friendship and trust than this world dreams of.

9. Do not lose sight of Australia’s other faith communities. Yes, we are grateful for the developing relationships between Jews, Christians and Muslims, but take care not to give the impression that we think monotheistic religions are the only ones that matter. Jews and Muslims in this country have squirmed often enough in the face of Christian arrogance. Take care not to replace that

with a sort of “Abrahamic” arrogance towards Buddhists, Hindus and others. Our context, after all, is Asia, not the Middle East or Europe, and we had better make sure we take seriously Asia’s rich and varied religious complexity. 10. Finally, keep your sense of humor. Religious people who take themselves too seriously are a danger to traffic. “He who sits in the heavens laughs,” says Psalm 2, and we should too. There is much said and done in the name of religion that God must find heartbreaking. But there is also a lot that God must find very funny indeed. Let’s not be afraid to join in the heavenly mirth and laugh along too – focusing, of course, on our own follies and foibles, before those of others.

### **SoP 1 Personal Circle**

- Susan Carew and Clowning for Peace
- Brendan McKeague and the Spirituality of Nonviolence
- Tony Robertson and Transforming Masculinity
- Barbara Potter and Arts for Peace

### **SoP 2 Family Circle**

- Barbra Asplet and the Aboriginal Healing House
- Christabel Chamarette and Safe Care
- Monique Lisbon and ‘If the Truth Hurts’
- Pearl Wymarra and ‘Recreating Our Campfires’

### **SoP 3 Community Circle**

- Dave Andrews and the Waiters Union
- Shayne and Lurleen Blackman and Breaking the Pot
- Bill Harris and the Week Without Violence
- Swee-An Koh and the Peace Church

### **SoP 4 Religious/Cultural Circle**

- Christina de Angelis and Action for Life
- Bronwyn Lee and Journeying with Promise
- Pat Linnane and Alcheringa in Mercy
- Joe Sheridan and Goodness and Kindness

### **SoP 5 National Circle**

- John Bond and the Journey of Healing
- Anne Coombs and Rural Australians for Refugees
- Colin Griffiths and the Healing of Memories
- Jo Vallentine and Politics for Peace

**SoP 6 International Circle**

- Joy Balazo and Young Ambassadors for Peace
- Peter and Sue Hallam and the Sanctuary Refugee Foundation
- Donna Mulhearn and being a Pilgrim for Peace
- Ian Stehbens and Pacific Peacebuilding

**SoP 7 Ecological Circle**

- Phil Bligh and Earth Light
- Norm Habel and the Season of Creation
- Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta and the Nuclear Waste Dump
- Lisa Wriley and Nappies for Peace

Azim Khamisa

Claudette Werleigh

National headscarf Day

Acts of solidarity

Writing letters a la Amnesty

ARRCC and the really big picture