

**REPORT FROM CMYI'S STATEWIDE MULTICULTURAL YOUTH ISSUES
NETWORK (SMYIN) MEETING**

**'A Christian, a Muslim and a Jew walk into a room...':
Young people and the role of inter-faith dialogue**

Thursday 19th April 2007

Overview

The Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues' (CMYI) first Statewide Multicultural Youth Issues Network (SMYIN) Meeting of 2007 explored the theme of young people and the role of inter-faith dialogue in promoting social harmony.

The selection of the theme follows the publishing of a paper through the Centre for Research on Social Inclusion at Macquarie University that highlighted the 'proliferation' of inter-faith initiatives and organisations over the past three years (Ho 2007). In fact, both the State and Federal Governments have made a commitment to supporting multi-faith initiatives.

As government and funding bodies increasingly prioritise inter-faith dialogue, CMYI considered it timely to explore the value of, and best practice in, inter-faith initiatives. This also provided an opportunity for CMYI to reflect on our past experiences working in this area, including being involved in organising the 2006 Victorian Multicultural Multifaith Youth Forum, as well as shape future initiatives.

Cahill & Leahy (2004) define inter-faith cooperation as "*the different faith communities not just living harmoniously side-by-side..., but actively knowing about and respecting each other and each other's beliefs in fair and honourable competition.*"

This SMYIN Meeting provided an opportunity to explore:

- Why inter-faith dialogue has become increasingly popular;
- The goals of inter-faith dialogue when working with young people; and
- How this fits within the broader context of addressing racism and discrimination.

The SMYIN meeting, held at the Queen Victoria Women's Centre (210 Lonsdale St, Melbourne), was attended by over 70 people. Representatives included those from: local and state government, community and religious organisations, youth and multicultural services, Police and higher education institutions (University and TAFE).

Speakers

Four speakers were invited to present at the forum:

Joseph A. Camilleri

Professor of International Relations and Director of the Centre for Dialogue, La Trobe University

Professor Camilleri's presentation provided an engaging and thought-provoking overview of the contemporary context in which inter-faith initiatives are taking place and some of the key principles in making dialogue (and inter-faith dialogue in particular) part of the solution.

Principles of inter-faith dialogue:

- Common search for truth
- Listening as well as speaking
- Journey = discovery of other and self
- Valuing of commonalities
- But also valuing of differences
- Sharing the memory of the past
- Acknowledging/experiencing pain of the 'other' = key to healing/reconciliation
- Legitimate and humane governance

Professor Camilleri particularly stressed this last point, that inter-faith dialogue should take place in an environment which supports understanding/dialogue/diversity in principle. We also need to institutionalise dialogue in Australia so it is not just reactive when there is conflict, but is normal part of interactions in society.

In terms of possible inter-faith initiatives:

- Doing things on a local level is so important.
- The Centre for Dialogue has a proposal to set up an inter-faith network across 5 LGAs in the Northern Metro area.
- Young people are key to dialogue.
- Need to be action-focussed, so working on a local issue such as employment, environment, etc that has relevance to those from all faith groups, so the dialogue is not about debating theological differences/finer points, but about working together to bring about common goals/shared vision.

A member of audience asked how to avoid getting bogged down in discussions about doctrine. Professor Camilleri suggested that the first step in creating dialogue is the "getting to know you" stage – where people become comfortable visiting/working with those of other faiths – and discussion of doctrine is one of the things that happens. BUT it shouldn't be confined to this. Need action!

George Lekakis

Chairperson, Victorian Multicultural Commission

George Lekakis spoke about the Victorian Government's vision and commitment with regards to interfaith initiatives as a way of promoting a harmonious multicultural community. To this end, the State Government allocated \$2 million in the last budget to multi-faith initiatives.

Mr Lekakis also spoke about the State Racial and Religious Vilification Act (the only one of its kind in Australia), the Community Accord that has been signed by peak religious and community bodies around respecting diversity, the Victorian Government's \$4.6 million community grants scheme, and the multicultural multifaith youth network following on from last year's youth forum.

Mr Lekakis stressed the need to move beyond 'the room' (referring to the title of the forum – 'A Christian, a Muslim and a Jew walk into a room...') and to take this dialogue into the broader community.

Hass Delal

Director, Australian Multicultural Foundation

Hass Delal spoke about the Muslim Youth Summits that have taken place around Australia, overseen by the Australian Multicultural Foundation. He highlighted how their feedback/evaluations showed how important it was for the young people that they were able to make decisions and speak out, and not be 'spoken for' by leaders.

Mr Delal highlighted the need for more proactive inter-faith dialogue, rather than reactive dialogue; waiting for something to happen (conflict, violence etc) for there to be initiatives to be undertaken that help bridge understanding.

Jasmina Kid

Project worker, Jewish Christian Muslim Association (JCMA)

Jasmina Kid spoke about the work of JCMA in going into schools to talk with children about diversity. She spoke about the need to talk about diversity more generally – and inter-faith dialogue is only part of this – and how young people respond to being exposed to 'the other' in a one-on-one setting that helps dispel myths.

Ms Kid also spoke about how JCMAs program only addresses discrimination to a certain degree (and young people are important because they are the future), but there are broader factors/structures that must be appreciated (media, international events, discrimination in different social settings).

Discussion

- In relation to tackling racism/discrimination, we need to work with teachers and adults who are in power, because often they're the ones teaching children and passing on stereotypes/beliefs.
- Q: [To Jasmina Kid] I think projects like JCMA are great, but how do you go into religious schools that can be reluctant to enter into dialogue?
- JK: Our program does not directly talk about religion/theology unless a student specifically asks a question about faith. We address stereotyping/diversity issues more broadly (e.g. putting someone who is 'different' in a box; not generalising about a whole community based on the actions of one person).
- It is better when running inter-faith forums to involve families, not young people in isolation. Need for dialogue to involve key points such as getting speakers to highlight good points of others' religion.
- It's important that young people are consulted about their spiritual needs. That is, young people aren't necessarily affiliating themselves with a particular religion, but they are identifying themselves as spiritual. We need to think about how we accommodate non-formal religions (e.g. Jedi's listed on Census!) when talking about inter-faith dialogue.
- Linked to this point, we need to think more about **intra**-faith discussions, not just **inter**-faith dialogue. What do we believe in?? Talk to young people about what they believe in.
- With all this talk of young people/religious leaders/dialogue, yet there are no young people at this forum. We need to involve/empower/consult young people.

- There are some logistical difficulties in getting young people to forums such as these. But also, it's important that as workers/services we get together to create those opportunities for young people to be involved.
- It's also important that workers know where we stand on this issue (let alone the organisations we represent) and that we are clear about our own actions, whether within direct service, when making policy or advocating for any change. We cannot engage young people in this debate unless we are clear what we are doing and how we are working on this, otherwise we 'set young people up' and fail to meet their expectations.
- Relating to this last point, I am a young person and I think young people are working out what they believe. Sometimes we contradict ourselves. Need to be able to explore faith in a flexible way.
- We need to – as Professor Camilleri pointed out – emphasise the common ground of 'a search for truth'
- We must be cautious in talking about inter-faith initiatives that we don't 'pigeon hole' young people so that their faith becomes their primary identifying feature – they are also from different cultural backgrounds, sub-cultures, peer groups, socio-economic and geographical regions – and faith is only one element of this. If we put a 'religion' as primary filter on dialogue, we force young people to identify with faith first and foremost, when in actual fact they may feel other elements of identity are more important to talk about.
- We also need to incorporate those from more extreme/fundamentalist end of faith spectrum in dialogue. At the moment, dialogue is focussed on moderate elements, which has had the effect of marginalising a group that are actually the ones more likely to create problems/conflict.
- One good program that has run in the City of Greater Dandenong has brought together young people from a state school and a Muslim school to help remove some of the myths and stereotypes.
- It would be good to have a website that had contact details for who is who within religious communities.
- With the current funding focus, it pushes services towards talking about/framing projects in relation to faith when in actual fact young people have multiple identities. How do we manage this?
- CMYI will be keenly observing, researching and examining the effects of all these interfaith initiatives, particularly in relation to addressing racism and discrimination more broadly. How do interfaith initiatives fit in relation to tackling racism/discrimination? How are interfaith initiatives evaluated? What sort of outcomes are achieved by these initiatives?

Outcomes

CMYI will use the information gathered from this SMYIN meeting and from current literature on interfaith initiatives to develop a discussion paper and series of recommendations. If you have suggestions you would like to feed into this paper, contact Louise Olliff, CMYI Senior Policy Officer on louise@cmyi.net.au or on (03) 9340 3709 by May 30.

The Inter-faith Dialogue discussion paper will be made available on the CMYI website (www.cmyi.net.au) by the end of June 2007.