

Relations with Other Faiths

1. MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMITTEE

- 1.1 Revd Graham Brookes (chair) Rev Bern Stevens, Revd Clyde Dominish, Ms Wilma Viswanathan, Ms Maureen Postma, Rev Ray Richmond, Rev David Bakhsh, Rev John Jegasothy, Ms Una Laird, Rev Dr Geoff Barnes.
- 1.2 Ex-officio: Ms Wendie Wilkie, Associate General Secretary; Ms Deb Brown, Social Responsibility and Justice.

2. "LIVING WITH THE NEIGHBOUR WHO IS DIFFERENT"

- 2.1 This is the title of a paper written by Rev Dr Keith Rowe and the Doctrine Working group in response to a request from the last Assembly. It was discussed at a lively seminar held in February by members of Theology and Discipleship Reference Committee and Relations with Other Faiths Reference Committee along with some people from other parts of the Uniting Church involved in theology and interaction with people of other faiths.
- 2.2 The Reference Committee on Relations with Other Faiths is delighted with this paper and the discussion it is engendering. We have felt the need for a long time to have a well written theological resource to help members of the church to be clearer in their understanding of the basis for discussion and interaction with people from other faith traditions. A key area for discussion related to the apparent dichotomy between a traditional understanding of evangelism and that of dialogue. The group affirms that evangelism is not in opposition to dialogue but a part of true interaction and conversation between people of faith. Being involved in dialogue with other faiths is not a compromise of Christianity but an opportunity to listen and share faith, just as being involved ecumenically is not a compromise of being Uniting Church but an enriching of our understanding of faith and other denominations insights and concerns, as part of the call of God to be one. It was said at the consultation that we have much more in common with people of other faith than with people of no faith.
- 2.3 Australia is a multi-faith community and there is much we need to do together and need to understand about each other. Many Christians in Australia came from Asia and the Middle East where they lived often as minorities among other major religions and we have much to learn from them.

- 2.5 This paper is to be revised by the Doctrine Working group and by T&D and brought to the Assembly. It may become a resource for congregational and other ecumenical groups involved in interfaith dialogue.

3. DIALOGUE GROUPS

3.1 Jewish Dialogue

- 3.1.1 This group was reformed in 1999 in response to the affirmations and proposals agreed at the 8th Assembly. The group consists of five persons from the UCA and five persons from the Executive Council of Australian Jewry. Both groups have a range of age, gender, and ordained and lay. Both groups have people from Sydney and Melbourne. The group is lead jointly by Rev Dr John Bodycomb (UCA) and Jeremy Jones (ECAJ)
- 3.1.2 Three meetings have been held with various topics. "What is characteristic about our faith group" led to an appreciation of the complexity and diversity which is integral to each faith organisation and understanding of how difficult it is to state emphatically what each group is.
- 3.1.3 A common concern about children, faith and schools led to a lively discussion on our respective religious schools and the issues they face in handing on the faith. Wesley Melbourne for example has a high percentage of Jewish children attending. The issue was raised by UCA about why this would happen and how should a UCA school like this meet the needs of their students from other faiths. ECAJ affirmed that the most important thing a UCA school needed to do was to be faithful to its own tradition and not try to take on the task of handing on the Jewish faith to such students. At the same time it needed to create an atmosphere of understanding and valuing of the multi-faith nature of the school community.
- 3.1.4 Relationships have developed such strength (after a time of sensitivity a few years ago) to the point where radio programs and press statements seen to be discriminatory and hurtful to the Jewish community have been raised by the Jewish group for discussion. The UCA has appreciated this frank and open attitude and has generally been able to respond appropriately.
- 3.1.5 **Jewish Relations study Kits** - These kits are still available from the Assembly office and are particularly helpful to study in Lent.
- ### 3.2 Muslim Link Group
- 3.2.1 The terms of reference for this group includes "to determine areas of common commitment to social justice and human rights and to work to implement joint action on such issues of mutual concern"
- 3.2.2 This group has been meeting once or twice a year originally on an ad hoc basis but it has now been made into a more formal group with set membership. Rev Graham Brooks heads

up the UCA group with John Jegasothy, Clive Dominish, Wilma Viswanathan and Deb Brown as other members.

3.2.3 This group has discussed violence in Lakemba, Sydney, earlier in 1999, shared the struggles and difficulties both groups have with youth and agreed to assist each other where possible in information about resources, etc. Discussions have also been held on family values and the difficulty of establishing counselling services for migrant communities, the issue of second generation clash of values and life styles, unemployment and drugs, and insensitivity and difficulties with cross-cultural issues in schools.

3.2.4 Many of the members of the this link group participated in a common witness of Muslim and Christians for peace in Indonesia in early January in Martin Place in Sydney organised by the National Council of Churches and the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils.

4. SEMINAR ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN AUSTRALIA

4.1 A small ecumenical Christian group met in Sydney to discuss this issue in response to an invitation and seminar held in Bangkok in March 1999. The group used the excellent research material produced by the Human Rights Commission on Article 18 of the Declaration on Human Rights. It concluded that while there was some continuing discrimination Australia generally experienced relative religious freedom and tolerance. It is more difficult when you are in the majority to always appreciate the difficulties experienced by those of other faiths. However it did express concern that this religious freedom and tolerance was not guaranteed by the Constitution or by law in Australia and therefore could be eroded or taken away at some future time.

5. WHEN WE WORSHIP TOGETHER

5.1 The Other Faiths Reference Committee has produced a resource pamphlet on *“When we worship together”*. It is a helpful guide to congregations and groups on issues and understandings needed by Christian people who may be planning joint celebrations. It is available from the Assembly office. It is currently under further revision in the light of comments from the Victorian Council of Churches work.

6. NEIGHBOURS

6.1 This magazine is produced from time to time by the Assembly and contains information and news relating to interfaith issues. You may order copies from the Assembly office.

7. YOUTH INTERFAITH GROUP

7.1 We are aware of a group of young people meeting together in Sydney to share ideas and issues affecting them in their various religions and who find this a source of interest, inspiration and comfort as they discover issues that are common to them all as well as profound differences.

8. “THE NEW WARFARE STATE”

8.1 Rev Dr Keith Suter wrote a paper by this title in response to a request by the reference group in 1998 to help it understand the rise of violence and conservatism in various Islamic parts of the world

9. RESOURCES

9.1 The following resources may be obtained from the Assembly office. Please phone (02) 8267 4214 or email wendiew@nat.uca.org.au

- *‘When we Worship’* - pamphlet on inter-faith celebration and worship
- *“The New Warfare State”* by Rev Dr Keith Suter
- *Neighbours* – an occasional magazine
- Jewish Relations study kits
- Occasional papers on a variety of topics relating to issues of multi-faith.

9.2 These resources will be put onto the Assembly Internet site later in 2000. Found at Nat.uca.org.au (omit www)

Wendie Wilkie
Associate General Secretary