

An Interfaith and Intercultural Network in Melbourne's Northern Suburbs

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The overall aim of the project is to develop a model for a dynamic and sustainable interfaith and intercultural network for the Northern region of Melbourne. It is based on active collaboration between La Trobe University's Centre for Dialogue, five municipalities (Moreland, Darebin, Banyule, Hume and Whittlesea) and eight partner organisations (Australian Multicultural Foundation, Uniting Church, Jewish Community Council of Victoria, Islamic Council of Victoria, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, Buddhist Council of Victoria and Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre).

The project's aim is to translate the general principles of dialogue into encounters, educational experiences and practical activities that target the particular needs and circumstances of local communities in the Northern region of Melbourne. It addresses the question whether dialogue and cooperation across different faiths and cultures can be nurtured (and if so, how) in places where people live, study, practise their religion, socialise, shop, and go about the business of everyday life, especially in their local communities.

The project comprises of four main phases:

1. Research and Community Consultation (2007 - 2008)
2. Design of Network (2008)
3. Implementation of Network (2009 - 2010)
4. Evaluation and Future Planning (2010).

The first two phases have been completed. We are now in the early stages of Phase Three.

PHASE ONE

This phase involved four main types of activity:

Community Consultation

A community consultation was held on Tuesday 15 April at Coburg Civic Centre. More than 90 people from faith and ethnic communities, inter-faith groups, municipal councils, local government associations, key community and service organisations came together to define current and potential future concerns of their communities and to identify ways of better using energy, resources, knowledge and experience.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed around the concerns and issues raised at the community consultation and in close conference with the five city councils. The survey sampled 0.5% of the combined population of the five councils. The questionnaire was released on 23 June 2008 and was in the field for a period of three weeks. The Centre for Dialogue received 452 responses, a response rate of 14.5%.

Focus Groups

The focus groups were conducted between July and September 2008. Over 700 invitations were sent throughout the region with 87 people participating in the eight focus groups across the five municipalities. A separate focus group was held at the Centre for Dialogue specifically for service providers.

Research into Australian and International Best Practice

The Centre for Dialogue, both before and since the beginning of this project, has conducted research into a range of initiatives which have got under way both in Australia and internationally, especially since September 11. The purpose of this research has been to identify successful initiatives, the factors that account for success, and the role of key actors, in particular the role of local government in facilitating and sustaining such initiatives.

PHASE TWO: DESIGN OF THE NETWORK

On the basis of the research and consultations described above, the Centre for Dialogue, in close collaboration with the five participating Local Councils, has prepared a series of findings and proposals to assist the establishment of Interfaith and Intercultural Network for the Northern Suburbs of Melbourne. What follows is a brief summary of key findings and some of the more important ideas and recommendations about the way forward.

Key Findings

1. The qualitative and quantitative research established strong and widespread support for greater dialogue and cooperation across faiths and cultures in the Northern Region of Melbourne and for the establishment of the proposed Network.
2. Many drew attention to the importance of cultural difference, while others pointed to the need for greater clarification about the relationship between culture and religion. What would be the approach of a Network that was interfaith and intercultural?
3. Strong support was received for projects and initiatives in the areas listed in the questionnaire, including education and training, support for refugees and recent arrivals, domestic violence, housing and environment.
4. Some variations existed between municipalities, age groups, and different religious, philosophical, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds regarding the nature and purpose of a regional interfaith/intercultural network.
5. The municipality of Hume rated lower on certain indicators relevant to the project. There could, however, be any number of explanations, including the relatively small number of respondents involved.
6. Those that were not religiously disposed were less enthusiastic about a Network that focused exclusively, or largely, on faith issues or interfaith cooperation.
7. The 34 year-old and younger age group was noticeably under-represented in the questionnaire as well as in the focus groups and community consultations.
8. There was a general recognition that lack of knowledge and understanding of religious and cultural difference could inhibit cooperation, and may in fact provoke fear, mistrust, suspicion and even outright hostility.

9. Activities that elicited strong support as potential areas for interfaith and intercultural cooperation were: education and training, celebration of cultural diversity (food, music, sport, and art), violence in the family, media literacy, housing, employment and the environment.
10. While the proposed interfaith/intercultural network received strong support from newly emerging migrant and faith communities, responses from the more established religious and migrant communities were more subdued.
11. While reconciliation was one of the issues highlighted in the community consultation, response from the indigenous community was minimal.
12. Cultural differences, language constraints, human and financial resources, transport difficulties were all cited as potential difficulties which the Regional Network would need to address.
13. The success of the Regional Network would be maximised through: a) active involvement and strengthening of existing local interfaith and intercultural initiatives; b) strong practical and financial support from the five Councils; c) a process of on-going consultation with the respected leaders of the various communities; d) activities which would have wide interest and appeal.

Proposals and Recommendations

Establishment of the Network

An Interfaith-Intercultural Network for the Northern Region of Melbourne should be formally established with the support of the Banyule, Darebin, Hume, Moreland and the Whittlesea City Councils. Religious, community and other organisations within these five municipalities, as well as residents, who support the aims and principles of the Network, should be invited to sponsor the Network, participate in its activities and assist in its development.

The following ideas are presented as a basis for discussing the direction, priorities and structure of the network.

Principles of the Network

A key principle in developing the network should be a strong commitment to nurturing the philosophy, method and practice of dialogue. In dialogue, members of the Network should respect each other; celebrate the contribution of different faiths and cultures; understand the importance of listening as well as speaking; affirm the important ethical (and spiritual) values they hold in common; accept that there are differences and appreciate that diversity is a source of mutual enrichment; recognise that relations between different faiths, cultures and communities have at times given rise to mistrust, suspicion, and hostility; seek to empathise with, and acknowledge the pain and suffering of others; work towards healing and reconciliation.

Objectives of the Network

The overriding aim of the Network should be to promote dialogue and cooperation between different faiths and cultures in the Northern Region of Melbourne. This can be achieved by creating more opportunities for people of different faiths and cultures to interact with each other, and better understand each other's beliefs, customs, languages, ways of thinking, lifestyles, hopes, aspirations, achievements, fears, concerns and needs.

What will the Network do?

The Network should support and, where appropriate initiate, functions and activities that celebrate the richness and wisdom of the different faiths and cultures of the region. After carefully reviewing what is currently being done in each of the municipalities, the Network should:

- a) Consider ways of supporting constructive initiatives and activities in the area of interfaith/intercultural relations in each of the five municipalities;
- b) Help to coordinate efforts and resources in the field of interfaith/intercultural relations across the five municipalities;
- c) Mount a number of community education and training programmes;
- d) Identify key areas of community need in which the dialogue of faiths and cultures can make a useful and practical contribution – possible priority areas worth considering include:
 - Reducing family violence – this would involve working with and extending already existing projects and initiatives in the Region;
 - Fostering greater environmental consciousness and practice;
 - Promoting cultural literacy programmes in both government and religious schools;
 - Taking into account intercultural and interfaith sensitivities in service delivery programmes;
 - Addressing issues of housing and employment, especially as they affect communities in need;
 - Supporting newly arrived communities and refugees, keeping in mind their specific cultural and faith traditions and needs.

Structure of the Network

As a first step, it is proposed that the Centre for Dialogue, in close consultation with all project partners and all relevant local stakeholders, be asked to facilitate the formation of a 20-member Council or Committee of the Interim Network, which will operate from July to December 2009. It is proposed that four members be drawn from each of the five municipalities. The aim would be to achieve the widest possible representation in terms of religion, ethnicity, gender, age group, skills and expertise.

The consultation process that will follow the release of this Report will be important in identifying people who have an interest in being part of the Network, and in playing a key role by serving on the Interim Council or Committee.

The primary task of the Interim Council will be to consult widely and to develop and execute an implementation plan for the establishment of the Regional Interfaith and Intercultural Network.

The Interim Council will need to give serious attention to:

- a) How organisations and individuals will be able to join the Network (what will be the criteria and rules of membership?);
- b) What office-bearer positions, if any, will need to be established if the Network is to operate transparently and efficiently;
- c) What consultations, forums and decision-making meetings will be most appropriate for the initial period (July 2009 – March 2010) and beyond;
- d) What should be the main elements of an educational and training programme (to be mounted with the assistance of the Centre for Dialogue);

- e) The resource needs of the Network;
- g) Identifying key priorities of the Network's programme over the first 18 months.

A possible organisational model for both the Interim Network and what is to follow is provided under Appendix A of the full report. This should be treated as no more than a series of suggestions which might help to guide the discussion.

Resourcing of the Network

In the initial stages the growth of the Network is likely to depend on the support that can be provided by the Centre for Dialogue and the partner organisations in the project, especially the Local Councils. However, from the outset, the Network will need to consider additional sources of funding and support. One of the main tasks of the Interim Network will be to set in train the preparation of a business plan for the long-term financial viability of the Network.

The support that Councils can provide can be considered under three main headings:

- *Cash support:* to assist with various activities and projects over the first 18 months, each of the five Councils has indicated that it is prepared to make a contribution of \$5,000 (i.e. a total of \$25,000). However, no assumption should be made that this level of funding will continue beyond this initial period;
- *Staff support:* each of the Councils should indicate what level of staff time will be made available, especially in the first 18 months to assist with the establishment of the Network – this will greatly assist both short and medium term planning;
- *Administrative support:* each of the Councils should indicate what facilities might be available at different times to the Network, especially in its first 18 months (e.g. office space, use of phone, access to computer, photocopying and printing facilities, access to municipal websites, postage, use of venues and light catering).

All the other partner organisations should carefully consider what additional support they can make available under the three above headings.

The Network, if it is to succeed, will need to gain the support and commitment of a number of people who will offer their time, skills and organisational support on a voluntary basis. This will apply to membership of the Network and participation in working groups as well as in specific projects and activities. This human resource should be considered the single most important asset of the Network, and vital to its long-term viability.

As the Network grows, consideration should be given to the appointment of at least a part-time Project Officer and Coordinator – over time this could become a full-time position. For this purpose various sources of funding will need to be explored.