

Keynote Speech “The Reality of Living One’s Faith In Today’s Australian Society” – 2015 Victorian Interfaith Network’s Conference, Kingston City Hall [22/11/2015]

Thank you for the privilege and honour of being asked to speak at this, the 2015 Victoria Interfaith Networks’ Conference.

Before I begin I would like to **acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians** of the land on which we gather and pay my respects to them; I honour their care of the land and make a commitment to work for reconciliation and justice.

When I agreed to speak on the suggested topic “**The Reality of Living One’s Faith In Today’s Australian Society**” it seemed to me that it was as good as any topic. However in thinking about it over recent months I have wrestled with many aspects of this topic. What could be covered? What *should* be covered? What specific - and meaningful focus could be given in the context of a diverse range of faiths and spiritual traditions that would likely be present at such a conference? What relevant perspective could I offer or suggest in the company of many who give, know and offer so much in the world of grassroots interfaith relations? What influences and experiences have there been in the past year, since that last Conference hosted by Monash Interfaith Gathering with the theme of Domestic Violence and why faith communities need to be involved (a serious issue still with us) – what would inform such thoughts? Being so broad it could go in any direction. I confess. I froze for a while and the business of **doing** took over – every now and then during those moments of fervent activity the thought would arise “what IS the reality of living one’s faith in today’s Australian Society?” And I would reflect in that moment of what might be said.

In his opening comments at a recent forum on “*Creating Change through Dialogue: Social Cohesion- Young People and Families*”, Professor Greg Barton from the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship & Globalisation, Deakin University remarked that faith and being human is here to stay - as is the desire for value, meaning and belonging. Faith grows deeper with humanity; it is not a threat to our own traditions but enriches it – humanity moves us to care and to care is to be human. Belonging is an acute human need - human nature abhors a vacuum. And as we would also know, he stated that culture and tradition in Australia is very often shaped by religion. This IS the reality in the City of Greater Dandenong where I live.

Last weekend, The Age’s Good Weekend magazine carried an article about Hillsong, a very large and popular church in Sydney. It’s concluding sentence on where the appeal of this particular church lies said: “Moral certainty, community and a sense of identity. There is something so attractive about a black and white view of the world”.

Community and a sense of identity are important and it is reassuring when there is a certainty about *anything*, but for many people, and for those of us involved in interfaith work, things are often not as clear cut and straight forward as we would like them to be. However there ARE some essential common principles that people of all faiths and spiritual traditions and good will . . . and people who do not commit to any formal religious tradition but who are on a spiritual search, can subscribe to as a moral compass and guide for living.

This is not news to us here.

The horrific events that have happened recently in many parts of the world has brought home something that has kept arising in me while thinking about what it means to live the reality of one's faith In today's Australian Society – **the importance of keeping the faith . . . the faith in inter-faith**. And here I am using inter-faith to describe a relationship between those people of different faiths, spiritual traditions, beliefs . . and none.

FAITH, as partly defined by Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, is a "*strong belief or trust in someone or something*". The reality of living one's faith today can and should be found in no other context than that of inter-faith. If we are open to it, part of each of our particular faiths or spiritual tradition calls us to seek out or find in community (or common unity - NOT uniformity) the friend of a different faith or spiritual tradition or belief. I say "if we are open to it" because we would all know people in each of our own traditions who would see only one path to faith – whatever that faith might be. This is reality – certainly for me.

It seems to me that there are three aspects to keeping the faith in inter-faith: (i) being faithful (ii) holding the faith and (iii) keeping the faith. And to illustrate THE REALITY of living one's faith in today's Australian society by being faithful, holding the faith and keeping the faith – in inter-faith, I would like to share some grassroots stories and experiences.

(i) BEING FAITHFUL: For its yearly gathering, the Interfaith Network of the City of Greater Dandenong follows the United Nations [UN] International theme which for this year was *International Year of Light*. The Interfaith Network added its own dimension "*Spreading Rays of Hope*". Throughout the year there has been stories of hope in interfaith work – not ground breaking news but glimpses of light where there has been pause for thought, prayer and reflection. Allow me share to some stories of being faithful.

Early one morning, prior to a tour to places of worship, I listened to a policewoman speak of her anguish over a close work colleague's suicide the previous day. With sunglasses containing her emotions she said she could have chosen to not come on the day's tour but instead was going to use the different places of worship being visited to reflect on, and think about her colleague. I admired her **strength** in the midst of such pain. Being faithful – in inter-faith.

I observed two dear interfaith friends from different faiths in earnest conversation about how one of their faiths could not be a part of the other's new faith organization because of strongly held cultural differences. Because of the friendship and respect they had for each other they were seeking a way through an impasse. I admired their **commitment** in the midst of a difficult conversation. Being faithful in inter-faith.

At the recent Interfaith Network schools' yearly gathering in Dandenong, I heard some 500 voices join in the singing of the song "*You Light Up My Life*" again follow the UN theme of Light. The local English Language School brought 8 grades of students, some of whom have only been in Australia a matter of days. I caught the eye of a little girl, possibly from Sudan, 'singing' with much gusto and joy "*You Light Up My Life – You Give Me HOPE*". Not really knowing hers or her family journey to come to Australia, I admired her **joy** in the midst of new beginnings. Being faithful has no age limits.

I was privileged to be part of a conversation between two religious leaders from different aspects of the Islamic Faith: one Turkish faith leader and one Afghani faith leader – both meeting for the first time. After the initial discussion regarding the possibilities of sharing prayer space the two leaders began exploring and comparing their differences checking with each other the different terminologies each of them use from the one language they could share in – English. What moved me so much was the deep sense of respectful curiosity and **compassion** each had for the other's experience and tradition. Being faithful transcends cultural traditions.

As part of a working group to develop a faith-based preventive resource on Family Violence [available on the display tables the back] I was privileged to work with several faith and spiritual leaders including male faith leaders who wrestled with many aspects of the facts of family violence and the part that faith and the privilege of position have played in contributing to inequality within faiths and spiritual traditions. I admired their **persistence** in the midst of wrestling with their sacred texts to find ways of being more inclusive while keeping the truth of those texts. Being faithful in one's own tradition.

(ii) HOLDING [onto] THE FAITH: on a recent Tour to Places of Worship provided for people from asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds, a group of Burmese Muslim women, three little children and some Afghani men were in a 151 year old Anglican church steeped in Christian history and tradition. The priest hosting the tour invited everyone to come up onto the platform and to gather close to the altar or communion table – a place of special and sacred meaning for those of the Christian faith. It was deeply moving to watch as the group, where English is not their first language and where there were at least two languages being spoken were welcomed into the space and were offered open hospitality and included. The group was also invited to walk up the steps and stand at the pulpit [or lectern] to gain the perspective that the priest would have on any Sunday morning in the Church. I watched as an older Afghani man slowly took this opportunity, walked up the steps and gazed tall, proud and upright, looking out over where normally a congregation would be seated. While holding his faith, this priest was holding faith in inter-faith.

In preparation for this tour that I have just mentioned, I telephoned the Venerable monk to ask about a visit to his Temple for this same group of people from asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds. I also asked whether his community could provide a special Sri Lankan morning tea. His comment was: *"It is good to be expanding and opening up services being offered. I will get some people from the community to prepare morning tea and be there to make them feel welcome!"* Another example of holding the faith.

(iii) KEEPING THE FAITH: at the Hindu Temple I recently attended the Deepavali "Festival of Lights" (there's that theme of light again). The new Deputy Mayor of Frankston was invited to offer some words. He told the story of his wife being diagnosed a few years earlier with two types of cancer. At that time he happened to be at the Hindu Temple. He spoke with the Temple priest about his wife's sickness and the priest prayed for his wife. Some years have since gone by but the Deputy Mayor was now back at the temple to offer a few words for the Deepavali Festival. In the context of this festival which you would know celebrates good over evil, light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance and hope over despair, the Deputy Mayor shared movingly with all present that his wife no longer had either cancer.

All manner of explanation could be offered about this but what struck me was the fact that a man, whom I would think is not perceptively Hindu by faith, shared with a person of another faith, his deep concern. That concern was respected and held in faith and from a sacred place in the Hindu tradition, support via prayer was given. I admired the **insight** of this man sharing his personal story, and in so doing he illustrated the common connectedness that is found in community. When telling some friends from the Hindu tradition this story they quoted an ancient Hindu text which says: "One Universe/World; One Family". An ongoing holding the faith in inter-faith.

It was also that same evening that the news was slowly emerging about Paris. The Minister for Multicultural Affairs also offered some words at the Deepavali Festival. He reminded everyone present that in the context of this news and the religious festival celebrating light over darkness, that this was a struggle of the human heart for peace and understanding. I again reflected on my **appreciation** and **gratitude** for the bi-partisan government support given that enables us all to keep the faith in inter-faith

While all these stories are illustrative of 'being faithful', 'holding [onto] the faith' or keeping faith . . . in inter-faith, they do not create world breaking news. Except for the people in the stories themselves – and that counts!

Keeping the faith in inter-faith, even if the world moves in the opposite direction is still meaningful: (i) for the person being faith FULL and is that much the better for it and (ii) for the ripple effect of compassion and love that has unforeseen positive consequences in the future in an ever-widening circle of goodness. Martin Luther King (Jr.) gave the '*I have a dream*' speech, not the '*I have a plan*'. Envisioning a future of keeping the faith in inter-faith from one's own tradition brings hope.

The Christian tradition talks about "some sowing and others reaping" – but there is the need to be faith FULL in the sowing. Keeping the faith in inter-faith means working together from all our traditions to challenge those whose narrow and often ignorant view of other faiths and spiritual traditions lead to hatred and division and violence.

Sometimes out of sheer helplessness, horror and deep anguish we desperately want to do more, and we sometimes can, if that is appropriate. But often the reality of living one's faith in today's Australian Society is just that of "keeping the faith": in inter-faith, in each other, in community in working together on the issues that concern us all - reconciliation, family violence, asylum seekers & refugees, the fears people have of anyone or anything that is different to them.

Someone has said: "*Lighthouses don't go running all over an island looking for boats to save, they just stand there shining.*" [Anne Lamott]. We are called by something that transcends us all and is beyond us all to be faith FULL, to connect with the essence of who we are, what we love, what has broken our heart open and what gives strength. This is **the reality of living ones faith in today's Australian Society.**

Thank you
Helen Heath OAM
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