

Council of Christians and Jews Western Australia Annual General Meeting

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Building Bridges in a Polarised World: Interfaith Dialogue in Schools

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I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of this ancient land, the Wadjak Noongar people and I pay my respects to their elders past and present and I extend that respect to any First Nations Peoples with us this afternoon.

In 1942, on March the 20th, nearly seventy three years ago, in the midst of the Second World War and during the unspeakable atrocities of the Shoah, which to date is the darkest period of antisemitism the world has ever seen, Anglican Archbishop William Temple and Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz came together in Britain to light a candle for hope.

Archbishop Temple argued that Christians had to take a stand against the despicable antisemitism plaguing the European continent and together with Chief Rabbi Hertz, they formed the first International interfaith organisation in Britain, the Council of Christians and Jews.

The aims of the council were in summary: to check and combat religious and racial intolerance. To promote mutual understanding and fellowship between Christians and Jews and to foster cooperation between the two faith traditions.

Inspired by this historic moment in Britain, Christians and Jews tried in 1943 to form a similar organisation here in Australia. However, due to divisions and mistrust, it took until 1985 when the first State Branch of the Council of Christians and Jews was formally established in Melbourne and on the 17th of December 1991 the Australian Council of Christians and Jews was formed and in 1995 the Council of Christians and Jews was formed here in Western Australia.

Since the dark days of the Shoah and in particular since the Second Vatican Council opened up the Catholic Church to Interfaith Dialogue, we Christians and Jews have – thanks be to God - moved closer and closer together.

We Christians have much to repent for given our religions' historic bias against Judaism, which includes thousands of years of persecutions, pogroms, expulsions, hatred, killings and prejudice. There is much intergenerational pain that needs to be healed, and much mistrust that needs to be mended.

Given this long history of antisemitism justified and perpetrated by Christians, it seems even more extraordinary that Archbishop Temple and Chief Rabbi Hertz were able to find common ground in the midst of the darkest of times, and against all odds, form one of the world's oldest continuing interfaith organisations which has ever since helped combat prejudice, hatred, fear and intolerance.

Since the Council of Christians and Jews was formed in 1942, interfaith organisations have become common place around the world, particularly in Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where immigrants from all corners of the world have found a home and have had freedom to practise their religion and culture.

It takes courage to reach out to those who might have slightly or very different understandings of faith, culture and society, particularly when times are difficult. It is always safer and easier staying with those we feel similar to. Interfaith networks and organisations require commitment and fidelity in order to endure – and endure they must - for they are essential to building social cohesion; and according to the Bible it is paramount on us to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, love our neighbour and make room in our hearts for all people so that together we can live in Shalom, Salaam, peace, which is God's dream for all of us.

But it takes courage to build bridges in a polarised world where walls and fences are quickly erected and friendships and connections easily broken.

Shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attack on The World Trade Centre in New York, Jewish and Christian and other religious leaders across the world reached out to fellow Islamic leaders to offer solidarity and extend a hand of friendship in a time of rising Islamophobia and much fear in Muslim communities.

In Melbourne, which is one of the world's most multicultural cities per capita, a friend of mine, a Christian, got together with a Rabbi and an Imam. Convinced of the urgent need for young people from the three Abrahamic faiths to get together and dialogue with one another, they formed the Youth Interfaith Programme called *Building Bridges*.

It started with one region with Jewish, Christian, and Muslim schools, but quickly it grew to involve many schools and over 300 hundred students participating every year in separate regions.

The Programme involved getting young people together for five nights and one day to talk and eat together, to share together and laugh together, and to educate each other about their faith and culture and to become friends. One full day was spent together, and I had the privilege of leading many of these 'retreat' or 'reflection' days where we walked with and learned from a local First Nations Person connecting us to country which we all share and are called to care for. We practised meditation together, did lots of drama games, we went to the Islamic Museum and the Immigration Museum together and we talked a lot

about each other's traditions as well as, of course, eat together. Those days were some of my favourite days ever as an educator.

At the conclusion of each year, the programme ended with an evening of celebration where all the students got together and celebrated their new friendships and what they had learned.

I was personally involved with the *Building Bridges* program for 10 years. I remember so many wonderful stories from late and cold Melbourne winter nights driving my group of students' home and hearing from them how much they had learned and how much they loved being part of the programme.

I remember in particular on one night, when the school captain of a Muslim School in the north of Melbourne, himself a refugee from Syria, got up at the height of the Syrian uprising and spoke to Jews, Christians, Muslims, atheist and agnostics, about the need for love, compassion and dialogue – one could have heard a pin drop and I stayed connected with that extraordinary young man for years after that.

And I remember seeing the children of Abraham and Sara sitting together side by side in a Synagogue witnessing the Torah being unrolled while students chanted in Hebrew.

And I will never forget when our programme nearly collapsed due to the war in Gaza in 2014, and despite parents from both Jewish and Muslim faiths trying to keep their children at home, the youth insisted on attending, and we prayed for peace together in the Mosque.

Having started and led an Interfaith Network and having been on the Board of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim Network and having been involved in many interfaith initiatives nationally and internationally, I count the *Building Bridges* program to be the most powerful and life-changing program I have ever seen.

I am not alone in having this view.

When it came to choosing a host city for the Parliament of the World's Religions in 2009, Melbourne was chosen because of its strong interfaith grassroots organisations, not least its successful *Building Bridges* program which focussed entirely on teenagers.

In an age of polarisation, fear of the other, war, conflict and prejudice, the world needs more than ever visionary and courageous leaders who will chart a path of peacebuilding and hope which includes building social and religious harmony across faiths and cultures.

The great Christian theologian, Hans Kung, once wrote that,

“There will be no peace among the people of this world without peace among the world religions”.

If this is true, which I believe it is, then it is paramount that Jews, Christians and Muslims – indeed all the world’s faith traditions and cultures - come together to seek common ground and learn from each other.

Jews, Christians *and* Muslims. We are all children of Abraham with belief in one God. We have so much in common and so much to learn from each other, yet tragically throughout history we have often fought each other and the fighting in some parts of the world continues.

The late and brilliant Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, wrote that,

“The greatest single antidote to violence is conversation, speaking our fears, listening to the fears of others, and in sharing of vulnerabilities discovering a genesis of hope”.

Or as one of my former students and graduate of the *Building Bridges* program said to hundreds of parents and young people from the three Abrahamic Faiths at the Celebration Evening:

“It is absolutely essential that we grow together and learn to coexist with each other in understanding, so that we are then able to build a world that seeks harmony, rather than fear”.

Today in 2025, sadly, the interfaith cooperation and harmony which we have enjoyed for decades here in Australia, and which previous generations helped forge, often during the periods of conflict, is under great strain once again.

Since Hamas’ brutal attack on October 7 in 2023 and the subsequent war in Gaza, antisemitism has reached new and dangerous heights, both here in Australia and in many other countries.

Before Oct 7 antisemitism had already been on the rise, especially in Europe. Many European Jews wrote before 2023 about the dangers of living in France, for example. And in Melbourne, where I lived for 20 years, many young people told stories of being accosted and ridiculed for their faith and culture on public transport.

But sadly, since Oct 7 in 2023 antisemitism has only intensified, and we have seen many despicable attacks on Jews and Jewish owned buildings across the country. That things have got this bad, is extremely worrying, to say the least.

A few months after October 7, in January 2024, the highly respected Danish Journalist, Martin Krasnik, himself a Jew and a fierce critique of the Netanyahu government, published an excellent and haunting book called,

A Narrow Bridge Over The Abyss: 7 October, Jews, Palestinians, The War, The hope

In the book he foresaw what was to come in the West as the war unfolded in Gaza and the subsequent intensification of antisemitism that followed.

Krasnik finished the book with a paragraph and a question that has stayed with me since.

He wrote:

In a few years will there even be Jewish people in Denmark who actively and openly are practising their faith and culture?

If the present situation [of antisemitism] continues as it is today, a section of Jewish people will be Jewish in hiding, while many others will give up and travel to Israel. And the history will have repeated itself.

I think it is deeply critical. What shall we do about it, I don't know. What do you think?

Sadly, Krasnik foresaw exactly what has occurred in Europe but also here in Australia, even though we are far removed from the Middle East.

With the war raging in Gaza, albeit with a much needed and prayed for, but very fragile, cease fire at present and with many hostages still remaining in capture, the conflict has spilled over and into Europe, America and Australasia.

History is repeating itself again as Krasnik wrote. With the rise and intensification of antisemitic attacks in Australia, Jewish people are rightly wondering, not just in Denmark, but also in Australia, if it is safe to practise their faith and culture openly and indeed if it is safe to stay in the country.

It is so sad that in age of globalisation, following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent economic upturn for many Western nations in the 1990s and the hope of people growing closer together, that the movement towards nationalism and protectionism is rising across the world. The dream of global cohesion is perhaps withering away.

When people are afraid, and when times are tough economically and with wars raging in some parts of the world, it is understandable that people tend to retreat to their own safe spaces, their own tribes, their own nations, their own families, their own cultures and indeed their own faith traditions.

When times are tough and grief, pain and hatred is rife, bridge building between cultures and faiths, while even more urgent, becomes all the harder to maintain.

Sadly, apart from here in WA, all Parliamentary Iftar Dinners to celebrate the Ramadan, for example, were cancelled across Australia last year. Many long established Interfaith Networks across our nation have collapsed or have been put on pause due to the Israel/Gaza conflict.

The *Building Bridges* program which also existed for a time here in Perth has tragically collapsed. It is important to note here that the program was already under threat before Oct 7, 2023, because many Muslim schools had pulled out of the program because openly LGBTQI+ students from both Jewish and Christian schools were participating. What was already fragile, quickly collapsed once the fighting began in Israel and Gaza. And it left many previous graduates of the programme very sad, as I have heard time and time again that the *Building Bridges* program was one of the best programs my students attended in their entire time in high school.

Having spent over 20 years in interfaith work and having so many friends from different religious traditions, this collapse of relationships and networks is desperately sad for me. Even our young people are not meeting any longer, and if that is the case where is the hope?

But we must not give up. Dark times call for even more visionary, courageous and hope-filled leadership in this space.

While we are in period of hiatus and hurt and while we are finding it difficult to speak with one another, we need people to lead us back together again.

Like Archbishop Temple and Chief Rabbi Hertz who reached out to each other in the darkest of times and forged a new interfaith network, which we are directly benefitting from today, we also must take courage and reach out to each other and learn from each other and listen to each other and seek to find common ground.

I take heart from Archbishop Temple and Hertz's work in the 1940s.

Just as I take heart from the hundreds of interfaith networks that were built across our nation in the latter part of last century and in the first part of this century.

I take heart in the many Interfaith organisations and networks across the world which continue to defy the trends and keep seeking to build peace rather than walls.

I take heart from the Rabbi, Priest and Iman who formed *Building Bridges* in Melbourne in the early 2000s.

I take heart that in my lived memory, despite living through difficult international conflicts, we managed to maintain the *Building Bridges* program by insisting that political discussions and ideas were not welcome in the small group sharing. We had strict rules which helped shield the fragile relationships from being absorbed into global conflict and hurt.

A number of our graduates went from high school to take part in what was known as *Interfaith Youth Core* at University, and some of them returned to our program for teenagers to work as paid facilitators of the discussion groups. I know that these experiences of intercultural and interfaith sharing and friendship have shaped these

young people, and I have no doubt that they will not forget what they have learned, even when times are tough as they are now.

So, in answer to Martin Krasnik's question whether Jewish people will have to hide their Jewish identity or emigrate to Israel, I will say, I sincerely hope not.

We must do everything in our power to prevent this from happening. For everyone in our society has the right to feel safe and be respected.

It begins with us. While times are difficult at present, and trust between some faith groups are at a low point, together we can reach out to one another and extend hands of friendship, not just between Jewish and Christians but between all people of faith and goodwill.

We can, for example, resurrect the *Building Bridges* program both here in Perth and in Melbourne. It may look a little different in the future, but we must not give up on seeking to find a way to involve young people in lived interfaith experiences.

Next week I am meeting with Dr Julie Harris, the Principal of Carmel School and I will be discussing with her opportunities for interfaith dialogue in schools here in Perth.

Interfaith networks and relationships can be healed and re-formed.

As elders, leaders, visionaries and dreamers of a deep biblical shalom, of salaam, of peace between all people, it is incumbent upon us not to give up.

If anything, let's ring our friends from other faith traditions.

Let's reach out and invite each other for coffee and seek to support each other and thus build trust.

Let's not lose courage and hope.

If this organisation could be forged and built during the depth of the Shoah, then surely we, and those we inspire, can help build bridges and heal what is broken and seek to build cohesion rather than hatred, conversation rather than silence, and friendship rather than enmity.

Our society depends on the children of Abraham and Sara and indeed all faiths and cultural traditions living in peace.

It is not a choice. We simply must work together.

For as Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote,

"The greatest single antidote to violence is conversation, speaking our fears, listening to the fears of others, and in sharing of vulnerabilities discovering a genesis of hope".

May God bless you. May God's Shalom be with you all.

Amen.

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