



Report from

Synod Interfaith Relationships Committee



Iftar Dinner 2019

Report

Summary

The committee is functioning well, appreciative of the work of Rev. Heather Griffin and Rev. Garth Read. We will keep up with promoting interfaith understanding, as we believe it broadens our horizons, promotes respect and tolerance and challenges us to be better followers of Christ!

Members of the Committee attend different interfaith forums and events which enables the church to be visible in these spaces.

The Committee has valued the wisdom and expertise of Rev Garth Read, Rev Bryan Gilmour and Mrs Lesley Bryant who have retired from the Committee.

About our Committee

The Purpose of the Synod Interfaith Relationships Committee (SIRC), as defined in its Charter, is that it:

“assists and advises the Synod Standing Committee in fulfilling its commitment to encourage throughout the Queensland Synod of the Uniting Church an understanding of other religious faiths and to promote relationships with members of other religious faiths.”

The Committee meets every second month and we have members from the southern Presbyteries, but none, as yet, from the north.

At time of writing (6 August 2020), members of the Committee are:

Chairperson: David Baker, Moderator - Ex Officio (transitioning to Andrew Gunton)

Secretary: Heather Griffin (transitioning to Lyn Burden)

Other members:

John Agnew

Heather Allison

Lyn Burden

Philipa Core

Levon Kardashian

Several other members resigned during the year for either health reasons or other commitments. A special mention needs to be made of the long-term commitment of Rev Garth Read, both to this Committee and for many years before that to interfaith work in general. Garth was well ahead of his time, seeing the need for building positive relationships with people of other faiths, well before the events of 9/11 propelled many of us to engage in this sphere.

Rev Bryan Gilmour was the initial driving force behind the formation of the Multifaitth Advisory and Action Group on the Gold Coast and joined SIRC in that capacity.

Rev Heather Griffin has made a significant contribution as Secretary to the Committee, particularly in maintaining connections with many of the faith communities with which the Synod engages.

Focus since the last Synod

Since the 34th Synod, SIRC made the following recommendations to the Synod Standing Committee re appointments:

Queensland Faith Communities Council Qld Synod representatives:

Heather Griffin (also nominated for the Executive), Heather Allison, Fa Matangi

Queensland Forum for Jews, Christians and Muslims:

Sue Zaphir

SIRC's relationship with the Assembly of the UCA is through the Seeking Common Ground Circle, with Heather Griffin as a Panel member and other SIRC members being members joining the Circle.

The Committee has understood it is in a time of transition. We have therefore seen it as very important that longer term and newer members spend time considering and reviewing SIRC's purpose and responsibilities as outlined in its Charter.

On 2 June 2019, during Ramadan, the Synod partnered with the Islamic Council of Queensland (ICQ) to host a "Friends in Faith Iftar Dinner" at the Uniting Church Centre. Equal representation from those of Islamic faith and members of the Uniting Church ensured lively conversations and deepening friendships. Part of the purpose of these gatherings has been to inspire other congregations to host dinners also, this is achieving success gradually. During Ramadan in 2019 two additional Iftar dinners were held in locations other than the Synod office, one at Grace College (UQ) and the other at Wesley House sponsored by Wesley Mission Queensland. The opportunity to share stories over the sharing of food is an excellent way to break down barriers and hear about other people's life experiences and beliefs. Unfortunately, in 2020 these dinners had to be cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions. Some member of the committee also attended the Queensland Police Multifaith Dinner.

An important connection for SIRC occurs as members engage with the Queensland Faith Communities Council, which was established in 2017, with the UCA as one of the fifteen founding faith communities. The establishment of the Council recognizes the diversity of religious and faith beliefs and traditions in the state of Queensland and it seeks to advance interfaith understanding and collaboration. It does this through gathering people, usually over a meal, to provide opportunities for participants to converse together and so develop respect for the diversities and shared values across the different faiths. As well as meetings and dinners, one of the key activities of QFCC is developing a faith food guide to assist communities hosting inter faith dinners.

Networking with like-minded organizations and supporting their activities are very important. At meetings, in addition to reports concerning the above organizations, SIRC receives verbal reports from members who are involved in:

Multi Faiths Religious Instruction Peak Body Network
North Brisbane Interfaith Group
Multifaith Advisory and Action group (Gold Coast)
Toowoomba Interfaith Group
Believing Women for a Culture of Peace
Together for Humanity

Members have promoted and attended multi-faith prayer meetings for Bushfire victims, Peace Conferences in Toowoomba, Together for Humanity Workshop, On G-D many voices concert, in addition to working with certain people of different faith backgrounds in seeking refugee status.

The Moderator, Rev David Baker, has been very active in the interfaith space throughout his term. On 30 July 2020, the Moderator, in conjunction with heads of other Churches and with the President of the Islamic Council of Queensland, Habib Jamal, made a *Joint statement by religious leaders regarding Kangaroo Point asylum seekers*, calling on the Australian Government to *ensure that its contractors give due regard to the human rights and basic needs of the men at Kangaroo Point*.

Rev Baker was instrumental in establishing a Religious Instruction Peak Body liaising with the State Government to bring a united faith communities' Religious Instruction perspective in Schools.

The Moderator has also joined with the Qld Human Rights Commission and representatives of community organizations calling for a review of vilification and hate speech laws in Qld.

As a Committee we are very grateful for the pro-active leadership of the Moderator during his term as Chair of the Committee.

Highlights:

At SIRC meetings there has been much interest in *encouraging throughout the Synod an understanding of other faiths and promoting relationships with people of other faiths*.

There has been much discussion about visiting Presbyteries to share the material presented at a lunchtime session at the last Synod. As Presbyteries have been meeting online it has not been possible to pursue this plan, but the Committee plans to find opportunities in the future.

The Committee has also discussed the possibility of working with Trinity Theological College to develop a series of workshops which would engage students with the beliefs, rituals and practices of other faiths. The Committee believes that assisting ministers early in their ministry to understand how to make inter faith connections within their communities, will assist congregations in engaging with people of other faiths.

The promotion by SIRC of a course offered via Zoom by Southside Uniting Church on the history of religions in Brisbane drew two extra participants. It is hoped that these may become a 'prototype' to offer to other groups.

Levan Kardashian has been working on updating the SIRC website. The resource presented at the 34th Synod is available for congregations to use locally.

Rev Heather Allison is working with the Education Subcommittee of the Qld Faith Communities Council in creating resources to guide health care and aged care workers to provide appropriate and helpful care for people of different faiths, especially at the end of life.

In general, it would appear that the focus for many congregations and agencies is, particularly in this extraordinary time, elsewhere.

Project Plenty

SIRC, through the work it undertakes, aligns with Mission Priority 2 (p16 Project Plenty | Shared life. Flourishing communities) and we look forward to be a partner in meeting existing and emerging needs and building upon the strengths of the complex and multifaith communities and world in which we live.

Challenges/risks as we progress

Our main challenge is finding the opportunities for people in the life of our church to see the value in quality inter-faith engagement. As a Synod we need to keep addressing the challenges of the world becoming more religious, not less. Quality inter-faith relations build respect and understanding in our communities. Being engaged with people of other faiths broadens our perspective on the life of the world and encourages us to be more deeply Christian.

For consideration

The SIRC wishes the Synod to record an appreciation of Rev Garth Read for his contribution to interfaith work, which has included making the Synod aware of the issues involved in working with and understanding people of other faiths. He has been a member of SIRC since its formation (2008), and previously was a member of the Synod Ecumenical Committee, helping that Committee to see the difference between ecumenical and interfaith.

Proposals to the 35th Synod

It is proposed that the 35th Synod receive this report



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