

Response Strategies in Times of Crisis – the Role of Faith Communities and the Victorian Government

The recent attacks in Christchurch against the Muslim community prompts the need to consider strategies of how faith and spiritual communities, together with the Victorian Government, can respond in a timely, coordinated and effective manner in times of crisis. This document proposes for consideration the following:

An **Immediate Response Strategy**: a set of coordinated responses which are enacted immediately when a crisis occurs.

A **Positive Awareness Strategy**: medium and longer-term creative initiatives promoting an agenda of peace and unity in Victoria.

A **Relationship Building Strategy**: a longer-term strategy in the continual investment in relationships of understanding and trust between the faith communities and between the faith and non-faith communities.

These are detailed in what follows.

Immediate Response Strategy

Vision: A coordinated response by faith communities to offer places of sanctuary for all in times of crisis.

This is an opportunity to demonstrate real unity as well as what faith communities can offer all members of society in times of crisis. This *Immediate Response Strategy* would involve:

- 1) Specific places of worship to open their doors to members of the public at particular times to offer places of peace, healing, quiet reflection, perhaps lighting of candles, or writing messages of peace, for instance, as necessary and as relevant. These specific times would be open to all members of the community *from any faith or non-faith denomination* with the aim of providing welcoming spaces of sanctuary, spiritual care and comfort. Any prayer, service, reflection or activity offered at this time would be respectful of the different backgrounds of those attending.
- 2) A central website set up by the Victorian government to provide links to central points of contacts of established places of worship (such as their Facebook or website) – which would provide the necessary information regarding which temples/churches/places of worship would be open, with relevant details and description of the offering. It would be the responsibility of the faith communities to post this information promptly on their central website – which would be referred to on the central Victorian webpage.
- 3) This central website would also advertise any vigils that are occurring.
- 4) A common brand or look to be developed to be used in signage across all faiths – to be used on poster boards on streets inviting any member of the public into respective places of worship and sanctuary.

Positive Awareness Strategy

Vision: That the City be filled with clear and apparent positive messaging of Peace and Unity.

What we fill our minds with has a very powerful effect on our attitude, words and actions. In a world of information over-load and decreasing attention spans, it becomes more important to influence the environment with a variety of initiatives that strengthen well-being of the mind and promote peace, love, happiness and a connected, caring community.

This *Positive Awareness Strategy* would involve:

- 1) Targeted positive messages on peace and unity throughout the city – via short video clips, dynamic images, static images and messaging on trams and tram stops, Fed Square on the hour 1-minute reflections, acts of kindness reminders etc.¹
- 2) Creative street art messaging including wall art in popular public spaces.
- 3) Galleries exhibiting images and voices (quotes) of the peace-makers past and present – places of inspiration and learning for schools and the general public to visit. This would be open for visits from every school in Victoria and part of it changing every 6 months if possible. It should also be creative enough to engage children’s artwork as well – so that they are part of creating and holding a vision of peace and unity going forward.

Relationship Building Strategy

Vision: That the faith communities develop long-term relationships as one large community/family.

The faith communities in Victoria could set an example of one community, one family, for the world. Already, the relationships are very good in Victoria and so this emphasis on relationship-building would continue. More formally, the *Relationship Building Strategy* would involve:

- 1) The continuation of grassroots events already happening – and support by the Victorian Government for these if necessary – that bring faith communities together in joint initiatives for the wellbeing of all and which promote peace and unity.
- 2) Public events such as dialogues to promote greater understanding in society of what’s common and what *unites* faiths.
- 3) The continuation of public events where faith and non-faith communities come together as one whether in vigils or meditation events.²
- 4) Spiritual Dialogue retreats in Melbourne bringing together faith leaders and meditators to deepen connections and understanding.

¹ Think of the ‘Let’s Fully Welcome Refugees’ poster at St Paul’s Cathedral and the positive impact it has on people’s minds and what the City of Melbourne represents.

² See, for instance, (i) the UN Peace Day events organized by Calm in the City at Federation Square – bringing together 21 meditators from faith and non-faith backgrounds for a collective meditation: *Wake Up for Peace* www.wakeupforpeace.org.au; (ii) the 2016 February event at St Paul’s Cathedral bringing together the Jewish, Christian and Muslim community in a special meditation; and (iii) the inclusive work of the Interfaith Centre of Melbourne (by Helen Summers).