In this resource, we describe the various activities of the Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations and explain why such initiatives are crucial in Australia’s current religious landscape.

This resource has been designed for the HSC Studies of Religion unit, Religious expression in Australia – 1945 to present.

Students learn about:
• Religious dialogue in multifaith Australia
  o Interfaith dialogue

Students learn to:
• Evaluate the importance of interfaith dialogue in multifaith Australia

What is interfaith dialogue?
Interfaith dialogue is a meeting of people of different religions in an environment of freedom and openness. It involves listening to the other and attempting to understand their views while offering your own. Dialogue cannot be confused with debate. While the purpose of a debate is to make the best argument in order to prove your point right, the purpose of dialogue is to explore both points of view with an attitude of respect.

The Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations

The Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations is part of the Columban Mission Institute - an organisation that makes an important contribution to interfaith dialogue in multifaith Australia. The Centre promotes positive interaction and collaboration between Christians, Muslims and members of other religions as a means of building harmony, respect and understanding.
Why is Interfaith Dialogue Necessary in Australia Today?

Australia’s religious, cultural and ethnic diversity is constantly increasing. While in 1911, 96% of Australians reported an affiliation with Christianity, this percentage decreased to 61% in the 2011 census.

Affiliation to non-Christian religions has dramatically increased in a short period of time, making Australia the pluralistic society it is today. Interfaith dialogue is a necessary step towards peace within our communities as it fosters respect and mutual understanding.

Wars, terrorist attacks and religious conflicts contribute to fear and hatred towards members of certain religions. Australia’s Muslim community, for example, was subject to suspicion and persecution in the years following the September 11 terrorist attacks. During these years, incorrect statements about Islam were disseminated through the media and offensive stereotypes were perpetuated. Interfaith dialogue provides a forum for these stereotypes to be broken down.

It is not until we meet a follower of another religion and take the time to listen to their views that we realise that most religions are fundamentally good. The Qur’an, the Bible and the Torah, for example, all teach the importance of the Golden Rule, that is, treating others as you would like to be treated. When our knowledge of other religions is based only on what we see in the media, this is a sure path to fear and conflict within our own communities.

In our increasingly secularised society, there has never been a more pertinent time for people of faith to come together to promote the values of community, justice and peace.

This realisation, made possible through interfaith dialogue, can lead to opportunities for people of faith to come together and address injustice within our society.
Multifaith Service Projects

In November 2013 the Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations worked with a team from the Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter Day Saints (more commonly known as Mormons) to organise a multifaith service project. Representatives from various religious backgrounds joined forces to put together food hampers for struggling farmers at Christmas time.

As part of the event, Fr Patrick McInerney, (Catholic Columban priest), Asma Yusra (Muslim) and Sarah Greenbaum (Jewish) offered reflections on the theme of service. Giving of one’s time and resources to help the less fortunate is something that is encouraged and promoted in most religious traditions. Events such as these highlight the common values that underpin diverse religious traditions.

Multifaith Dinner Discussions

In February 2014 the Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations hosted a dinner for young adults from different religions to explore questions raised in the book, ‘For God’s Sake: An Atheist, a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim Debate Religion’. Segments of the book were read and used as the impetus for discussion. Questions such as, ‘What is a good life’ ‘Where do you find hope?’ and ‘What role does God play in suffering?’ were discussed.

Comments made at the end of the night highlighted the importance of such events:

“All our religions teach the importance of community, the trouble with consumerism and the need to have hope in something beyond this world. In this day and age, it shouldn’t be Muslims vs. Jews or Catholics vs. Protestants - it should be people of faith vs. consumerism, greed and war.”

Abraham Conferences

For many years, the Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations has played a key role in facilitating the Abraham Conference, a forum where members of the three Abrahamic faiths - Christians, Muslims and Jews - come together to engage in healthy, fruitful discussion.

At each conference a keynote speaker representing one of the religions presents on the given theme, whether it be the importance of family or faith in the media. The keynote presentation is followed by a panel discussion where representatives from each of the religious traditions offer their thoughts and views on the topic.
Participation in other Interfaith Initiatives

As well as coordinating its own projects, the Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations supports and participates in the initiatives of other interfaith groups.

In April 2013 Ashleigh Green, staff member at the Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, participated in an interfaith trek through the Tasmanian wilderness. Coordinated by Muslims without Borders and funded by the NSW Community Relations Commission, the purpose of the trek was to bring together twelve community-minded young adults from six different religions. The group consisted of two Catholics, five Muslims, two Jews, one Mormon, one Buddhist, and one Hindu.

What followed from the four-day trek was a realisation that although we are different we face similar hopes, fears and challenges. When we step outside our comfort zones, the essence of our humanity is revealed, and at this point we can truly unite.

When the trek ended and everyone went their separate ways, several members of the group were inspired to run interfaith events, panels and discussion groups in their own communities.
Activities

1. In groups of three or four, devise a hypothetical interfaith event that brings together members of two or more religions.

   • What would your interfaith event involve? A mini-bus tour of sacred religious sites? Time spent volunteering at a soup kitchen? A high tea?
   • What would you hope to achieve through this event?
   • What message would you want your guests to leave with?

2. In small groups discuss the following question: with reference to the examples given in this resource, evaluate the importance of interfaith dialogue in multifaith Australia.