



Youth Celebrate Religious Diversity

By Ashleigh Green

Youth delegates during discussions

More than 400 young Australians representing diverse religious and cultural backgrounds assembled for the inaugural Youth Parliament of World's Religions (Youth PoWR) on 17th September. *Youth PoWR* is an initiative of the *Columban Mission Institute* and this year's event was coordinated by a passionate, enthusiastic team of young people representing different religious communities across Sydney.

The event at the Sydney Baha'i Centre featured speakers from the Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Baha'i, Buddhist, Sikh and Hindu communities who addressed a Message to Youth and a Message to Religious and Civic Leaders. While the Message to Youth urged other young people in society to join in the interfaith journey and to encourage their friends to do the same, the Message to Religious and Civic Leaders thanked our leaders for their leadership and asked that they open up for us those texts in our respective scriptures that illuminate and inspire positive interfaith relations.

Ms Sahba Clara Delshad from the Baha'i community addressed the Message to Youth, "Youth are needed as leaders and decision-makers not only in youth conferences, committees and panels but in those spaces where the course and direction of society as a whole is determined." She encouraged her peers to take leadership and play their part in building a vibrant, inclusive, multi-faith society.

After the speakers addressed the parliament, 400+ young people voted in support of the messages, which will now be circulated and shared with religious leaders, civic leaders and youth organisations in NSW.

The youth were given the opportunity to make their own commitments to interfaith dialogue. Some committed to visiting another's place of worship, others expressed interest in starting a multi-faith association at their universities, while others simply committed to embracing each other with hands of true friendship. The civic and religious leaders present on the night also made their own commitments "to engage in interfaith dialogue with compassion, to challenge prejudices and to uphold good character even when we disagree with each other."



MCs Ashleigh Green (left) and Glen Falkenstein (right) with Ms Dai Le, Multicultural NSW, who offered a vote of thanks.



Polynesian Cultural Performers

The programme was brought alive by engaging performances from Aboriginal students at St Joseph’s Hunters Hills, Spoken Word poet Ahmad Al-Rady and a Polynesian performance group.

The process of preparing for Youth PoWR was a transformative experience for all those involved. Satjit Singh from the Sikh community said that working with individuals from diverse backgrounds, opinions and beliefs revealed how much they have in common, “I am proud to call these people my friends. Youth PoWR is a perfect example of how we can achieve peace, harmony, unity and happiness for our communities.” It is hoped that Youth PoWR becomes an annual event that continues to give youth a voice in

shaping our multi-religious society. Youth PoWR visionary Rev Dr Patrick McInerney believes that Youth PoWR is greatly needed in Sydney in 2015, “Ours is a multi-faith society. Harmony can only be achieved by reaching out to the “other” and getting to know them as my sister and my brother.”

See video of *Youth PoWR 2015*:
<http://goo.gl/OqIHxI>

Spoken Word poet Ahmad Al-Rady



Youth during discussions





Message to Civic and Religious Leaders

From the inaugural session of Youth PoWR
 Sydney Baha'i Centre,
 107 Derby Street, Silverwater
 17 September 2015

We, young people from diverse religions across Sydney, gathered here for the inaugural session of Youth PoWR (Parliament of the World's Religions) address the following message to our religious and civic leaders.

It is said that we walk into the future looking backwards. As a young and diverse community, we wish to acknowledge those who have travelled this path before us; as civic and religious leaders, you have continued to build a diverse society of which we are all a part. To our religious leaders, thank you for forming us in our respective religious traditions. To our civic leaders, thank you for providing us with the resources and infrastructure that encourages our multi-faith society to flourish.

The 2011 Census of the Australian population recorded over 120 different religious denominations each with 250 or more followers. The reality of living in a multi-faith society is that we must continue to welcome people of all faiths and people of no faith in a way which not only draws on the strengths of our differences, but also draws us closer together by virtue of our common humanity.

Although the doctrinal teachings of the major world religions differ, the ethical, social and moral teachings largely agree. The fundamental spiritual teachings of most religions have at their core the same notion that human beings are created noble and have the capability to establish unity, love and fellowship with each other. In the sacred texts of the major world religions, common values such as *The Golden Rule* – treat others as you would like to be treated – can be found. To our religious leaders, we ask you to promote interreligious dialogue so that it becomes a mainstream concern of all our congregations. We ask you to open up for us those texts in our respective scriptures that illuminate and inspire positive interfaith relations. We ask you to highlight those teachings in our respective faith traditions that promote positive attitudes towards people of other religions, so that we can emulate and improve on those times and places in history when our ancestors enjoyed cooperative interfaith relations.



We acknowledge that as humans, we naturally surround ourselves with people who are similar to us. However, when we become preoccupied with our immediate communities - that we fail to look beyond - it is easy to start vilifying the “other”. As our religious and civic leaders, we ask that you provide us with a living example of what it looks like to step outside our comfort zones, to embrace the other and to live in solidarity with people outside our immediate communities. To our religious leaders, we ask you to challenge exclusivist interpretations of our religions that separate us from others and to provide inclusive approaches that create a harmonious, multi-faith society. To our civic leaders, we ask you to provide appropriate facilities and protections that ensure all Australians can live their faiths freely with dignity and without vilification.

As leaders, you are in the best position to inspire us into creating a grass roots movement that will build a peaceful, just and fair society. We ask that you engage with each other and society at large in order to build a united front through dialogue. We ask that you support freedom of speech along with emphasising the respect commanded by revered fundamentals of every religion. We need more opportunities and resources for interfaith communication that are aimed towards promoting peace and friendship within our society. We need your collaboration with individual communities to strengthen their interests in pursuing a common agenda. We ask that your cooperation and commitment is ongoing, as it is only

with perseverance in working towards this common goal that together we will bridge the gaps between our communities.

“We assure you of our support and cooperation in building a vibrant, multi-faith society that embraces diversity”



Fr Brian Vale and Fr Patrick McInerney (from left) with invited guests Sr Elizabeth Delaney sgs and Rev Dr Gerard Kelly at Youth PoWR.



Youth PoWR organising committee at the event



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Meeting and engaging with people of other religions is a transformative and enriching experience. We, as members of *Youth PoWR*, testify to the way that interfaith dialogue breaks down barriers and stereotypes that have been years in the making. These exchanges have expanded our hearts and minds and, far from our respective faiths being diminished or put at risk, our spirituality has deepened.

We encourage you as our peers in society who are living in a multi-faith, multi-cultural society, to join in the interfaith journey. Make it your own. Show initiative. Encourage your friends to do the same. We are living in a time and place where breaking down barriers between people of different religions is crucial if we are to have a peaceful society to call home in the future. Mutual respect is fundamental for any relationship to flourish, especially among people who profess religious belief. In expressing this respect, sincere and lasting friendship can grow. United we stand! Let's pave the way for a vibrant, respectful,

inclusive society in Sydney in 2015 and beyond. After sharing and refining various ideas about how best to practice and promote embracing diversity among and between the members of different religions, we made the following commitments:

- We will use active listening to have meaningful conversations with people from other faith traditions in order to develop mutual understanding and to discover and build on commonalities. We will acknowledge and respect differences as offering enrichment and colour to society.



Youth delegates at the event



- We will learn about others' beliefs and traditions, seeking knowledge from reliable sources, especially from well-informed and truly representative members of those communities, rather than relying on media stereotypes.
- We will visit each other's places of worship to gain greater insight into and appreciation of the sacred spaces, spirituality, beliefs, practices and values of each other's religions.
- We will support and participate in interfaith and multi-faith events such as Youth PoWR and Harmony Day that unite people from diverse traditions.
- We will play our part in eradicating all forms of overt and covert prejudice about particular cultures and religions.
- We will stand up against all forms of negative discrimination whenever and wherever we see or hear it at home, work, school, sporting fields or on social media.
- We will go out of our comfort zones and engage in community-building activities, starting at the grass roots, especially among youth in our local neighbourhoods.
- We will unite in together performing works of mercy in the community, for example, visiting the sick and feeding the homeless, in order to spread in deeds, not just words the message of care and compassion that is common to all our traditions
- We will look for opportunities to create multi-faith groups and societies that practice and promote interfaith relations, particularly at our universities.
- We will acknowledge each other's feast days by learning their meaning and sending greetings.
- We commit to loving all people with an open mind and an open heart, regardless of religious and cultural background, because love sees no barriers.

We invite you to make similar commitments, using or adapting these or coming up with your own, to promote interfaith relations and be part of creating a vibrant, respectful, inclusive multi-faith society.