Faith-Friendly Communities
contributing to the development of faith-friendly communities in Australia

Responses to an awakening of religious difference

Triggered by various international and more local events at the beginning of this millennium, there have been numerous conferences, meetings, seminars and projects aimed at developing greater inter-faith understanding and mutual respect within the Australian community. In particular, the need for such gatherings was provoked by the attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in the USA ('September 11'), the 'Bali Bombings' in Indonesia and, closer to home, the 'Cronulla Riots' in Sydney. At the same time, refugees from various ethnic and religious backgrounds who have fled to Australia, have also awakened the Australian public to the importance of faith and their need for understanding and acceptance, particularly as their stories of resilience have become known.

Many of us who have organised or participated in such gatherings are beginning to seek a way forward beyond *talk* to mutual, cooperative *action*, to move beyond the immediate awakening created by these events, toward mutual understanding and respect for each other in the warp and woof of everyday life. The arena for inter-faith understanding therefore must be enlarged beyond the meeting halls to the everyday.

Normalising appreciative inter-faith understanding

The coining of the phrase "faith friendly" and the recognition that faith may be a bonus in the workplace has come from work done in the USA by David Miller, who at that time was Executive Director of Yale's *Center for Faith and Culture*. http://www.yale.edu/faith/index.htm

The faith-friendly concept is spelt out in this statement reported on *CNN Money*:

> "I don't think it's appropriate for a public traded company to be faith-based because you are then privileging one religion over another," he says. "In contrast, a faith-friendly company tries to accommodate on an even playing field the spiritual dimension of people."
> Ford Motor Company is a prominent example. The Ford Interfaith Network (FIN), formed in 2000, encompasses organized groups of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu employees. FIN says its mission is "to help management to increase and maintain religious diversity, attract, develop, and retain talented employees of faith, and be more aware of religious consumers' and investors' needs." Ford's interfaith group brings in speakers, organizes ecumenical events and supports the practices of each religion. For example, the group provides lists of religious holidays of many faiths for company calendars so executives can be sensitive to scheduling issues. It also has advised senior managers on touchy issues, such as whether to donate to charities with religious roots. "A company that is faith-friendly gives people permission to draw on the ethical traditions of their faith," Miller says. "The great religions have teachings on truth telling, and treating your neighbor the way you want to be treated, and being ethical."
> http://money.cnn.com/2007/01/16/news/companies/faithfriendly_companies.fortune/?postversion=2007011707

We believe that the benefits of this 'faith-friendly' approach may be generalised to any community – to any workplace or educational community, for example. And so we have proposed a set of principles any community may adopt to foster 'faith-friendliness", allowing such communities to name themselves as a *faith-friendly*, whether that community be a faith friendly city, a faith friendly university, a faith friendly small business… These principles have been developed by a working group into "A Faith Friendly Charter".

Making transparent the processes which recognise the religious needs of community members

Anecdotally we know that a blind eye is often turned to employees who take 'sickies' to attend religious festivals and to other such forms of absenteeism, in the interest of maintaining harmony within the workforce. In more enlightened workplaces, the religious needs of workers are taken into account and accommodated at an individual level. We think that the process of an organization signing up to a *Faith-Friendly* Charter of agreed principles might create greater transparency and

reduce the possibility of suspicion and recrimination. It also provides an opportunity for the organisation to signal the valuing of the faith of its members and the positive values and ethics that arise from faith.

We know from enquiries of overseas students hoping to study in Australia that the fear that their religious needs will not be met, or that they will be unwelcome, are allayed by providing information and encouragement. So we believe the experience of members of minority religions, who may be applying to join the workforce or engaging with Australian organisations for the first time, will be much more positive if such organisations are able to *demonstrate* a positive attitude toward people of other ethnicity or faith. The capacity of an organisation to present itself as *Faith-Friendly* by having signed up to the Charter may facilitate this.

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