



# #realunitingchurch

Report from

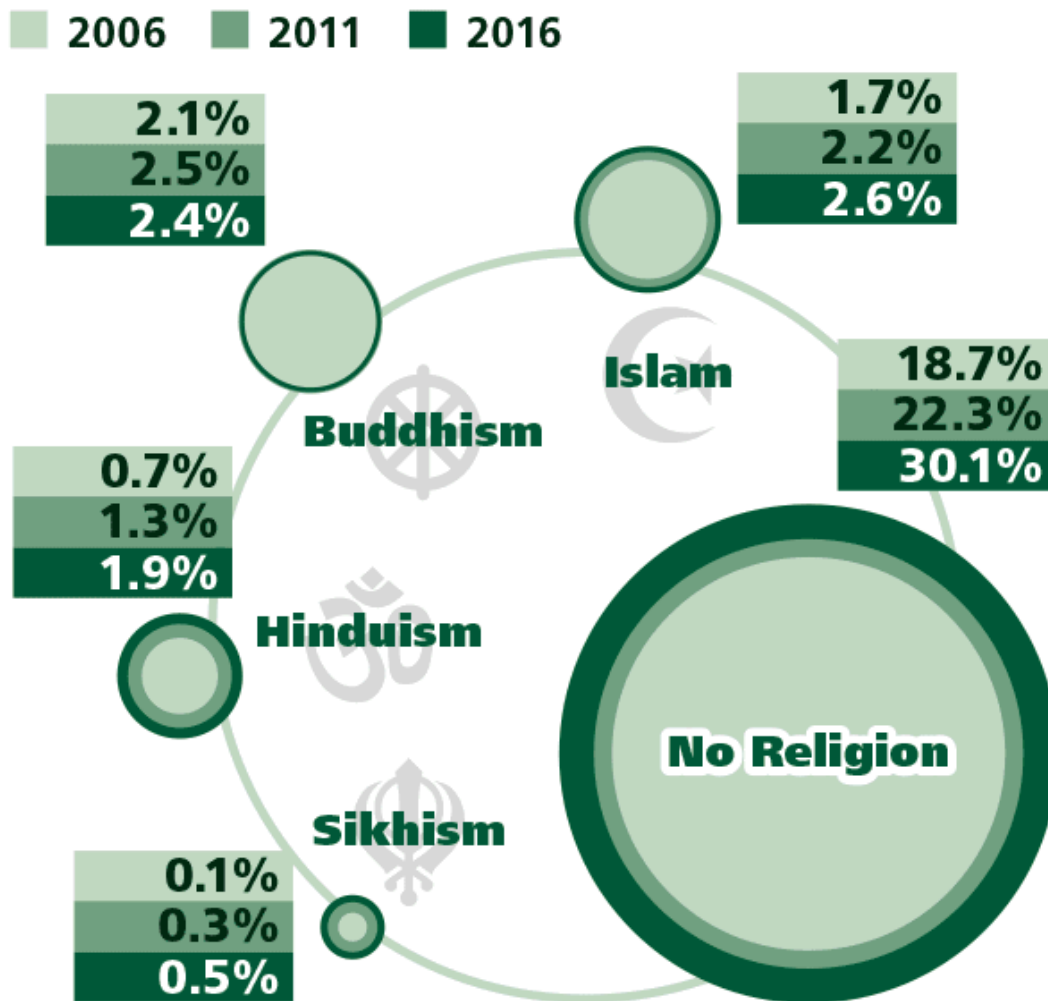
## Synod Interfaith Relationships Committee (SIRC)



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### Context

At this time Australia continues to experience increasing diversity both in the variety and numbers of those who identify with particular cultures and particular faiths.



A diagram showing such trends has been published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics<sup>1</sup>.

The percentages are as a proportion of the total population.

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2006, 2011, 2016.

Issues of social cohesion are becoming more and more important in what appears to be an increasingly fragmented world. Christians know our calling to “love our neighbour as ourselves” (Luke 10:27). We also know ourselves to be called to a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18) and peace-building (Matthew 5:9).

Within this theological understanding, the Synod IRC has been tasked with:

- a) encouraging throughout the Synod an understanding of other religious faiths, and
- b) promoting relationships with members of other religious faiths.

It is important that members of Synod understand that we are building relationships, creating friendships, not arguing points of belief. If anything, working in the interfaith space enables us to express our own firmly held Christian convictions with more clarity and greater love and respect for those who hold to other faith positions.

<sup>1</sup> 2071.0 Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia – Stories from the Census, 2016  
LATEST ISSUE Released at 11.30 am (CANBERRA TIME) 28/06/2017

Membership of the committee as at 3 August 2017:

**Chairperson:** David Baker, moderator – ex officio

**Secretary:** Heather Griffin (Presbytery of South Moreton)

**Other members:**

John Agnew (Presbytery of The Downs)

Neil Ballment (Presbytery of South Moreton)

Lesley Bryant (Presbytery of South Moreton)

Philippa Core (Presbytery of Central Queensland)

Bryan Gilmour (Presbytery of South Moreton)

Julie Mackay-Rankin (Presbytery of South Moreton)

Garth Read (Presbytery of Moreton Rivers)

Since the last Synod SIRC has focussed on:

- a) Assisting members of the Uniting Church to understand people of other faiths as neighbours and friends, as well as being able to articulate our own faith fully and succinctly as we share in faith conversations across religions.
- b) Working with people and organisations across the various faith traditions to come together in both formal and informal ways to discuss and act on values common to our traditions.

Major actions include:

1. Inviting Dave Andrews to speak at the 32nd Synod.
2. Holding a multi-faith event at Newlife Uniting Church, Robina.
3. Involvement with the development and launch of the Queensland Faith Communities Council.
4. Study Guide for the 2012 Assembly document “Friendship in the Presence of Difference”.
5. Assisting the Synod in holding a Uniting Church “Friends in Faith” Iftar Dinner.

## Priority Directions

SIRC has primarily advanced:

### Priority A

*Enabling a demonstrated commitment to the shared call and vision.*

Connects to: *Forming active and accountable disciples of Jesus confident in sharing faith.*

AND

### Priority E

*Engaging in opportunities for intentional, open community connections and partnerships.*

Connects to: *Working for Christian unity; Engaged in authentic community relationships; Reaching out and speaking out for justice and peace for all creation.*

We do this through working within the church to enable people to more readily and fully articulate their own faith and, at the same time, listen more intentionally as others share their faith stories with us.

In the course of our work we have, either formally or informally, connected with people from a number of other faith traditions in Toowoomba, Brisbane and the Gold Coast. Our desire is that this extends also to other parts of the state.

## Report

The committee met every second month. Meetings were held on 9 June 2016, 11 August 2016, 13 October 2016, 8 December 2016 (combined with the Synod Ecumenical Relationships Committee), 9 February 2017, April meeting cancelled due to extreme weather event, 9 June 2017, 11 August 2017.

In addition to business at hand, some meetings were used to discuss the presence of other faith traditions in our society and where possible, to invite a guest from that faith tradition.

We provide here a few more details of the major actions of SIRC since last Synod.

1. 21 May 2016: Dave Andrews was invited to speak at “Synod Unchained” on developing peaceful relationships between Christians and Muslims.
2. 11 October 2016: An event at Newlife Uniting Church, Robina in partnership with the Centre for Interfaith and Cultural Diversity at Griffith University and the Multifaith Advisory and Action Group on the Gold Coast. Speakers: Dr Arini Beaumaris (Baha’i Centre), Ashmore Imam Imraan Hussein North Gold Coast mosque, Rev Dona Spencer Southport Uniting Church. Rev David Baker moderated. About 90 people attended.
3. 2016–2017: The committee worked with the draft constitution for the recently launched Queensland Faith Communities Council and through the work of the Synod Standing Committee, the Queensland Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia became the first foundation member of the council. David Pitman, Lesley Bryant and Heather Griffin were appointed by the Synod Standing Committee as the three official Uniting Church representatives on this group.
4. 2016–2017: The committee worked with the Assembly Relations with Other Faiths Working Group to develop a study guide for the 2012 Assembly document “Friendship in the Presence of Difference”.
5. 18 June 2017: The Synod, at the behest of the Assembly, held a “Friends in Faith” Iftar dinner at the Uniting Church Centre at Auchenflower. Approximately 15 Muslim and 15 Uniting Church people attended. It is hoped that this event will provide a starting point for local congregations to engage and partner with local Muslim communities during Ramadan to provide similar hospitality.
6. Heather Griffin is the nominated representative to the Assembly Relations with Other Faiths Working Group.

In addition, members were involved in a variety of other ways.

The moderator, on behalf of the Queensland Synod, has made official statements in response to offensive behaviour towards people of other faiths, has attended a gathering at the Holland Park Mosque to show solidarity with those of the Muslim faith in the wake of tragic deaths at a mosque in Canada, has participated in a Christian-Muslim group which resulted from the approach by the Queensland Heads of Churches to the Islamic Council of Queensland and has experienced, first-hand, how interfaith is “done” in India.

Other members have been heavily involved in the following aspects of interfaith interaction and friendship:

- Interfaith dimensions of hospital chaplaincy
- North Brisbane Interfaith Group
- Toowoomba Interfaith Group
- Multifaith Advisory and Action Group (Gold Coast)
- Compassionate Cities Project (Gold Coast)
- Believing Women for a Culture of Peace (Brisbane)
- The Chai Women's Group (Gold Coast)
- Interfaith Peace Conference and visit of UNESCO Ambassadors (Toowoomba)
- Queensland Forum for Jews, Christians and Muslims
- Annual Police Multifaith Dinners in Brisbane, Toowoomba and the Gold Coast
- Events at the Centre for Interfaith and Cultural Dialogue, Griffith University
- Several interfaith events at Parliament House
- World of Women for World Peace event, Taiwan.

One member was the Christian speaker at the memorial service held at Moorooka for murdered Sikh bus driver Manmeet Sharma.

## Challenges/risks as we progress

Challenges:

- Addressing Islamophobia.
- Facing and challenging the increasing belief in society that "all religion is bad news" (not yet a major position, but very strong nevertheless).
- Raising awareness within our local congregations and agencies of the importance of compassion as a core value in our society. It needs every congregation in every community to take steps to engage and build communities of compassion, and to take steps to educate the whole of every community towards that end.

## For consideration

The work undertaken by this committee is an important part of the overall call by the Uniting Church for a just society, one in which all members are valued and heard.

## Proposal

It is proposed that the 33rd Synod receive this report.

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