



Multifaith Multicultural Youth Network

# Premier's Report

The Multifaith Multicultural Youth Network (MMYN) is made up of many passionate young people with similar interests who have come together to promote understanding both within the group and in the wider community

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# Multifaith Multicultural Youth Network

## Summary

The Multifaith Multicultural Youth Network (MMYN) entered its second term in October 2008 with ten inaugural members continuing their tenure and 16 new members joining from a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds: some Australian-born or raised here, some recently arrived migrants and refugees, some international students. This 2008-2009 group ranged in ages from 17 to 25 years and came from across Victoria, both metropolitan and regional areas.

We brought with us a range of experiences, views and opinions, and an enthusiasm to communicate these on behalf of our communities and our peers.

A highlight of the second year was the range of opportunities available to the Network to identify issues of concern and voice these views to Government. Throughout the course of the year there were opportunities for exploration of such issues as:

- CALD Young People and Police
- International Students
- Settlement support for Refugee Communities
- Regional Victoria: Multifaith and Multicultural Understanding
- Human Rights and Freedom of Religion
- Media and Community Perceptions

The development and implementation of the MMYN's Regional Schools Tour was a key success, which saw 50 young people from Shepparton come together with MMYN members to discuss faith, culture and the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities from a young person's perspective.

A range of consultation, event and project opportunities made for a busy and exciting year and resulted in a raised profile for the Network – both within government and the community.

The MMYN anticipates that this momentum will continue to build in the third year of the Network and that opportunities posed by the Parliament of the World's Religions event (Melbourne 2009) will be fully explored. Successful initiatives such as the Multifaith Multicultural Youth Forum, last held in 2007, and Regional Schools Tour will be continued. Alongside these activities the Network's advisory role to Government will remain a key focus and hopefully be even further enhanced.

This Report provides a snapshot of the work and experiences of the MMYN over the past 12 months.

# Multifaith Multicultural Youth Network

## The Network

The Multifaith Multicultural Youth Network (MMYN) has had five meetings over the past twelve months. Each of these meetings has provided the MMYN with the opportunity to discuss issues and initiatives that affect young Victorians from culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The meetings have also provided the MMYN with the chance to develop friendships and networks, while keeping informed about Victorian Government policy and initiatives.

## Key Issues

During the course of the past 12 months, members have highlighted a range of issues for the consideration of Government in its policy development or to form the basis of future MMYN-led projects. Issues which have been most prevalent are detailed below.

### CALD Young People and Police

MMYN members recommend that Victoria Police take steps to improve their relationships with young people from culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse backgrounds. It has been suggested that ongoing workshops/forums between CALD young people and police be developed to improve cross-cultural and cross-generational understanding and greater diversity within the police force.

MMYN members feel that the issue of police interactions with young people, especially those from migrant and refugee backgrounds, is a common concern within the community. Although significant steps have been taken to improve the relationship between police and such young people, MMYN members are concerned that members of the police continue to receive minimal cultural awareness and competency training and therefore substantial responsibility rests with the Multicultural Liaison Officers to enhance understanding among police regarding diversity.

### International Students

MMYN members recommend that the Government increase the support services available to international students. Members have suggested that introducing a buddy system between international students and local volunteers may assist with some of these issues.

MMYN members have raised a number of concerns regarding the situation for international students in Victoria including social isolation and loneliness, safety, and difficulties experienced in accessing accommodation and social support services.

### Refugee Communities

MMYN members have raised the need for increased support services for refugee communities, particularly in relation to the arrival of a group of Tibetan refugees in Victoria earlier in 2009. This group was granted humanitarian visas and were welcomed into the Tibetan community of Victoria. However, while some assistance was provided by service providers, it was felt that the role of settling these individuals into the Victorian community largely rested on the Tibetan community and members of the wider community who were willing to assist. A lack of support from service providers has posed a substantial problem for these individuals who are suffering considerable trauma. This lack of support is also shared with other newly arrived communities such as the Sudanese community.

### Regional Victoria

MMYN members have raised the issue for an increase in multifaith and intercultural programs in regional areas, and in particular regional schools. The MMYN would like to discuss these issues in greater detail with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Members have also raised the need for a greater focus on interfaith and intercultural dialogue in regional Victoria where issues such as stereotyping and racism may pose a greater risk. Individuals settling in regional Victoria are faced with culture shock and may not be connected to available

support services. It is also important that service providers in regional and rural Victoria are equipped to deal and work with newly arrived communities, particularly in understanding a range of cultural and religious barriers that may be present.

### Media and Community Perceptions

At their most recent meeting, MMYN members were joined by Minister James Merlino MP for a discussion around promoting harmony in Victoria and particularly the impact of the media on community perceptions and on a harmonious society. Members noted that the media causes division by the use of stereotypes and generalizations which can quickly undo the hard work being undertaken by Government and the community to promote harmony. They recommended supporting faith communities to facilitate grassroots change with local media and also called on Government to provide greater support to local community media. MMYN members felt that there was also an opportunity to promote positive interfaith and intercultural activities in mainstream media, for example in the afternoon paper for commuters, MX. There was also discussion in regard to building the capacity of local communities to promote harmony and recognition of the need to engage with the disengaged or those from non-faith backgrounds rather than promoting interfaith and intercultural events and dialogue only to those already engaged in such activities.

### **Group Involvement**

In the past year the MMYN has been involved in a range of initiatives and projects which have seen members participate in many ways. Key involvements such as the Regional Schools Tour and the Human Rights Conference, were just some of the many events that the MMYN took part in.

### **Regional Schools Tour**

The Regional Schools Tour was held in March 2009 in Shepparton and was run by 7 members of the MMYN. The Tour was held in conjunction with the Victorian Multicultural Commission and the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission. It provided an opportunity for MMYN members to engage young people from regional Victoria in interfaith and intercultural dialogue. It was an all day conference which provided students an opportunity to learn about four faiths (Catholicism, Islam, Baha'i faith and Judaism) as well as to learn about the core principles of the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.

This was a highly successful program with around 50 year 9 and 10 students from Shepparton High and McGuire Secondary College attending the day with excellent feedback provided. Due to the success of the pilot earlier this year the MMYN will be looking into conducting a future Regional Schools Tour in 2010.



### **Human Rights Conference**

At the *Everyday People, Everyday Rights* Human Rights Conference, five members of the MMYN were invited to lead a session on faith, culture and young people. The session provided an opportunity for the MMYN members to share their experiences and stories. Each member provided a personal account of their backgrounds and lives as young religious and cultural individuals in Victoria, and how their experiences had shaped their views, perceptions and outlooks in life. This session provided an opportunity for the members to showcase the leadership and direction of young people in Victoria.

## Bendigo Meeting

As two members of the MMYN are located in regional Victoria, the MMYN held one of its meetings in Bendigo. The July meeting provided an opportunity for members to visit Bendigo and to speak with local service providers in the area. Members were greeted by Mayor Kevin Gibbins, who discussed the nature of Bendigo, and its growing diversity. Mayor Gibbins also noted that it is difficult for young people in regional areas to find employment and that they often have fewer employment and educational opportunities than those in metropolitan areas.

Members also had a discussion with representatives of the local Victoria Police, Bendigo Bank and the City of Greater Bendigo's youth and employment services to gain an understanding of the work currently being undertaken in the City to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue and support young people in the region.



## Consultations

### Australian Multicultural Foundation: Freedom of Religion and Belief in the 21st Century Project

The MMYN participated in a consultation with the Australian Multicultural Foundation, which is undertaking the Freedom of Religion and Belief in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Project, in partnership with the Australian Human Rights Commission. Questions around barriers and the ability to practice faith and the role of gender in faith communities were explored. Members also noted that although Freedom of Religion exists in common law, many in society continue to discriminate, including the media who play a vital role in shaping community perceptions. The discussion provided the basis for an MMYN submission to the Project.



### Victoria Police: Child and Youth Strategy

The Victoria Police presented the MMYN with an overview of the Victoria Police Child and Youth Strategy. The MMYN had the opportunity to ask the officers a number of questions, including in regard to the cultural competence training received by new recruits of the police force, as well as questions around how the police are trained to work with young people who have experienced trauma, in particular how the police deal with situations where young people have a fear of police due to past experiences. This consultation provided a good opportunity for the MMYN to discuss with the members of the force the present issues facing CALD communities, in particular issues around young people and police.



### Department of Human Services: Youth Justice Roundtable

Members of the MMYN were invited to take part in a roundtable discussion on youth justice, undertaken by the Department of Human Services (DHS). It was a great opportunity for members to raise issues of faith and culture in regard to young people and the justice system. This discussion centred around the role of the police, the role of the community sector and the role of young people. The issues raised at the roundtable will form part of the report on the Youth Justice system, which is presently being undertaken by the DHS.



## **MMYN Ambassadors**

Representatives from the MMYN have been actively involved in a range of activities and events over the past 12 months including:

- Cultural Diversity Week activities, such as the Premier's Gala Dinner and the Viva Festival at Federation Square.
- Governor's Australia Day Celebrations at Government House, a memorable event where members met the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd.
- Premier's Walk for Harmony, which saw over 10,000 Victorians march for Harmony through Melbourne CBD.
- Youth Parliament, where the MMYN partnered with the Ethnic Youth Council to pass a bill on Safety and Public Transport.
- Members have also been fortunate enough to be on the steering committee for the Multifaith Multicultural Youth Mentoring Program through the Centre for Multicultural Youth, as well as participating in events such as the Buddha's Day Festival and the National Day of Mourning for the Victorian Bushfire Victims.

## **Future**

The progress of the MMYN in the year ahead will be interesting and exciting, as inaugural members end their two year term and 13 new members join the group. In recent times the MMYN has had discussions around the implementation of a new MMYN structure, which would see the group work in sub committees and working groups. Creating subcommittees around areas such as policy, networking and projects would provide greater clarity and focus for the Network.

The Network will also be looking into embarking upon several new projects. One is to hold a forum with organisations working in interfaith and multicultural affairs in Victoria. The forum would be a useful way for members and young people from CALD backgrounds to raise issues and get the collaboration and assistance of both government and non government agencies. Another idea is to hold another Faith and Culture Youth Forum, similar to the one held in 2006 which saw many great initiatives such as the establishment of the MMYN.

Another option being considered by the MMYN is to run a second Regional Schools Tour in another area of Victoria. The success of this year's (2009) tour, and the benefits experienced by all involved reinforces the need for this type of program to be held at least annually. MMYN members feel that running this valuable program in rural and regional areas will achieve tangible change over a period of time.

## **Comments from members**

"I've been really lucky to become good friends with most people on the MMYN"

"There is so much potential and capacity within the MMYN to promote change and raise awareness within the community".

"The support of the officers from the VMC also has been invaluable in the success of the group. The creative ideas to come out of the MMYN translated well into practical projects. These projects met the needs they were intended to, and were on the whole tremendously successful. I feel that this focus on youth-led initiatives is something worth continuing, and expand upon in years to come."