

A Conversation about Community Harmony

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) brought together representatives from a diverse range of culturally diverse, religious, and community groups. This is a summary of the facilitated conversation on the topic of community harmony.



Photo: The Prophetic Family Tree ⁱ in the Islamic Museum of Australia

“People are free to be who they are whether they wear a turban, cross, Star of David or headscarf”

Quote from the ECCV Community Harmony Conversation

Key Consultation Insights

Key points

The Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria (ECCV) hosted a meeting of a group of representatives from faith-specific groups, community organisations, and peak bodies with an interest in cultural diversity to have an open conversation on community harmony on 8 August 2017. The meeting was held at the St Ambrose’s Community Centreⁱⁱ.

Group members were asked these three specific questions to guide the conversation on community harmony:

- What the foundations for mutual respect are in our society?
- Where do we find a common sense of belonging?
- How do we build confidence in our whole community?

The cultural iceberg

A participant expressed that discussions on community harmony should be seen in the context of our common humanity and what connects us to each other rather than on what separates people.

A participant followed on from this thought and expressed that “when we look at the cultural iceberg we get an image of the small part that is sticking out of the water. An image of what’s sticking out is often about the stereotypes. When we look at the bigger part below the surface we can see that we all have our culture. We are quick to look at the top of the iceberg but we also need to see the rest.”

“Now when people ask me about my identity, I stay away from highlighting my faith and ethnic identity as it isn’t as effective as saying yes this is who I am.” “It is about looking at the bottom of the iceberg.”



Image: The connecting cultures icebergⁱⁱⁱ (Adapted from L. Robert Kohls’ “Cultural Iceberg” by Connecting Cultures)

Fellow sojourners across the globe

The internet helps us find like-minded thinkers around the world. ECCV searched the internet for the cultural iceberg mentioned during our conversation about community harmony and we found the following version adapted by Sharon Kristjanson of Connecting Cultures and SVK Intercultural in the United States of America.

Sharon offered to share the thought-process about adapting the cultural iceberg from its original author as follows:

“The original iceberg concept, as developed by L. Robert Kohls, introduced a useful framework for

understanding the distinction between visible and invisible culture, and it is still used extensively today. However, it stops short of identifying how we are connected, which is why I modified the iceberg paradigm. I believe that adding this third element -- our common humanity -- is essential to understanding the totality of our similarities and differences.

The essence of every iceberg is that it is made of ice. The essence of our common humanity is that we all love, laugh, and cry for the same reasons, and we all seek dignity and meaning in our lives. We may look different, and we see the world through our own worldview, but we have the same essence just as it is with every iceberg.”

Sharon’s current endeavour to help people engage in meaningful dialogue across differences is *People Beyond Politics*^{iv}.

Media

Concerns were raised that some media outlets have a tendency to ‘label’ people.

“Negativity in the media about Muslims is a massive problem. “

A participant made the point that media broadcasting should also focus on the positive stories of Muslims and not almost exclusively on the negative stories.

It was added that there is ‘us’ versus ‘them’ perception in some of the public debate.

A participant expressed that “we can’t combat the media but it is all happening at the community level and that’s where we can do something.”

“There is a global wave of hate, amplified for Muslims. The word terrorism is equated with Muslims.”

“Victorians think there are about 40% Muslims in Australia but here are only 2.6 % which is not so significant.”

The right to express one’s religion was raised.

A participant mentioned inappropriate media commenting on religions. This was associated with a currently underdeveloped expertise in the media industry on religious topics and religions as such.

“There is work being done at the grassroots level on supporting religious freedom.”

“People are free to be who they are whether they wear a turban, cross, Star of David or headscarf.”

Hectic pace of life

The question was asked if people “actually have time to reflect about what’s going on in multicultural Victoria?”

A person commented that times are very quick and hectic these days and that most people don’t have the time to relax, reflect, meditate or pray.

Another person mentioned that a function of the Jewish Shabbat, which starts on Friday night and goes through all of Saturday all day, is to “switch off” from emails and technology and is specifically about reflection.

“Where are you from?”

The group spent significant time discussing the appropriateness of the question “where are you from” when talking to people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

A participant expressed the views that the appropriateness of asking “where are you from” depends on the underlying intention and the context in which this is being asked.

Some of the participants were surprised to hear that such conversations are open to misinterpretation.

A participant stated that he would usually ask a person “where are you from” simply out of curiosity and to learn more about the person.

One participant made the point that a possible way of responding to the question is by stating the local area where the person lives. For example: “I am from North Melbourne”.

Mutual respect

Participants highlighted that mutual respect includes accepting the person for who they are as human beings.

Mutual respect includes refraining from value judgments and not making assumptions. It is about being open-minded and treating everyone equally and fairly.

A participant mentioned that she has been encouraging a ‘smile culture’ in her organisation based on the principle:

“Who comes to us gets a smile and takes a smile home”

Sense of belonging and personal relationships

When asked about how to develop a common sense of belonging participants talked about the need to connect communities and engage better with different cultural and faith groups.

It was mentioned that the represented organisations participate in different community events and celebrations such as NAIDOC week, Reconciliation Day and Cultural Diversity Week, Refugee Week, and Harmony Day. Community events such as these help to foster a sense of community and belonging.

It was suggested it is beneficial to promote the value of the “gastronomical side of multiculturalism” and to share ideas and bond while eating together.

A participant mentioned that community or interfaith dinners are a good way of encouraging community discussions and that these dinners help counter misconceptions and build trust.

The idea of community dinners is to facilitate personal relationships and community connections and they also provide good outcomes. The question was asked why interfaith conversations are relevant in today’s Australia.

A participant remarked that members of faith groups continue to be victims of physical harassment and hateful activities. People were surprised to hear this.

“Getting people together works. We’ve always done the dinners”.

Successful interfaith relationships traditionally have been formal dinners at tables and with guest speakers.

To improve community engagement “trying different things is important. Things such as speed networking, friendships walks, a bike ride, a BBQ and pets day. It brings different people together.”

Another way of connecting is through films and having nibbles, and sitting on bean bags on the floor. Short films and videos are good for finding out about different cultures and different communities.

Concerns were raised about the continuation of Victorian Government funding for community dinners.

Confidence in our whole community

A participant referred to the theory of ‘bonding, bridging, and linking’^v in the context of supporting ethnic groups and healthy workplace connections.

It was mentioned that organisational representatives can sometimes find it difficult to engage with faith and cultural groups.

The group discussed issues relating to volunteering in the community. The differences with regards to formal and informal volunteering were mentioned. Examples for informal volunteering are caring roles by family members and cooking meals for isolated people. It was pointed out that there is a need to broaden volunteering activities for culturally diverse groups.

A participant indicated that volunteering played also a significant role in ethnic and multicultural organisations and that work is underway to encourage volunteering amongst culturally diverse groups, local groups and in the wider community. A participant referred to the work of a faith body in working with young Muslims and local volunteering groups.

The ‘Jewish-Muslim comedy debate’ and the ‘Speed Date a Muslim’ were highlighted as good ways to bring people together in a more relaxed way.

It was highlighted that sporting matches are a great way for people to connect and build community harmony.

A participant spoke highly of the Australian Football League (AFL) in terms of fostering inclusiveness and multicultural community engagement. AFL Victoria has displayed photos at their offices of the cultural diversity of AFL team members.

It was pointed out that culturally diverse footballers have few role models they can identify with on TV.

Future Directions

ECCV advocates the following:

- Victorian Government funding for study trips to faith-based museums;
- Conversations on community harmony in a respectful manner and a safe environment;
- Opportunities for interested professionals including from the media industry to amplify their knowledge on relevant religions and related issues;
- Victorian government support for interfaith and community dinners with specific community harmony targets;
- Bringing people together through volunteer work in the local community;
- The safety of culturally diverse people and faith group members in the community.

About ECCV Social Cohesion Policy Briefs

ECCV is the peak advocacy organisation for ethnic and multicultural groups in Victoria and consults with communities when their voices are not heard in the policy process. ECCV's social cohesion policy briefs are short snapshots from our roundtable discussions on social cohesion issues. They are not forums or education events. Culturally diverse community members, leaders and service providers are invited to attend both open and closed discussions on what is an evolving and complex issue.

To respond to the increasing rate of social change and also government policies on social cohesion, ECCV has developed a new way of consulting, analysing and sharing insights from each roundtable that give a voice to multicultural Victoria on issues that matter. We post our briefs online within three weeks. The briefs are a combination of direct quotes from participants, policy analysis and human observation grounded in ECCV's 43 years of consultation with multicultural Victorians.

To receive future ECCV Social Cohesion Policy Briefs please subscribe by emailing eccv@eccv.org.au with the subject 'Subscribe to Social Cohesion PB'.

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ⁱ The photograph is an illustration of the 'Prophetic Family Tree' and a courtesy of the Islamic Museum of Australia. The Islamic Museum of Australia is a not-for-profit foundation that aims to showcase the rich artistic heritage and historical contributions of Muslims in Australia and abroad through the display of various artworks and historical artefacts. For more information please visit <https://islamicmuseum.org.au/>.

ⁱⁱ The St Ambrose's Community Centre of the Catholic Parish of Brunswick and Brunswick East was a former school that has been converted into a Parish Centre. For more information please visit www.bbe.org.au/our-properties/.

ⁱⁱⁱ Iceberg picture credit/ acknowledgment: The iceberg picture has been supplied with permission from Sharon V. Kristjanson from SVK Intercultural LLC, web: www.svkintercultural.com. The connecting cultures iceberg is an adaption from L. Robert Kohls' "Cultural Iceberg" by Connecting Cultures.

^{iv} People Beyond Politics™ brings people together for constructive dialogue. Please visit www.peoplebeyondpolitics.com.

^v The theory of 'bonding, bridging, and linking' refers to strong bonding in ethnic groups; weak bridging across groups; and the need for help with linking them. Irene Bouzo, *Adaptation after displacement: A case study of the Temple Society*, 2015, in Chapter 3, *Australia Hopeful Places: Migration and belonging in an unpredictable era*, 2015, edited by Chris McConnor, Connor Court Publishing P/L.