



National Council of Churches in Australia

22 September 2023

Multicultural Framework Review
Department of Home Affairs
Canberra ACT 2600

SUBMISSION to Multicultural Framework Review

The National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) thanks the Australian Government for the opportunity to participate in an online consultation with Review Panel members on 2 August 2023 and to make this submission to the Multicultural Framework Review.

NCCA is a member of a number of interfaith, inter-religious and multi-faith dialogues, variously formally and informally structured. These interfaith and inter-religious meetings reflect the history of migration to Australia and a diverse population. As a settlement country Australia has embraced multi-culturalism in government policies and practice as part of helping with establishing identity and belonging for new residents. Less so has Australia looked at religion being a factor for new residents in supporting their identity and belonging alongside their culture. In fact many migrants in Australia stay in the form and function of the culture and religion of their home countries.

If the Review is to address the key principle of having a multicultural framework that supports a cohesive and inclusive multicultural society in Australia, we must do better in addressing the multi-faith dimension of Australia's cultural diversity.

Multi-faith dialogue and interfaith education needs to be given better support and we have some lived examples where this has been shown to reduce inter-community conflict and where multi-faith and interfaith experiences especially for youth and young adults have built bridges and fostered social cohesion.

The first example is the establishment of the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO) in 2003 after the Bali bombings and the 9/11 attacks in USA.

The aims of APRO (refer to **Annex**) are:

- To promote and advocate for inter-faith harmony, and understanding and respect between the adherents of the various religions in Australia;
- To combat religious prejudice and discrimination; and
- To consider and address matter of mutual concern arising out of the shared values and interests of the various religions.

APRO was formed as an independent group by national religious bodies, including the NCCA, and initially hosted periodic inter-faith forums that brought members of faith communities together in dialogue on social and cultural issues relating to social cohesion, community harmony and social equity. It is still a standing group,

Anglican Church

Antiochian
Orthodox Church

Armenian
Apostolic Church

Assyrian Church
of the East

Chinese Methodist
Church

Churches of Christ

Congregational
Federation

Coptic
Orthodox Church

Greek
Orthodox Church

Indian
Orthodox Church

Lutheran Church

Mar Thoma Church

Religious Society
of Friends (Quakers)

Roman Catholic Church

Romanian
Orthodox Church

Syrian
Orthodox Church

The Salvation Army

Uniting Church

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most recently called upon by the Uphold and Recognise organization (Dr Shireen Morris and Dr Damian Freeman) in 2022 about the support of national religious organisations for the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Although APRO was envisioned as a peak multi-faith body in Australia that could act in an advisory capacity to governments, it has not been used in that way as it sits outside of the multi-cultural advisory groups set up by governments to consult on policy and programs. Our experience is that multi-cultural advisory groups who have members from diverse religions that become *ipso facto* consultants on religious diversity as well as cultural diversity. For many religions there is a question of authority about who speaks about a religion's beliefs and practices. Leaders matter in representing religion and individual adherents or academic experts cannot claim authority as advisers when it has not been given.

This leads to the reflection that governments in Australia, including the Federal Government, have generally mixed up multi-cultural and multi-faith issues and policy without understanding the complexity of conflating these two aspects in a diverse population. NCCA believes that it is important that the new Multicultural Framework draws out the relationship between multi-culturalism and multi-faith diversity and inclusion and includes some definitions.

During the years of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia a number of State Governments reached out to the networks of faith communities to help with some of the communication, public health messaging, awareness raising 'problems' that they were experiencing with their culturally diverse communities. In NSW, this experience has led to the formal establishment of a Religious Advisory Council of religious leaders.

The representatives of APRO members that met in online consultation with the Review Panel members on 2 August 2023 made the point that the world and Australia has changed in the past 20 years. There is more need to work with the Australian Government in policy areas such as protection against discrimination and vilification on the basis of religion; scapegoating and other forms of 'othering'; interfaith education and awareness-raising of how religions promote community cohesion and inclusion. It is time for Australia's Multicultural Framework to recognize the importance of consulting with national religious organisations and whilst a national interfaith council has been proposed but not endorsed by these organisations it is important that multi-faith consultation is both resourced and consistent in an advisory role to the Australian Government.

A new Multicultural Review for Australia at this time needs to be intentional in striving for a reconciled multi-cultural and multi-faith nation that has close connections, interactions and consultations with our First Peoples and organisations such as Reconciliation Australia.

Supporting public space for religious practice and giving respect to those of a religious faith in Australia is about ensuring settings are fit for purpose in harnessing the talents of all Australians. Faith can build bridges of understanding and hope.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elizabeth Stone". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

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General Secretary

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Annex – Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO) Structure and Guidelines (next page)

STRUCTURE AND GUIDELINES

NAME

1. The name of the organisation is “The Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations”, known as “APRO”.

AIMS

2. The aims of the organisation are:
 - a. To promote and advocate for inter-faith harmony, and understanding and respect between the adherents of the various religions in Australia;
 - b. To combat religious prejudice and discrimination; and
 - c. To consider and address matters of mutual concern arising out of the shared values and interests of the various religions.

MEMBERSHIP

3. The following organisations are members of APRO as at this date :
 - National Council of Churches in Australia
 - Muslims Australia (Australian Federation of Islamic Councils)
 - Executive Council of Australian Jewry
 - Australian Baha’i Community
 - Federation of Australian Buddhist Councils
 - Hindu Council of Australia
 - National Sikh Council of Australia
4. The Council may invite any national organisation which represents a significant religious group in Australia to become a member of APRO.

THE COUNCIL

5. The Council shall consist of the following:

a. One representative appointed by each Member, provided that a Member may appoint a substitute representative at any time.

b. The Convenor, who shall be appointed by the Council by consensus and for such term as may be decided by the Council from time to time.

c. The Council may invite any national organisation which has the objective of promoting the aims of APRO to appoint a representative. The following organisations are entitled to appoint representatives as at this date:

- Australian Multicultural Foundation
- Settlement Council of Australia
- UNESCO Chair in inter-religious and inter-cultural relations, Asia-Pacific.
- World Conference of Religions for Peace (Australia)
- Australian Sangha Association (representing ordained Buddhists)

d. Such individuals as the Council may by consensus co-opt from time to time

e. Such unpaid specialist advisers as the Council may by consensus appoint from time to time.

MEETINGS AND ACTIVITIES

8. The affairs of APRO shall be conducted by the Council, and all decisions shall be made by consensus.

9. The Council shall meet at such times as it may determine, but not less than once per year.

10. The Council shall engage in activities for the purpose of advancing the aims of APRO, including, but not limited to, the following:

a. the organisation of conferences, seminars, education programs and other functions of a similar nature;

b. preparing and distributing reports and documents , and issuing public statements on relevant issues including religious discrimination or prejudice when arising;

c. mobilising support and assistance for religious communities at risk; and

d. providing advice and recommendations to government on matters of concern.

AMENDMENT

11. This document may be amended at any time by the Council by consensus provided that notice of the proposed amendment has been circulated prior to the meeting.

Dated 26 November 2014