**The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne**

**Report**

**World Interfaith Harmony Week 2016**

**Event: *I’ll Dine With You* #IllDIneWithYou**

**When: Monday, February 29, 2016, 6.00 pm – 9.00pm**

**Venue: The City Square, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia**

**Why this event was needed**

Multiculturalism has helped make Australia a welcoming, socially cohesive and prosperous western nation but an upsurge of terrorist events both in Australia and overseas understandably makes us a bit more fearful, nervous and uncertain. The worst thing that we can do under these circumstances is to allow fanatical and barbaric groups and individuals to erode our capacity for decency and respect for others and in particular, to demonise Muslims within our community. In addition, anti-semitism is growing. Muslims, Jews and Sikhs in particular, report that they are experiencing verbal and other abuse. In the 2011 Census, 23.1% of Victorians spoke 260 languages other than English at home and 67.7% followed 135 faiths.

Most fear of the ‘other’ is due to a lack of understanding and limited opportunities to meet people of diverse religions, spiritualities, philosophies, ethnicities and cultures in social settings. For every one person who has a positive experience of meeting someone outside one’s own circle, at least ten other people will be informed and thus a wave of acceptance and appreciation may follow.

**Planning the event**

Several months agoover cups of tea with a group of women,Helen Summers proposed a Dinner, hashtag “I’ll Dine With You”, inspired by the hashtag “I’ll ride with you” which was used successfully after a terrorist attack in Sydney.Women from several religious traditions came together under the auspice of The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne to host this unique dinner for the people of Melbourne. As women from diverse religious communities, we share a strong commitment and belief in the age-old tradition and power of “breaking bread”. We also believe in the way in which sharing a meal can facilitate conversation with people who are different from one’s own circle of family, friends, religion, culture and social environment. When we come together to know each other a little better, we have the opportunity to change our stereotypic and/or negative perceptions.

In the past five years The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne, has been committed to holding an Interfaith Luncheon at Parliament House for religious and community leaders to celebrate UN World Interfaith Harmony Week. This year, we made the celebration even better and extended invitations and good will to members of the public who may not be part of our interfaith circles by holding an open-air evening dinner in the City Square, in the spirit of love of God and love of the neighbour or love of the good and love of the neighbour, which leaves no one out.

Six women formed the working committee and recruited many volunteers from diverse traditions to assist in the days leading up to the event and the event itself. Helen Summers and Nur Shkembi co-chaired the Committee.

It was important that the event took place in a public space for pedestrians, cyclists and commuters on trams to see 206 people dining at one long table and to ask questions as to what the event was about.

**The Open Air Dinner**

**Visual impact**

The event itself was visually arresting, with a single long dining table, 60 metres in length, running along the City Square, where 206 people were seated and dined simultaneously. 24 tables were the maximum we could fit into the space available. Co-chair Nur Shkembi, with her art curator’s eye chose the colour scheme to enhance the environmentally friendly tableware: palm dinner plates, wooden cutlery and recyclable clear cups, which added to the rustic setting under tall eucalyptus trees.

**Music**

Music provided a relaxing background as guests sat with people they had not met before and engaged in meaningful conversation. Zac Wilson and Rasheeda Cooper played guitar and tabla. *Zourouna*, Yuval Ashkar, Byron Tryandafillidis and George El-Azar played oud, bouzouki and daf.

**Conversation**

The focus was on Conversation. Monique Toohey, psychologist and committee member, contributed fifteen conversation starters, which were written in the Programme/Menus as suggestions for guests to initiate conversation.

**Special Guests**

Spoken word poet Sukhjit Kaur Khalsa, who had recently been highly rated by the judges of Australia’s Got Talent, was the MC. The Acting Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Mrs Susan Riley gave a Welcome Speech, which was warmly received. Wurrundjeri Senior Woman, Aunty Joy Wandin Murphy was unable to attend at the last minute. She asked Rev Helen Summers to do the Acknowledgement of Country which is part of the Indigenous Spiritual Tradition.

All of the guests were special – 206 guests and 40 volunteers. Representatives of our sponsors and supporters attended the Dinner.

When booking a seat for the Dinner online, people were asked to name their religion, faith or no faith, voluntarily, to assist with report writing. Twenty-seven faiths/beliefs/world views were given: with the largest groups being Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and Sikhism. All guests will receive a Survey online in the next few days to assist the Committee with an evaluation report.

**Food**

All food served was vegetarian which catered for most religious dietary requirements. The venue was alcohol free.

The Sikh Community of Victoria generously cooked and provided most of the three course meal free of charge. The food was cooked in the kitchen of a Gurduara and transported to the City Square. When it was decided that the rice should be cooked closer to the venue, the head of the kitchen at the Hare Krishna Temple, 15 minutes away from the venue, offered to cook the rice for the Sikhs at no charge. So love of the neighbour was exemplified by the Hare Krishnas helping the Sikhs!

Additional food was catered for by social enterprise caterers: Lentil as Anything, inc. and the Asylum Seekers Resource Centre Catering.

**Volunteers**

It was as important for volunteers to meet each other before the event, as it was for the guests to mix and engage in conversation. Four training sessions, three pre event and one on the day of the event were held. Sunni and Shia volunteers met with different denominations of Christians and diverse others to foster understanding and build bridges.

**Challenges**

February is a holiday time in Melbourne. Most venues are fully booked a long time in advance. The only date available to book the City Square was the last day of February in 2016, the 29th and a leap year!

An outdoor event is expensive to produce: hired tables, chairs, marquees for the food, stage, administration costs and to meet all requirements for the City of Melbourne Permit for the City Square, costs a great deal. The purpose for such a big outdoor event was to inspire other groups in other suburbs and towns in the State of Victoria to hold # *I’ll Dine With You*. Future events could be as small or large as organisations’ budgets allow.

In the middle of February The interfaith Centre of Melbourne did not have the funds we had expected and were on the point of cancelling or postponing the event. On the night of February 20th we received a phone call to say that a foundation would give a grant which would assist with the costs. We then had nine days to meet deadlines and seven days to publicise Bookings. We were concerned that there was not enough time to obtain 206 bookings but the event was booked out with more people wanting to attend!

**Media and Publicity**

There were no funds for advertising – all interfaith networks were asked to send emails with Booking information to their mailing lists.

**3AW Radio Tom Elliot Drive Show**

Tom Elliot interviewed Monique Toohey who invited Tom to the Dinner and he came with three of his staff. A good response in bookings came from this radio interview.

**After the event**

We envision suburbs, towns and cities throughout Victoria and Australia – and perhaps internationally - replicating this event, however small, in the near future. Already The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne has been asked to advise the Zee Cheng Khor Moral Uplifting Society to hold *#I’ll Dine With You, Clayton*, in May, 2016, in a south-eastern suburb of Melbourne.

**Committee Members**:

Rev Helen Summers - Co-Chair

 The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne

Nur Shkembi - Co-Chair

 Islamic Council of Victoria

Ayesha Bux

Sue Ennis

 Religions for Peace Australia

Nada Kalam

 Islamic Council of Victoria

April Robinson

 Interfaith Network Developer, Uniting Church of Australia

Monique Toohey

 Islamic Council of Victoria

**Evaluation report**

An evaluation report will be written in the near future, gathering information from the online ticketing procedure at Eventbrite, committee members’ and volunteers’ feedback and the online Survey sent out to all guests.

**#I’ll Dine With You Procedure Manual**

If funds are available, a manual will be produced to advise other groups who wish to replicate *#I’ll Dine With You*, whether the size of the group is small or large.

February 7, 2016

Rev Helen Summers

Founder and Director

The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne

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