

A Brief History & Summary of Tours to Places of Worship Interfaith Network - City of Greater Dandenong

The Interfaith Network formalised its beginnings at City Hall on 21 August, 1989 where leaders of faith communities signed a Common Statement, making a personal commitment to Mayor and Councillors to work together for the promotion of harmonious relations in Springvale's multicultural, multi-faith community. Tours to Places of Worship had its origins about sixteen months later.

In the minutes from the meeting in December 1991, a member of Council staff who was studying religious architecture gave a report on her visits to different faith communities. One of the faith leaders on hearing this report suggested that faith leaders could also do this, an idea that was greeted with enthusiasm.

The first Tour to Places of Worship was held on Wednesday, 18th December 1991. Beginning with a light luncheon at Council, this tour ran from 12noon to 5pm. The tour itinerary was drawn up by Council Staff, including the person who was studying religious architecture. The Salvation Army provided the 22 seater bus for the tour.

The minutes from the February 1992 meeting report that this first tour was worthwhile and that everyone felt very welcome. It was also felt that this should be done on a larger scale or in a more public way so members of the community could participate but not 'too large' or it would lose its significance. The spiritual aspect of tours was, and still is, seen as being very important. It was agreed to hold tours twice a year and several different faith communities offered their small buses for transport.

On 24th June 1992 another tour was held where the Places of Worship included a Mosque, a Catholic church, a Buddhist Temple, a Uniting Church and an Orthodox Church.

Over 40 people participated in a further tour of four Places of Worship on 18th August 1993 with many people booking the tour from outside the local area. Tours to Places of Worship had well and truly begun!

The first mention of schools enquiring about tours is recorded in the Interfaith Network's April 1994 minutes and the suggestion of sharing experiences of a tour over afternoon tea was first raised in June 1994. This practice of debriefing over "a cuppa" continues today. Since 2006, a Public Tours Participants' Feedback Sheet has been placed in the book "Many Faiths, One People" - a book that participants receive when they come on a Public Tour.

Today, due to the popularity of these Tours to Places of Worship, Public Tours have been increased to run every second month, beginning in March each year with a tour for Council Staff.

In December 2005, because Interfaith Network members could not book a place on the tours for themselves, instead of having their usual end-of-the-

year meeting, the Network went on a tour, visiting four Places of Worship. These tours took place for ten years until most local Places of Worship had been visited as well as some Places of Worship outside Greater Dandenong (including the Jewish and Islamic Museums) had been visited.

Public Tours usually include an opportunity to visit a Hindu Temple or Sikh Gurdwara; a Mosque, a Buddhist Temple and a Christian Church, either Western or Eastern tradition; an opportunity to see diversity focusing on the religious and faith dimension of multiculturalism and an opportunity to be welcomed by a member or leader of each faith, and learn from them something of their belief, practices and community here in Australia.

Public Tours used to be arranged and conducted by members of the Interfaith Network on a voluntary basis. Due to the increasing demand for all kinds of tours with an all-time record* of 33 tours being conducted in 2013, an Interfaith Network Development Officer has since been employed in November 2014. Part of that role is to coordinate and arrange, with the Interfaith Network, ALL Tours to Places of Worship. [*A new records was set in 2015 when 40 Tours to Places of Worship were conducted]

From 2015, in partnership with Victoria Police, a couple of spaces on each Public Tour are filled by members of Victoria Police, an important community engagement initiative valued by both the Interfaith Network and the police.

Besides Public Tours, the Interfaith Network conducts **Other Special Tours** upon request and where possible. Over recent years these have included:

- ♦ Council Staff Tours - in 2008 the Interfaith Network was privileged to have the CEO of the City of Greater Dandenong come on tour; in March 2004, Age reporter Larry Swartz and a photographer came on a combined tour of Council Staff and local police, resulting in an article in The Sunday Age
- ♦ A twilight tour for the City of Greater Dandenong Councillors, in particular, for newly-elected Councillors
- ♦ Tours for Rotary Group Study Exchange Teams from France and from the UK
- ♦ Beginning in 2006, Tours for the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (DFAT) including the Australia-Thailand Institute, the Australia-Indonesia Young Muslim Leaders Exchange Program, the Australia-Malaysia Institute & the International Media Visits Program (IMV)
- ♦ Many tours for public, private & religious schools, both within the City of Greater Dandenong and beyond, including both primary and secondary levels
- ♦ A briefing tour requested by the Royal Thai Embassy for a senior delegation of Thai government representatives, including some key policy makers for the administration of the Southern Thai provinces;
- ♦ A tour for TAFE Work Education students
- ♦ National Youth Week Tours for combined school groups within the City of Greater Dandenong

- ◆ Victorian Multicultural Commission Tour for Commissioners and Staff from the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC); six places of worship were visited during a very long, but worthwhile day
- ◆ Professional Development Twilight Tours for groups of School Teachers
- ◆ Tours for Probus Clubs, Rotary Clubs & the University of the Third Age (U3A)
- ◆ A tour for an “Outside School Hours” Holiday Program
- ◆ A tour for a Volunteers Group, City of Greater Dandenong Council Program
- ◆ Tours for Youth Groups including a Multicultural Peer Education Group Tour
- ◆ Tours for Hospital staff, Palliative Care Workers & AMES Volunteers and Tutors
- ◆ Transition tours for people of the Christian faith preparing to travel overseas who need to have intercultural sensitivity training
- ◆ Tours for older people including a tour for Jewish Care - Active Living Centre and for the National Council Jewish Women Australia, Victoria Inc Tour
- ◆ Special Tours for people from refugee & asylum seeker backgrounds

Often these Special Tours are return requests E.g. since 2006 the Interfaith Network has conducted at least one tour a year for the Australia-Thailand desk of DFAT.

Also since 2006, the tours have also incorporated standing in the land at sacred, historic aboriginal sites arranged with Council’s Aboriginal Policy Officer. Visits to sacred aboriginal sites highlights and honours the spirituality of aboriginal people, an important dimension of the Interfaith Network. However, since 2013 these tours have ceased for the time being because the aboriginal person who conducted them left and a replacement needs to be found for them to continue.

Those in the Interfaith Network who host or guide these tours give in a variety of ways: faith leaders and their community members who are so welcoming at their place of worship, who provide hospitality, ensure the heating is on, show groups around their place of worship, clean up after refreshments, take group photos for the tour participants, put seating out, cook and offer many other kind acts of service, all with the greeting of a warm smile and in a gracious and hospitable way.

These practical acts of giving service and sharing hospitality by faith leaders and their communities is what really makes the tours so popular. This directly contributes to promoting peace, harmony and understanding, both within the City of Greater Dandenong and beyond into the wider community.

Helen Heath
 IFN Development Officer
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