

Official Welcome

IFN President, Mehtap Williams

Good morning, everyone

It is my great honour, on behalf of the Interfaith Network, to warmly welcome you all to this year's 37th Signing of the Common Statement ceremony.

I would like to begin with a very warm welcome to our special guests and dignitaries:

- From the Parliament of Australia, Julian Hill MP, Federal Member for Bruce.
- From the Victorian Parliament: Eden Foster MP, State Member for Mulgrave; Belinda Wilson MP, State Member for Narre Warren North; Rachel Payne MP, State Member for the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region; and Lee Tarlamis OAM MP, State Member for the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.
- From the City of Greater Dandenong: Deputy Mayor Sophie Tan, representing the Noble Park Ward, and Chief Executive Officer, Jacqui Weatherill.
- I would also like to give a special welcome to past IFN Executive Committee Members here today, Rienzie Machado, Agnes Kean, and Helen Heath, previous Executive Officer. Thank you for joining us today and for your continued support of the Interfaith Network and our shared commitment to peace and harmony.

Today we are gathered not only to uphold a tradition but also to affirm a living commitment that has guided our community for more than three decades. Since August 21st, 1989, the Interfaith Network, together with our Faith Leaders and the City of Greater Dandenong, has pledged through the Common Statement to walk side by side in a spirit of peace, harmony, and understanding.

The first Annual Gathering was held at the Supper Room in Springvale, where people from many different communities came together. From that gathering, the signed Common Statement was taken to a council meeting and presented to then-Mayor Cr Noelle Trembath. That symbolic act marked the beginning of a tradition that continues to this day.

Since then, the Common Statement has been presented year after year to the Mayor and the City of Greater Dandenong, a visible reminder that this pledge belongs not only to faith leaders but to the whole community.

The words of the Statement are powerful:

“We bring greetings from the faith communities to the Mayor, Councillors, and people of Greater Dandenong. We offer to the City of Greater Dandenong our common commitment to seek to live together in peace and goodwill... We therefore urge all citizens, both religious and non-religious, to put aside intolerance, prejudice, and divisiveness, to attain peaceful and fruitful co-existence in our City.”

These words are not just a declaration. They are a promise, a promise that people of different faiths and cultures can live together not only in tolerance but in respect, cooperation, and friendship.

And we have seen this promise come alive in moments of great challenge. I think back to March 2019, when the Christchurch mosque shootings shocked the world. In that moment of grief, the City of Greater Dandenong, together with the Interfaith Network, showed what the Common Statement truly means.

A vigil was held at Harmony Square, where hundreds of people from across faiths and cultures came together. We stood shoulder to shoulder with our Muslim brothers and sisters. Flowers were laid, prayers were offered, and messages of love and solidarity were shared. The Mayor at the time, together with faith leaders, spoke with one voice: an attack on one faith is felt as an attack on us all.

That response — of compassion, unity, and action — was the living spirit of the Common Statement. It was not just words signed on a page; it was a community embodying its pledge to stand together in the face of hatred and violence.

And of course, as we gather today, we cannot ignore the ongoing conflicts in Palestine, Ukraine and Sudan as well as other places around the world and the pain it is causing so many people around the world, including here in Greater Dandenong. For many in our community, this is not a distant headline — it is family, friends, and loved ones directly impacted.

As people of faith and goodwill, we may not be able to solve global conflicts from here, but we *can* respond in the way we live together locally. The Common Statement calls us to stand against intolerance and prejudice, to uphold the dignity of every person, and to choose peace over division. In this sense, the Statement is not only symbolic but practical — it reminds us that even in times of global uncertainty, our city can be a place of refuge, respect, and shared humanity.

Over the years, I have also witnessed the quieter ways this commitment is lived out: faith leaders sharing meals together, young people discovering common ground across traditions, and communities welcoming refugees and asylum seekers with open arms. These everyday acts of kindness and solidarity are just as powerful as the big public moments. They show that the Common Statement is alive in the daily life of Greater Dandenong.

For me personally, being part of this journey has been humbling and inspiring. Each time I witness the signing, I am reminded of the extraordinary richness of our community and the hope it offers.

So today, as we sign and present the Common Statement once more, let us do so not as a routine formality, but as a sacred commitment. A commitment that belongs to every one of us here. A commitment that we will carry into our homes, our workplaces, our places of worship, and our wider community.

Thank you for being part of this ceremony, for carrying forward the legacy of those who first signed the Common Statement, and for ensuring that its vision of *“Many Faiths, One People”* continues to guide us for generations to come.

Welcome to today’s gathering — may it inspire us, unite us, and strengthen our shared commitment to peace, harmony, and understanding.

Thank you.