2026 Official Welcome, Annual Signing of the Common Statement

IFN President Mehtap Williams

Before we start, I would like to acknowledge the Bunurong people of the Kulin Nation, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we gather today.

I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and honour their enduring connection to Country, culture and community.

It is my great honour, on behalf of the Interfaith Network, to warmly welcome you all to this year's 38th Signing of the Common Statement ceremony.

- I would like to begin with a very warm welcome to our special guests and dignitaries including The Mayor of City of Greater Dandenong, Sophie Tan.
- I also would like to give a special welcome to our staff, volunteers, members and faith, religious and spiritual leaders who are here today.

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.

We saw that same commitment after the tragic Bondi Beach terrorist attack in December last year.

Following the terrorist attack the Interfaith Network reached out to members of our Jewish and Muslim communities to express our support, care and our commitment to continue to promote 'togetherness' and unity, in word and in practical ways.

IFN also released a media statement calling for peace and solidarity amongst all and stated that the use of violence has no place within our community.

Our Mayor, Cr Sophie Tan, spoke on behalf of Greater Dandenong Council and reminded the community that everyone, regardless of faith or background, deserves to gather in peace and feel safe.

Our Deputy Mayor Cr Phillip Danh reflected on the trauma carried by our Jewish community and spoke proudly of the role of our Interfaith Network and our many community organisations in standing against hate and division.

This is what our Common Statement means in practice: when one community is hurting, we don't stand back—We stand beside them.

And as we gather today, we cannot ignore the wars and conflicts that continue to cause suffering around the world.

These conflicts may be happening thousands of kilometres away, but here in Greater Dandenong, they are never truly distant.

They affect our neighbours, our friends, our families and our communities.

As an interfaith community, we may come from different backgrounds and hold different views, but our shared humanity must always come first.

We grieve for every innocent life lost. We stand with families who have lost loved ones, with those who have been forced from their homes, and with all people who long simply to live in safety and dignity.

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 the Interfaith Network which continues to grow and 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.