1. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH’S STANCE ON ISLAM AND MUSLIMS:

1.1 General Principles

The principles that govern the attitude of Catholics to Muslims were formally declared at The Second Vatican Council in a watershed statement concerning all religions. With regard to Islam it states more particularly:

“... the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator; in the first place amongst whom are the Moslems: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day.”

Furthermore the Second Vatican Council acknowledges that

“Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The Sacred Council now pleads with all to forgive the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values.”

These texts, brief but of the highest authority, are constantly quoted in subsequent documents and speeches of the Magisterium and underpin the attitudes and action of Catholics regarding Muslims in Melbourne.

1.2 Coming together in prayer

The East-West Meditation Foundation was established in 1995 by Fr John Dupuche, Fr Ken Petersen o.carm, Fr Michael Mifsud osb camald. and Sr Kathleen Murphy op. with the support of Mr Herb Elliott, the famous Australian sportsman. This in turn prepared for the establishment under the leadership of Mrs Margaret Mooney of what was eventually named the ‘Catholic Interfaith Committee’. These groups made valuable connections with a whole range of religious communities around Melbourne so that Ceremony for Peace and Collaboration among Religions could be undertaken with great ease.

That Ceremony - held at St Patrick’s Cathedral on 11 June 2000 during the ‘Great
Jubilee’, the 2000th anniversary of the reputed year of the birth of Jesus Christ and before the attacks of 11 September 2001 - set the tone for Catholic interfaith relations in Melbourne. After Aboriginal elders opened the proceedings, leaders from the Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions listened attentively to readings from each other’s sacred texts and proclaimed their intentions for peace.

In smaller ways and more frequently, Muslims and Catholics have been involved in prayer together. For example, on 2 February 2003 members of the Australian Intercultural Society (AIS) attended the Parish Mass at St Joseph, Black Rock. At the beginning of Mass they were welcomed by the Parish Priest, Fr John Dupuche, and at the conclusion of Mass the leader of the Muslim contingent gave a short address. This has been repeated many times, with variations, at Christmas and Easter, at St Patrick’s Cathedral, and in the parish churches of Reservoir, Ormond and Altona.

In like fashion, Catholics and other Christians have been invited to Open Days at the mosques of Deer Park and Broadmeadows, to witness the prayer and to engage in conversation.

In 2003 Mr. Yasser Soliman, then president of Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV), accepted the invitation to attend the episcopal ordination of Father Christopher Prowse who in 2007 was appointed a member of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue because of his close involvement in interfaith relations, not least with the Muslims.

In 2008 members of the AIS attended the funeral of Emeritus Archbishop of Melbourne, Sir Frank Little together with members of the Jewish and Hindu communities.

Because of this complexity, the solution has been found in silence, that deep and evocative silence which is not the absence of words so much as the fullness of the Word. This is expressed in events such as ‘From Sound to Silence’ held at St Augustine’s Bourke St in preparation for World Youth Day in Sydney in July 2008. Musicians, Jewish, Aboriginal, Hindu and Muslim, played music – cello, didgeridoo, sitar, chanting – from their respective traditions and then, in the echoing beauty of the sounds, participants entered into silent meditation. This was modelled on an earlier interfaith gathering at Beaumaris also called ‘From sound to silence’ where music from the Aboriginal, Hindu, Muslim (Sufi), and Christian traditions introduced in each case by a period of profound silence.

The celebration of the Noble Birth and the celebration of the Birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas are altogether different in purpose and nature, but it seemed appropriate for Catholics to commemorate the Noble Birth just as Muslims have come to St Patrick’s Cathedral and some parish churches to take part in the celebration of Christmas. In this way we could gather together for prayer and appreciate the diversity and unity between our faith traditions.

In 2005 Bishop Prowse spoke at the Celebration of the Noble Birth in Broadmeadows Town Hall. In 2008, the EIC initiated the Commemoration of the Prophet’s Birth at the Cardinal Knox Centre, with a special focus on the "Servanthood and Submission in Jesus and the Prophet". In 2009 the theme was ‘Silence as an aspect of the lives of Jesus and the Prophet.’

This does not mean that Catholics and Muslims take part in reciting each other’s prayers but rather that they attend in respect and listen with attention to the proceedings. The issue of praying together is an on-going and complex issue.

Indeed, the particularly Christian teaching on the Trinity is notably evident when Muslims attend Mass, for the whole ceremony is Trinitarian, from the opening Sign of the
Cross to the concluding blessing with the Sign of the Cross. Similarly, by taking part in the commemoration of the Noble Birth it was clear how much veneration is given to Muhammad as the perfect example of Islam and yet he is no more than a man. It becomes apparent how much the focus is on Allah the merciful and compassionate and upon the revealed text. Thus, far from glossing over the differences, these become clearer. This point is of first importance. The meeting of different faiths, far from glossing, only serves to make the distinctiveness of the traditions more apparent.

2. THE MUSLIMS

2.1 Diversity of Muslims
Most Australians are not aware of how diverse the Muslim communities are. It is a surprise to most when they are informed that Australian Muslims come from over 75 different countries. Muslims also have are influenced by many cultures and they have many different denominations. In fact, Australian Muslims are in most cases not that connected to each other in the Muslim Community.

2.2 What do Muslims know about the Catholic Church?
In general, Australian Muslims do not know much about Catholics in Australia. There is however a good level of respect for Catholics. This can be shown, for example by the large numbers of Muslim parents that choose to send their children to Catholic Schools.

In addition, many Islamic schools have developed consistent interfaith programs between their schools that have resulted in thousands of students from both religions dispelling many misconceptions and developing positive goodwill towards each other.

2.3 Capacity of Muslims to engage
An important limitation that plays a role in the Muslim’s ability to engage and participate in interfaith activities is that the Muslims do not have structures similar to those that Catholics have developed over time.

Most Muslim participants in interfaith dialogue are unpaid non-clerical volunteers from the general community as compared to the majority from those from Christian and Catholic background that are from the clergy and this may be part of their everyday work. It is worth noting that leadership in the Muslim Community is volunteer based. They are not full-time employees of the peak body as those from the Catholic and other Christian leaderships are.

It is also worth mentioning that the Muslim leadership can be broken up into two types, the Lay community elected representatives, spokes people and leaders. And the Imams / clergy of which only some may have employment contracts tied to a particular mosque or school and as such are paid and others, perhaps most, are not paid at all.

3. COMMUNICATION, ENGAGEMENTS AND DEALINGS BETWEEN MUSLIMS AND CATHOLICS
3.1 Personal friendships

The most important relationships are those built on friendship. There are a great number of friendships that have developed or are developing across the two faiths. As more interaction, and engagement takes place, it follows that more understanding, trust and confidence in each other’s goodwill and intentions.

Friendships have also played an important role, especially during times of controversy, and misunderstanding. Simple phone calls providing reassurance and support to local Muslim leaders have minimized the impact when there have been controversial statements.

It is of great importance to repeatedly stress that comments of various leaders, do not reflect the feelings or stances of the rest of the community in which that leader is part of. As a result it is illogical that a reaction should be made against the whole community as a result of the comments of an individual.

3.2 Joint activities

Much fruit has been born out of interfaith dialogue. Many activities have resulted from discussions held during various interfaith events or from the relationships developed as a product from people meeting at these events.

Various partnerships have resulted such as joint fundraising concerts for the children of Iraq, initiatives like the Victorian Community Accord, and on various on issues addressing racism and justice.

3.3 Catholic support of the Muslim Community

Archbishop Hart has frequently shown his commitment to developing relations between the Catholic and Muslim communities, and his policy has been seconded by all his auxiliary bishops. Thus, at the Sunshine Mosque on the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Bishop Coleridge spoke powerfully about the relationship the Catholic Church wishes to develop with the Muslims. He used the analogy of the phoenix rising from the ashes. The difficulties facing the Muslim community are a testing time, he said. If Abraham was put to the test, no Muslim can expect to be free of a time of trial. Indeed, Muslims will emerge all the more alive and true from the ordeal.

In December 2002 on the occasion of the feast of Eid ul-Fitr, Archbishop Hart sent a letter of greeting and blessing to the Muslim Community of Melbourne, a practice which has continued each year since then and has been expanded to greetings to the Hindu and Buddhist communities on the occasion of their great feasts. Thus the relationship with the Muslims has spear-headed an expanding relationship with members of all faiths.

On 17 September 2004 the Archbishop, together with members of the Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission (EIC), Monsignor Peter Kenny EV (chair of the EIC), and Fr John Dupuche (chair of the Catholic Interfaith Committee), met with Muslim leaders, Mr. Yasser Soliman (president of ICV), Sheikh Rezhep Idrizzi (Chair of the Board of Imams) and Mr. Philip Knight (ICV). Archbishop Hart emphasised the respect the Catholic Church has for the Muslim community and reiterated his wish that the Catholic Church in Melbourne should provide every support and assistance to them. Mr. Yasser Soliman in turn expressed his thanks for the encouragement which the Catholic Church has given to members of the Muslim faith, both in Melbourne and overseas.
This was reinforced some time later when, at the conclusion of Mass at St Patrick’s Cathedral on the first anniversary of the Bali bombing and before a large congregation which included Mr. John Landy, the Governor of Victoria, Mr. Steve Bracks, the Premier, Mr. Doyle, the Leader of the Opposition, and many members of Parliament, Archbishop Hart publicly declared the wholehearted support of the Catholic Church for Muslims, especially at a time when they were under pressure due to events beyond their control.

On 21 August 2007, Archbishop Hart launched the official policy of the Catholic Church in Melbourne entitled ‘Promoting Interfaith Relations’; some guidelines for the parishes and agencies of the Archdiocese of Melbourne to assist in the promotion of interfaith relations in general and especially in the preparation of interfaith gatherings.’ Bishop Prowse gave the occasional address and Mr Yasser Soliman of the Victorian Multicultural Commission responded on behalf of the Muslim community. There were responses also from the Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish communities.

The text has been well received around Australia, including the armed forces, prison chaplaincies etc.

Archbishop Hart has made a point of showing his regard for Muslims. In early 2009 he attended Open Day at the Sunshine mosque and prayed in that holy place. Later on that year 2009 he received Shaykh Muhammad His ham Kabana the renowned Sufi master, and shared with him his desire for peace.

This attitude of Archbishop Hart springs not only from the concern of the Catholic Church for justice and peace between all peoples, but also because the Church can remember the difficulties that Catholic experienced during the early years of European settlement. Fleeing from oppression and famine in their home land, the Irish Catholics had to struggle in a colonial society which was not always favourably disposed to them and yet managed to flourish against all odds. For this reason it was entirely appropriate for the ICV to invite Edmund Campion to speak about his book Rockchoppers which recounts the struggles of the early Catholic settlers, and to encourage Muslims to look forward to a brilliant future in Australia.

### 3.4 Assistance with the ‘Catch the Fire’ court case.

In October 2002 a small joint committee, the ‘Catholic-Muslim Working Group’, was set up in order to explore possibilities for cooperative ventures between the Muslim and Catholic communities. It was also about this time that ‘Catch the Fire Ministries’ was attacking Muslims in ways that breached the Religious and Racial Tolerance Act (RRTA). The Islamic Council of Victoria lodged a complaint against the group and asked, at one of the meetings of the Catholic-Muslim Working Group, if the Catholic Church would support them in their complaint.

The Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission therefore decided to make an intervention, and this for many reasons. Firstly, the Catholic Church was able to state clearly and publicly its positive attitude towards Islam in general. Secondly, the intervention demonstrated to the ICV and the Board of Imams that the Catholic Church supported them really and actively. Thirdly, the intervention demonstrated that Catch the Fire Ministries could not claim to represent the Christian viewpoint. This was reinforced by the happy coincidence that the Uniting Church also sought to make an intervention, with the result that the cooperation of the Catholic Church and the Uniting Church in this matter has drawn these two Churches even closer: they have engaged in a common defence of Muslims who, like
Christians and the Jews, worship the one God of Abraham. Lastly, but not least, if the Catholic Church had not sought to make an intervention during the case it would be hard placed to come forward offering support after it was over.

Even though, on Monday 15 December, 2003, Mr Justice Higgins considered the three applications for intervention – from the Catholic Church, the Uniting Church of Australia, and the Board of Imams – and decided to dismiss them, the major objectives of the intervention were never in doubt.

Catholic involvement in the case continued, even after Justice Higgins decision. Rev. Dr. Patrick McInerney, a Catholic priest from Sydney and a recognised scholar of Islam, testified on behalf of the ICV. His input was invaluable and demonstrated the inconsequentiality of Catch the Fire Ministries.

In light of these vents, the EIC published two documents on its website: ‘The Catholic Church and Islam’, “Talking about Other Faiths”

### 3.5 Youth

On 13 July 2008 at Federation Square, to coincide with the visit to Melbourne of 25,000 international pilgrims en route to World Youth Day in Sydney, the youth of various religious communities in Melbourne came together “on pilgrimage to one another” in order to make a joint commitment to peace. It was the ‘Interfaith Youth Pilgrimage’. Many communities were represented: Indigenous, Baha’i, Buddhist, Brahma Kumari, Christian (both Protestant and Catholic), Jewish, Hindu, Muslim (from both the ICV and the AIS), Sathya Sai, and Sikh. The event was jointly planned by the young people from these communities themselves. Ms Inaz Janif, a Muslim, was one of the MC’s, and Hafiz Muhammad Sezgin chanted from the Koran.

These events had been preceded by school interfaith visits over a number of years where students from the Isik Colleges met with students from Our Lady of Sion, Box Hill; Star of the Sea, Gardenvale; and St Kevin’s, Toorak.

There had also been ‘Muslim and Catholic Youth Nights’ in 2007 and also in 2008 at which the topic was “Living my Faith in Contemporary Society”. This was expanded in 2009 and 2010 with a grant from the Victorian Multicultural Commission so that several meetings and dinners were held climaxing with an iftar during Ramadan 2010. The AIS has been conspicuous in these events which were entirely Melbourne based.

However there were many other contacts with youth, in particular from Indonesia: 2002: a Muslim delegation from Indonesia met with students of the Divine Word Missionary Theologate, Box Hill, who were accompanied by their Catholic Indonesian friends. In the years since, the ICV, in its Indonesian program, often organised meeting between young Indonesian Muslim academics and members of the EIC. Conversations took place on Muslim – Catholic relations and then the Muslims were given a guided tour around St Patrick’s Cathedral, since sacred buildings have a powerful voice.

In 2009 the Catholic Church in Melbourne took part ecumenically with the Indonesian Muslim/Christian Program ‘Uniting Through Faith’ established by the Uniting Church of Australia. Members spent two nights at the Janssen Spirituality Centre, a Catholic institution established by the Divine Word Missionary Society for the promotion of intercultural and interreligious relations. A joint dinner was held with CIC, and there was also a guided tour of St Patrick’s Cathedral.
3.6 *Iftar dinners*

Since 2002, the *iftars* at the conclusion of the fast during the month of Ramadan have become highlights of the relations between Muslims and members of the public in general, and with Catholics in particular. They have become a feature of university and parliamentary life, to name but two other contexts. They have enabled people from the most diverse backgrounds to come together in friendship and in reconciliation.

On 1 November 2004, the EIC and the AIS held a large *iftar* at Central Hall of ACU where some 250 guests were involved. This in turn led to the establishment of an annual meal between Catholic and Jews, showing how relations between Muslims and Catholics have led to wider involvements.

During the night of the *iftar* at ACU, Isik College in Broadmeadows was the victim of an arson attack. In response Bishop Prowse and other members of the Catholic Church visited Isik College and expressed the Church’s support.

*Iftras* have also been held in parishes such as Beaumaris and Meadow Heights. They have been held at the Cardinal Knox Centre on a number of occasions, most recently on 1 September 2009 where ACU and EIC held a joint *iftar* at the Cardinal Knox Centre following on the highly successful joint pilgrimage to Istanbul and Rome.

In this way, food has proved to be a powerful means of drawing people together in friendship.

3.7 *The joint Muslim and Catholic Pilgrimage.*

For many years the AIS has hosted tours to Turkey with the aim of developing relations between religions. These tours involve all manner of people even those with no faith disposition. Catholics have featured prominently in these tours from the beginning.

Following on these successful tours to Turkey, the EIC suggested that there might be a joint pilgrimage. Thus the EIC and the AIS organised a pilgrimage to Istanbul and Rome from 13-27 April 2009. Some 12 Muslims led by Mr Orhan Cicek and 12 Catholics led by Bishop Prowse spent a week in Istanbul and Konya, and then a week in Rome and Assisi. This led to a deep appreciation of the diversity of Christianity and Islam. The group was told several times in Rome that nothing of this sort had happened before.

4. EDUCATION ABOUT THE OTHER

4.1 *Conversations*

‘Conversations’ have been a significant feature of the Catholic Muslim relationship. The conversations have been: 2000: ‘Islam in Victoria’; 2001: ‘Journey’; 2002: ‘Living the faith in a multi-cultural society’; 2008: ‘Abraham’s sacrifice’. They take place in groups of about 10 Muslims and 10 Catholics. A speaker from one group presents some point of view on a topic and then a respondent from the other group reflects on what has been said, after which there is a general discussion. The process then is repeated in mirror image. This has brought about a sense of closeness and interchange which larger gatherings do not allow.

While the conversations have been generally open to a wider public, on occasion the conversations have been involved religious leaders only. Thus in 2003 the meeting was between Imams and Priests on the topic of ‘Journey’ at the Carlton Mosque. It was interesting...
and instructive to note the different approaches in the interpretation of the Sacred Texts. In 2005 Mr Yasser Soliman and Mr Philip Knight spoke to a gathering of priests at the Ministry to Priests Centre in Carlton on the topic of ‘Looking to the future: Catholic/Muslim cooperation in Melbourne’.

4.2 Joint presentations

A different approach was taken in July 2006 in one of the series entitled ‘Spirituality in the pub’ when Fr John Dupuche and Mr Waleed Aly spoke on ‘Building a dialogue with Islam’. This was repeated on another occasion in Clayton.

Different again were the joint presentations on Muslim and Catholic relations given in 2007 by Mr. Yasser Soliman and Fr John Dupuche to the Broadmeadows Deanery and the Brighton Deanery.

4.3 Conferences and symposia

The Catholic Interfaith Committee has held various interfaith one-day symposia in which Muslims have always been involved. For example: 2003: ‘The Heart’; 2004: ‘Forgiveness’; 2005: ‘Can we pray together?’; 2006: ‘Judgment – Mercy’. A particularly significant symposium took place on 13 November 2005 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Vatican II, Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate).

These symposia climaxed in the Interfaith Symposium on Death and Dying held at ACU over three days, 7-9 April 2010, which was an outstanding success.

The East-West Meditation Foundation continued its six-weekly meetings with members of other traditions. They also conducted larger-scale events where Muslims were often involved. For example, in 2003: ‘Between fear and hope’; 2005: ‘Empowering peace’; 2006: Meditation for one world’.

Every year, from 2002 till 2008, the ‘Abraham Conference’ involving Muslims, Christians and Jews, was held usually at one or other of the university campuses often with speakers from overseas. In 2002: ‘Peace and dialogue in a plural society: common values and responsibilities’; 2003: ‘Abraham, a symbol of hope and common bond for Jews, Christians and Muslims’; 2004: ‘Our future together: Muslims, Christians and Jews’; keynote speaker Sir James Gobbo, former Governor of Victoria; 2005: ‘the Legacy of Abraham’, Health of Body and Soul; 2006: ‘Multiculturalism, secularism and interfaith relations’; 2007: ‘Shaping a nation’s values: the Abrahamic contribution’; the opening address was given by the Governor of the State of Victoria, His Excellency Prof. de Kretser; 2008: ‘After sorrow: reconciliation, responsibility and Abrahamic Traditions’. These conferences grew in size and complexity, duration and impact but then tapered away so that by the time of the last conference it was simply an evening lecture.

Every attempt was made to protect ourselves from the complexities of events overseas on which Muslims, Catholics and Jews have no influence. However, the Gaza conflict of 2008/2009 eventually had its impact so that it seemed no longer possible to conduct a joint Abraham Conference. In any case, the results had ceased to justify the enormous amount of work involved.

In 2003, the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Association (JCMA) was set up and eventually incorporated. While the conferences are open to all Christians, Catholics have played a prominent role. Over the years, many hundreds of people have attended the JCMA
Conference at Pallotti College, ideally located in the countryside near Melbourne. The conferences have always been admirably conceived and conducted, with times of input, prayer, discussion, and simple friendship, with great taken to observe the dietary requirements,. The various topics have been: 2004: ‘My faith in Australia’; 2005: ‘Creation in crisis’; 2006: ‘Seeing others seeing us’; 2007: ‘Healing of memories: history and reconciliation’; 2008: ‘Take off your shoes: God and the just life”; 2009: ‘Building a better Australia: people of faith in a secular society’.

The conferences have been all conducted with a remarkable sense of unity and peace, with the result that the London bombing, which occurred at the very conclusion of the 2005 conference, was all the greater a shock. To show the general public of Melbourne that Jews and Catholics and Muslims stood together in protest at such violence, Archbishop Hart, Sheikh Fehmi Naji el-Imam and Rabbi Kluwgant gathered at the iconic location of Flinders Street Station to make a statement of mutual support and joint condemnation of the atrocity.

The JCMA conferences, attended by both men and women, were such a success that the decision was taken to conduct Women’s Conferences. These were in 2007: Sarah, Hajar and Mary: Continuing conversations yesterday, today and tomorrow; 2008: Celebrating difference within and between our faiths; 2009: Walking in each other's shoes; 2010: Women, faith and ethics. The women have continued with other meetings at regular intervals between conferences.

4.4 Australian Catholic University

Australian Catholic University (ACU), with its campuses in Melbourne, Ballarat, Sydney, Brisbane and Canberra, is fully committed to the work of interfaith. Indeed, it is a policy in the Catholic Church as a whole to ensure that all Catholic institutes of higher learning establish centres of interfaith relations.

In keeping with this encompassing policy, ACU established the Asia-Pacific Centre for Interreligious Dialogue (APCID) with its main office in Melbourne and its director Professor Raymond Canning located in Canberra.

On 31 August 2006 at the Melbourne Campus, APCID was launched jointly by His Eminence Mehmet Ali Sengul (honorary president of the AIS) and His Eminence Cardinal Murphy O’Connor (then Archbishop of Westminster).

Furthermore, the Vice-Chancellor of ACU, Professor Peter Sheehan AO, signed a joint declaration of intent with Mr Orhan Cicek, executive administrator of the AIS which states:

"Grateful for the strong and harmonious working relationship that has been built up between the two in relation to various projects since the year 2000, Australian Catholic University and the Australian Intercultural Society now intend to formalise this relationship in the context of the University’s newly launched Asia-Pacific Centre for Inter-Religious Dialogue by moving towards the establishment of the Fethullah Gülen Chair in Islamic Studies and Muslim Christian Relations."

This chair was established shortly afterwards to which Dr Ismail Albayrak was appointed. APCID has conducted other events regarding Catholic Muslim relations. For example, on 13 July 2006 jointly with Canberra Baptist Church, it held a conversation with Dr Bernard Sabella, Professor of Sociology at Bethlehem University. On 2 August 2006 jointly
with the US Consulate it sponsored a public lecture by Imam Yahya Hendi, Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University. In June 2007 it held a conference on Mawlana Rumi to celebrate the 800\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of his birth.

At the Parliament of World Religions, December 2009, APCID presented a session ‘Milestones and Goalposts’ which described important occasions in the past when Muslims, Catholics and Hindus took significant steps which have shown the way to our future interreligious relations.

The Centre has continued to expand its range of activities. Monash University and Australian Catholic University have established the Joint Islamic Studies program in which a range of units will be available in 2010, namely: Arabic language (Monash); Islam: Principles, civilisations, and influences (Monash); Introduction to Islam (ACU); Approaches to the Qur'an and Hadith (ACU).

5. LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

5.1 Muslim views of Christians and Catholics

It is common for people to collectively group many different and diverse people together into one stereotypical set of characteristics. This happens with Muslims when many people assume that Muslims are collectively the same. These people overlook the diverse histories, cultures, origins, religious, languages and denomination that Muslims have. The reality is that Muslims have as many different denominations as there are in Christianity. Each denomination has its distinct set of characteristics, beliefs and leadership structures and prominent scholars.

Likewise many Muslim also have a narrow understanding of Christians and Catholics. Many do not distinguish between different denominations or organizations. A main stereotype is the belief that Christians will try to undermine Islamic teachings and attempt to convert Muslims to Christianity. They cite stories of missionaries going to poor and needy people and giving aid and food with one hand and the cross in the other.

Another stereotype of significance is the Muslim image of the Christian world, is that of the Crusaders. Current day crusaders take the form of the military activities of the United States of America, England and the European Union. There is a common suspicion that these countries that are Christian dominant populations, are collaborating to undermine Islam and Muslims. This is associated with Christianity and that it is best to avoid getting to close to Christians and Jews for these reasons.

5.2 Cardinal Pell

The relationship between Muslims and Catholics depend vitally on good communication. This is especially true in the whirlwind of media which seems to need controversy and to create it if necessary. Accurate perception, true discernment and wisdom of speech are all the more essential.

Something of a crisis occurred in 2006 when Cardinal Pell gave a couple of speeches in the USA which were misinterpreted as being the teaching of the Catholic Church. While Cardinal Pell may have a personal opinion on various subjects, his episcopal authority extends only to matters concerning the faith of the Church. Even so, he does not speak for the
Church as a whole, which only the Pope can do.

To allay any misapprehensions in this regard, a meeting was arranged between members of the EIC and His Eminence Mehmet Ali Sengul accompanied by members of AIS. Bishop Coleridge came on behalf of Archbishop Hart and spelt out very clearly the positive and encouraging attitude of the Catholic Church towards Muslims.

5.3 Pope Benedict XVI

However, a few weeks later, on 12th of September, Pope Benedict XVI gave a speech at the University Regensburg which caused consternation around the world and undermined all that had just been achieved in the meeting with Mehmet Ali Sengul. The Pope’s speech seemed to say - but this too was a misunderstanding – that Islam is essentially belligerent. In order to show that such was not the import of the Pope’s speech, Archbishop Hart met with the AIS on 2 November 2006 and expressed the authentic teaching of the Church with regard to Islam.

Precisely because a sound relationship had been developed over many years, it was easier to resolve these issues. Commitment to dialogue and interfaith initiatives had built up a fund of good will, a space for dialogue. Thus Catholics were able to reassure their Muslim brothers and sisters that their respect was honest and sincere.

5.4 ‘Memorandum of Understanding’

In order to allay any suspicion that the Catholic Church might not wish to be involved with the Muslim Community, and in particular with the AIS with whom so many projects had been undertaken, the EIC proposed that there should be a ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ (MOU) between the AIS and the EIC for the period 2007-2009. This was duly signed on 29 July 2007 at a celebratory dinner at the Cardinal Knox Centre. The MOU begins with the following preamble:

"This Understanding is made in a spirit of profound respect for each other’s traditions. We acknowledge our willingness to both speak and listen, to communicate the deepest aspects of our traditions and to learn from each other what is held most dearly. It takes place in confidence, without fear or arrogance, without dominating or glossing over differences, never excluding or patronising, neither assimilating nor ignoring."

In keeping with this Memorandum whole range of activities was undertaken with the AIS, many of which are mentioned in these pages.

Conclusion:

This has been a brief survey of a plethora of activities that have resulted in a positive and constructive attitude between Catholic and Muslims. However, much remains to be done. The Muslim and Catholic populations in Melbourne are large, but only a few have been touched by these events and outlooks. A concerted effort must be made to involve the ‘grass roots’. The principles have been established but their realisation will take a long time. We can only hope that the good seed that has been planted will bear fruit in due season.