The bullying of Muslim children by other Australian children in the wake of the attack on the twin towers in New York on 11 September 2001 spurred an ACU National religious education lecturer to promote interfaith education.

To break down religious stereotypes and intolerance, Associate Professor Kath Engebretson is developing new curriculum materials with five Muslim teachers and five Catholic teachers, while researching successful interfaith education across the spectrum of religions.

The project is a collaboration between ACU National’s Asia-Pacific Centre for Inter-religious Dialogue (APCID), the Australian Intercultural Foundation and the Catholic Education Office of Melbourne.

“It struck me how terribly unfair it was that Australian young people could be discriminated against in this way for something they had no control over and which represented their religion in the most terrible way,” said Associate Professor Engebretson, who coordinates the Victorian activities of APCID.

“It made me want to promote learning about each other’s religions as much as possible. Australia is such a profoundly multicultural society, with so many religions, that if we are going to be a socially cohesive society, we need to critically examine the stereotypes we hold about religions that are different from our own.

“I have always been interested in dialogue between faiths, because there is far more that unites us than divides us. Our religions share a common faith in the transcendent, believing that there’s a world beyond us, beyond the reaches of our senses, a world of a good and loving transcendent being.

“All religions call us to compassion and action on behalf of justice.

“Every Catholic must know now that to be involved in dialogue with other religions is part of the Catholic call to evangelisation. It’s about seeing the common values and common good, to work together towards social justice and peace in our world.”

ACU National has the largest and most academically qualified cohort of religious education experts in Australia, and is well known and respected internationally.

“We are very good at the theory and practice of religious education, and interfaith education, and dialogue is a branch of that. We bring that body of expertise, that commitment to good religious education in Australian Catholic schools and a commitment to good interfaith education for Australian schools.”

Curriculum materials created through the project will be made available to teachers throughout Australia by Catholic Education Offices, ACU National and the Australian Intercultural Foundation later this year. They are expected to be relevant to public and private schools throughout Australia, including students of Studies of Religion in NSW and Religion and Society in Victoria.

In a related project, The Transformative Possibility of Interfaith Education, Associate Professor Engebretson would like to hear from any teachers who have experienced success developing interfaith dialogue and understanding, including between students with backgrounds in Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Email kath.engebretson@acu.edu.au with details.