SAFE SPACES BEYOND DIFFERENCES

Helping to bridge barriers of age, culture, religion, gender and more is a major role of the University's new Institute for Advancing Community Engagement (IACE).

“At its heart, it’s about creating safe, open spaces where people with differing starting points can come together in respect, to dialogue, to reflect and then to act in ways that will bring about transformation,” said lecturer Mr Anthony Steel, pictured below, who facilitates many of the activities.

IACE is nurturing interfaith and intercultural relationships between the university and other agencies in the community, such as the Islamic Council of NSW, the Affinity Intercultural Foundation and the Al Ghazzali Centre for Islamic Studies and Human Development.

“Together, we are building credible and truthful reciprocal relationships,” said Mr Steel, a former high school principal and teacher educator with a Masters in Theology from La Salle University, Philadelphia and a Graduate Certificate in Citizenship and Human Rights from ACU National.

Examples of recent events include a day of dialogue with mainly Muslim academics from Pattani, in southern Thailand; a three-day leadership program for young Australian Muslims from Melbourne; and Holy Places: Our Shared Heritage, held in conjunction with a visit to Australia by Mayor of Bethlehem Dr Victor Batarseh.

Careful planning was the most important component of hosting successful meetings, Mr Steel said. “All participants need to be confident they will be respected for their wisdom and experience, that their views will be heard and given due consideration, and that there is a climate of mutual respect.

“The events encourage engagement with others firstly as human beings, rather than as Muslims or Christians, or adversaries at any level, and they encourage reflection as well as action.”

Valuing diversity

The visitors’ book at the Josephite convent at Summer Hill includes some unique messages. “First ever Muslim sisters here! We loved you! Thank you from the bottom of our hearts.”

Home stays with families of staff and friends of ACU National, including religious brothers and sisters, were just one part of the three-day Beyond Today Leadership Program for young Australian Muslim leaders from Melbourne, held at ACU National’s Strathfield Campus in collaboration with La Trobe University’s Centre for Dialogue earlier this year.

“Participants found it a deeply powerful experience to share in the lives of people from other faiths and cultures,” said IACE associate lecturer Dr Youssef Taouk who helped run the event.

“They explored leadership issues with ACU National students and staff, and had opportunities to interact with experienced leaders who recognised their own strengths but were also able to admit their weaknesses with humility and modesty.

“The program reinforced the principle of diversity being a rich and valuable aspect of our Australian society.”

Sharing silence and strategies

ACU National’s Institute for Advancing Community Engagement welcomed a delegation of five citizens from the Province of Pattani, Thailand, earlier this year.

Thailand is predominantly Buddhist. Differences in history, culture and religion have all contributed to the recent violence and instability in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, the three southernmost provinces of Thailand, where the majority of the population is Muslim.

The Thai visitors engaged with students and staff from the University, members of the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, the Islamic Council of NSW and representatives of the Affinity Intercultural Foundation.

ACU National Yalbalinga Indigenous Support Unit manager Mr Ken Ralph spoke movingly about the experience of Indigenous Australians as a minority group, Mr Steel said.

Two other short presentations from forum participants were followed by a brief, quiet personal reflection. “People focused on the conflicts each faced in their own culture, and what hopes there were for change,” said Mr Steel, adding that a focus on common experiences, deliberate silences for reflection, and group discussions on genuine mutual engagement and conflict resolution strategies were valued activities.