

## ***The Parliament of the World's Religions, by Sue Flood osu***

*from A Place at the Table (Newsletter of the Social Justice Commission, Catholic Diocese of Toowoomba) Summer 2009*

At the beginning of December, I had the opportunity to attend the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne. This was an international event, attended by people from across the globe, and from at least thirty faith traditions and religious pathways.

Very often gatherings such as this one are cynically described as 'talk-fests', implying that the only thing that results from them is many more words, with little action by or transformation of the participants. To a degree, the 'talk-fest' label might be applied to this gathering, too. Perhaps, with around 5,000 participants and 650 workshops over 6 days, that was the only realistic expectation.

Amongst the plethora of speakers and workshop presenters people such as Catholic theologian Hans Kung; and Sr Joan Chittister, added to the richness of the conversations. Panels consisting of representatives from Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism, Christianity, and some with no particular religious background addressed issues which are of concern to everyone.

I suspect that, like me, most of the participants left the event encouraged about the future, with a little more hope and the glimmer of new insights. For me, this was the result not of any one workshop or any single speaker, but rather the outcome of being in the midst of so many good people all longing for and committed to working towards the same thing – a world in which we can work together, not in spite of, but rather because of our differences.

The differences were very obvious – in dress, in nationality and language, in religious practices, even in the detail of our beliefs. However, the common focus was also clear. People are striving to find ways to live with compassion, to make clear their commitment to nurturing an ecological and economic climate in which all people can thrive. As we engage with each other, we don't have to dissolve our differences, but rather commit ourselves to find ways to better understand each other, to respect our varied perspectives, to explore the common threads in our diverse pathways, and even to celebrate the feasts which are important to each other, and the truths that they encapsulate.

I came away from the week more convinced that difference need not be threatening, but is, in fact, enriching, and that Interfaith Dialogue is not only possible but essential as we walk in the company of our neighbours in a globalised world.