

Contribution of Muslims to the regional social harmony, interreligious dialogue and culture

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Although it is not definitely known when the first Muslim came and lived in Toowoomba, it is fair to note that in the online matching profiles from family trees records it is clear that the members of the Kaus family were the first Muslims lived in Toowoomba. Surprisingly, their living in Toowoomba goes back to 125 years before the first Mosque of the city was established in 2014. According to the website information, Ms Bebe Marion Kaus (1889 - ?), and Mr Abdul Ahab Kaus (1891 – 1960) both were born, lived and died in Toowoomba. Mr Abdul Ghias Kaus who was the first Muslim in Mt Gravatt, Brisbane also lived in Toowoomba. Details on them and other early Muslims are found at this website.¹

My attempts to collect information about the history of Muslims living in Toowoomba and their engagement with the wider community are mainly through my contacts within the community after the settlement of my family in the city in January 1993.

Engagement of Muslims with people of other faith started with the migration of a group of followers of Muhammad, peace be upon him, to Abyssinia to escape persecution in Makkah.² The Charter of Median³ was an

¹ See URL <http://www.mundia.com/au/Search/Results?surname=KAUS&birthPlace=Australia>

² See URL http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migration_to_Abyssinia

agreement between all residents of Medina including Jews, Christians, Muslims and pagans, a first model of multifaith and multicultural modern statehood. The Qur'an teaches that mankind is one nation⁴ and Allah has created them as His representatives⁵ on earth.

Arrival and Early Days in Toowoomba

The first Eid prayer we prayed on our settlement in Toowoomba was held in our backyard. About 10-12 people participated in the congregation in late 1993. In the morning the local daily newspaper sent a reporter to cover the story. The next day the *Chronicle* published the news with a photograph. There were several Muslim students at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) when I joined the University in January 1993 as a Lecturer of Statistics in the then Faculty of Sciences. In the University, we shared the chaplaincy in the G-block for day-time prayers including the Jumma prayers on Fridays.

To meet the religious needs of the community we established the Islamic Society of Toowoomba (IST) in 1994. The Society was registered as an incorporated body with the Department of Fair Trading, Queensland. Later the IST became a member of the Islamic Council of Queensland (ICQ) and Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC), peak body of Muslims in Queensland and Australia respectively.

³ See URL <http://www.constitution.org/cons/medina/macharter.htm>

⁴ Al Qur'an, Chapter 2, Verse 213.

⁵ Al Qur'an, Chapter 2, Verse 22.

Over the years IST has played key role in leading the Muslims in Toowoomba and the region, working closely with other communities in Queensland. This long standing relationship at the state and national level of Islamic organisations and their leadership were highly valuable to get their support for the local Muslims. One of the main objectives of the Society was to establish a mosque in Toowoomba. It took 20 years to achieve this cherished objective with a lot of hard work of many people and support from the Muslims of almost every part of Australia.

In 1995, as the number of Muslim students grew, USQ created a basement Muslim Prayer Room to fit about 25-30 worshippers. We used to have community gatherings, religious functions, and children's Qur'an classes there. The USQ Islamic Centre was set up in 2000 to meet the religious needs of the large number of Muslim students. In 1998-1999 there was a resolution of the USQ Council to dedicate land for a mosque if the Muslim community could provide funds for the construction. The Islamic Centre was set up in an independent portable building by USQ, but the IST has been managing its use and operations.

In addition to the usual daily prayers, the Centre was the only hub of Islamic celebrations for Muslims in Toowoomba and the region. IST regularly organised Islamic Centre Open Days attracting a wide variety of participants from the local community. Among the invited speakers in the Open Day events were USQ Chancellor Bobby Brazil (2009), Vice Chancellor Professor Bill Lovegrove (2007), Professor Akhtar Kalam of Victoria University (2006), Mr

Gary Lee Edwards from Melbourne (2007), Engineer Ikebal Patel, a former President of Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC), A/Professor Mohamed Abdullah of Griffith University, Mrs Faiza El-Higzi of Romero Centre (2011), Director of USQ Multicultural Centre Dr Krzysztof Batorowicz, USQ Chaplain Coordinator Mr Evan Reichelt, USQ Dean of Faculty of Arts Professor Peter Goodall (2011) and many others.

The Islamic Centre has been a very successful partnership between USQ and IST to look after the religious and cultural needs of thousands of international students. Many potential students and parents contacted me about access to the Islamic practice and availability of Halal meat/food in Toowoomba before deciding to come to USQ. The University promoted its commitment to the students of Islamic background through the support it provided at the Islamic Centre. As the coordinator of the Centre I have been working as the liaison between the University and IST since its inception.

Engagements with faith communities

Ever since I arrived in Toowoomba Muslims engaged with the members of the wider community within the USQ and outside. My earliest formal contact with the Catholic Church was via Sr Amahl Bruce who organised a meeting with Fr Brian Sparksman in his residence in 1994. Mr Ejaz Ahmad accompanied me in the meeting. We discussed a wide range of issues related to the community and religion. Our contact and communication has been regular and extended to social

gatherings of followers of Islam and Christianity. We also had multifaith discussions on various topics of interest and on current affairs. We invited Brian and other church members to the Islamic Centre many times for meetings and dinner with the Muslims. In return, members of the Christian faith invited Muslims in churches in many occasions.

At one stage, I requested Brian to write a testimonial for me. He may have thought that I was trying to leave USQ, and asked me not to leave Toowoomba. He told me that we had a lot to do together. He invited me to speak in gatherings of church followers several times. Later I came to in contact with Dr Mark Copland of Catholic Justice Commission, and we did a lot of things of mutual interest over the years. I also participated many meeting with the other denominations of Christianity. When the Canada based preacher, Rev Methew Zacharias visited Toowoomba I managed Dr Rashid Raashed of Sydney to participate in a religious dialog at USQ with the request of my Engineering colleague, A/Prof Ron Ayers.

In 2012, when Brian invited me to his home to discuss some issues of common interest, I told him about the need of a Mosque in Toowoomba. He started thinking as to how he could help us in this venture. He suggested me to be in contact with the leaders of the TRC and get them on board from the beginning of the project to secure their support. He even told me that he would talk to some wealthy landlords in Toowoomba to search for an appropriate land for the first Mosque in the city. Couple of years prior to this, I met former Roman

Catholic Bishop of Toowoomba Bishop William Morris in a meeting at USQ. I mentioned to him that I was thinking to build a Mosque in Toowoomba. He instantly replied, "I will support you."

Over the years we become close partners on so many religious and multifaith events. In 2007 when USQ celebrated 40 years I participated in the multifaith service with leaders of different faiths. Bishop Morris came to the Islamic Centre numerous times with many of his church followers and invited Muslims to various churches on many occasions. Bishop Robert McGuckin's episcopal ordination as the sixth Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Toowoomba took place at St Patrick's Cathedral, Toowoomba on 11 July 2012. Since then, I have shared stage with the new Bishop in many events, and found him very friendly, supportive and a man of knowledge and understanding. He spoke in both the Thankyou Meeting in June 2013 and Opening Ceremony of Toowoomba Mosque on 30 March 2014. He also welcomed the first Mosque in Toowoomba in his interview with the Chronicle in May 2014.

I believe the long standing engagement and relationship of the Muslims in Toowoomba with diverse faith and multicultural communities, and regular communication, consultation and attempts to keep the leaders of the community informed on the development and progress of the Mosque project, since its inception on a regular basis helped develop confidence and support of the wider population. Some highlights on the major activities, engagements, and

cooperation with the non-Muslim communities are summarised in the following document.

Involving the wider community for first Mosque

In the beginning of the 21st century, on several occasions some Muslims in the community approached me to set up a mosque in Toowoomba. Given the limited number of families permanently settled in the city I was unconvinced that it was a viable community to justify a mosque. This was also my view because of the unlimited access that the local Muslims had to the USQ Islamic Centre. But when the community became larger and the number of permanently settled families increased there was a genuine need for a mosque.

USQ actually encouraged the local Muslims to build a mosque and seek cooperation of the Toowoomba Regional Council (TRC) as this would be first mosque in the city. I met with the Manager of Planning and Development of the TRC several times at USQ and in his Council Office. Our first meeting at USQ in 2010 was organised by Mr Dave Povey, Executive Director of Campus Services, in his office. At that stage I was looking for land on the Toowoomba campus of USQ to build a mosque with money donated and collected by the local Muslim community. When I asked the Manager of Planning and Development of TRC about the possibility of getting any Council land near the University, his response was negative. It was suggested in the meeting that the Community seek help

from local real estate agents to identify appropriate land that we may consider to purchase.

Since 2011, USQ was looking for alternatives to the current Islamic Centre within a three-year timeframe. The suggestion was to set up a mosque by the Muslims, while the University would continue to provide sufficient on campus facilities to meet the needs of its Muslim students and staff. In addition to my meeting with the Chief Operating Officer, Mr Bernard Lillis and Mr Dave Povey, I met with the new Deputy Vice Chancellor, Mr Carl Rallings about the management of USQ Islamic Centre. He was keen to get everything done and sought my suggestions to overcome the extension of the Centre and some issues raised by the students of Steele Rudd College. Later he and Mr Dave Povey became the main contacts for the project when Mr Lillis left USQ.

Community support in the media

In February 2013, we went to see the church property on sale at 217 West St with a view to setting up the first mosque in Toowoomba. After rigorous community consultation in Toowoomba and Brisbane, Muslims decided to purchase the property. Before a formal contract was signed the local media became interested in publishing a story on it. The first story published by the *Chronicle* on the 28

May 2013 under the title, “Toowoomba Muslims Plan Suburban Mosque.” The online version of the story can be accessed online.⁶

The *Chronicle* was running an online poll on the first mosque in Toowoomba and also opened a Facebook site for public opinion. Based on the online poll and Facebook page comments the *Chronicle* published another online news at 1:04pm on the same day (28 May 2013). The headline of the news was “Majority supports city’s first suburban mosque”. The story stated that sixty-six-per-cent of the 700 respondents to a *Chronicle* online poll voted that a Muslim mosque would be welcomed in Toowoomba. Many of the comments on the *Chronicle*'s website and Facebook page were also in favour of a new mosque.

Next morning (29 May 2013) the *Chronicle* published another article, “Nothing to fear over mosque plans: City's Muslim leader”. The online comments and follow up story is available at the website.⁷ Another follow up report published on the project on 29 May 2013 reflected on the commitment of the Muslim to the wider community.⁸

In my email to *the Chronicle* I wrote, “Thanks for covering the story very professionally. I am pleased with the overwhelming support of the wider community for the mosque project. On behalf of the community I would like to extend our sincere gratitude to all those expressed the sense of understanding

⁶ See URL <http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/plans-to-establish-a-mosque-in-toowoomba-to-cater-1883684/>

⁷ See URL <http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/plans-to-establish-a-mosque-in-toowoomba-to-cater-1883684/#comments>

⁸ See URL <http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/nothing-fear-over-mosque-plans-citys-muslim-leader/1886374/>

and acceptance to a potential new development. Muslims are living in the city for over twenty years as colleagues, neighbours, and friends peacefully without causing any problem to anyone while performing their religious duties. Why should it be different now? We are in close contact with the community and religious leaders, and have been engaging significantly with the residents and faith organisations of the city for the common good and reputation of Toowoomba."

The support from the local leaders for the proposed mosque was reported⁹ on 30 May 2013. The report contained views of some prominent community and religious leaders of Toowoomba. All of them supported and welcome the first mosque in Toowoomba. Bishop Robert McGuckin said people in Toowoomba needed to be more tolerant and accepting of people who shared different beliefs to their own. "We talk about people's right to religion, and then we will not allow them their own place of worship," Bishop McGuckin said. "The site is zoned as a place of worship and Muslims have a right to worship like the rest of us". "People are scared of the unknown," he said. Bishop McGuckin said Muslim people formed an important part of our community. "People should step back and have a look. There needs to be tolerance," he said. "We have to be welcoming of other people and their beliefs. It is when you segregate people, that is when you get problems."

⁹ See URL <http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/mosque-a-welcome-addition-bishop/1886846/>

The city Mayor Paul Antonio said the city had always prided itself on its diversity. Cr Antonio said council would work with the Islamic Society of Toowoomba about its plans to establish a mosque at Harristown. "We are a very diverse society. There has been a solid Muslim presence in Toowoomba for many years," Cr Antonio said. "There are many faith traditions in Toowoomba. "We have always been very welcoming of those faiths," he said. Cr Antonio said he understood why the city's Muslims were looking at an alternative place of worship. "The Muslim population has been meeting at the University of Southern Queensland for years," he said. "They are just looking for an alternative site to cater for growing numbers. "We are working together in an effort to resolve any issues."

Following the news in the Chronicle, the ABC Radio contacted me for an interview. The interview was broadcast on 30 May 2013. The report can be accessed from the website.¹⁰

The IST organised a large "thankyou" community meeting for driving community support for the first mosque project in Toowoomba. The weekend event included John McVeigh, Minister of Agriculture Queensland, Catholic Bishop Robert McGuckin of Toowoomba, Professor Jan Thomas, Vice Chancellor of University of Southern Queensland, A/Prof Mohammad Abdalla and Dr Nada Ibrahim of Griffith University, and Mr Muhammad Yusuf, President of Islamic

¹⁰ See URL <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-05-30/mosque-plans-consider-existing-churches/4722384>

Council of Queensland on 22 June 2013. The recorded audio version of the presentations is accessible via the website of the IST.¹¹

Post settlement engagements

The church property was settled on 16 January 2014 and the first prayer session was held on the next day. On Wednesday, 22 January 2014 the *Chronicle* published a positive story.¹² The daily also published my commentary below online.

The recent steady growth of population and enhanced opportunities for work in Toowoomba, have attracted increased numbers of people to the Garden City of Australia. Muslims in Toowoomba are working in almost all leading professions including as university lecturers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, accountants, business managers, social workers and many others. This natural growth of Muslims has created the obvious and expected social, religious and cultural needs for the community. A place of worship is a basic need for followers of any faith.

Muslims in the city have been active, and play a significant role, in the multi-faith and multicultural fabric of the society through numerous community engagements which have helped foster harmonious relationships with the

¹¹ See URL http://www.isot.net.au/ist_org_au%20-%20Web%20Links.htm

¹² See URL <http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/toowoombas-first-mosque-has-opened-in-a-disused-ch/2146051/>

followers of different churches and faiths in Toowoomba. We have no doubt that a mosque in Toowoomba would make a significant positive addition to the cultural make-up and religious mosaic in the city. Furthermore, the mosque will directly contribute to Toowoomba's economy by attracting more businesses, tourism, professionals, and domestic and international students.

I thank TRC and congratulate the City of Toowoomba for its inclusiveness. We offer our very special thanks to every individual and institution that have been, and will be, involved in the process of establishing and maintaining this mosque with their inspiration and advice as well as providing spiritual, material, and financial contributions. May God bless our wonderful city of Toowoomba and guide its people to peace and prosperity.

On the 24th January 2014, the *Chronicle* published another story with a very misleading heading, "Christian ministry forced out to make way for mosque", which was merely a reflection of the conflict between the owner of the church building (Uniting Church) and the Westside Church that rented the property for 14 years of which the last 4 years were without any formal lease. Interesting online discussions evolved on the story. Some readers commented against the Mosque and the others supported the right to set up place of worship. One reader wrote, "You can't blame the Muslims they were purchasing the property. The issue here is between landlord and tenant. If another buyer was buying it the Ministry would still be in the same situation."

Another person commented, "The media has fairly low scruples in these situations. The headline is deliberately inflammatory seeming to suggest that it was Muslims that kicked the Christians out. I know papers like to stir controversy to increase sales and sell more advertising, but surely today's journo's should have some sort of ethical and/or moral compass. A headline like just incites anger and hatred, as most people give scant attention to the content of the story." All postings on the topic are accessible online.¹³

Involving the wider community

On the 30 March 2014 the first mosque in Toowoomba was formally opened. The First Toowoomba International Food Festival was also organised in conjunction. The *Chronicle* reported the event with the following heading and story: Crowds lined up for samples of the 12 international foods on offer while leaders of various religious faiths talked to the throng of people. The full story is accessible from the internet.¹⁴ The opening ceremony was participated by a range of dignitaries from Toowoomba, Brisbane, Melbourne, and Sydney.

Muslims in Toowoomba have been an active part of numerous community wide programs often include federal, state and local government officials, community leaders, politicians, religious leaders and members of the local community. They have an ongoing record of involvement in community work,

¹³ See URL <http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/a-strange-tale-of-friction-between-two-christian-m/2148350/#comments>

¹⁴ See URL <http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/mosque-opens-amid-rejoicing/2214720/>

including speaking engagements and educational activities as well as policy and program design.

Toowoomba Muslims have engaged with many government agencies at Federal, State and Local levels to include ASIO, police, health and family services, refugee and multicultural services. These agencies have benefitted greatly through their contact with the Muslims by increasing their Muslim and non-Muslim understanding and as a result of these interactions have contributed to community understanding and harmony while solving many potential security and social problems within the region.

Muslims have led numerous fundraising initiatives to help victims of natural and manmade disasters at home and abroad including help distribute \$42,000 to the victims of flash floods in the Toowoomba and Darling Downs region in 2010, and over \$7,000 to Rohingyas in Myanmar very recently. They also helped settle many refugees and new immigrants in Australia.

Here are some significant events and activities where Muslims played a key role:

(1) They helped organise, and delivered a paper as participant in the, pre and post Parliament sessions of the Parliament of World's Religions in Toowoomba in 2009 and 2010. This program included a number of various religious bodies, which included the Catholic and Anglican bishops. Additionally, Government Officials, Mayor of Toowoomba, and Vice-Chancellor and President of USQ also were participants.

(2) Participated in multi-faith prayers and services at USQ, with senior religious figures from Christian, Jewish, Baha'i and Buddhist communities, on its celebration of 40 years in 2007, and serving as a USQ Chaplain since 2008.

(3) Have presented numerous talks/seminars and information sessions on various cultural and religious topics which informed participants how to better engage in cross communication and interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim people.

These presentations took place at various organisations to include the Toowoomba Hospital, Catholic Churches, Department of Communities, health workers, members of different cultural organisations, students and teachers of various regional schools such as Downlands, St Xavier's, St Joseph's, Christian Outreach, and St Mary's Colleges to promote and enhance better understanding.

(4) Helped many local schools, industries and Government offices including Oakey Air Force Base, Toowoomba Correction Centre, Wagner Industries, Department of Communities, Child Protection Agency, Federal and State Police, ASIO etc. to deal with cultural issues relevant to Muslims and Islamic practices.