

## **Reach out to the Muslim community, we're all Aussies together**

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*Denis Hart is Archbishop of Melbourne and president of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.*

BRUTAL attacks by the forces of Islamic State on Christian, Yazidi, Muslim and other religious and ethnic minorities in northern Iraq continue to be a deep concern. We can feel so remote from the conflict it is hard to know how to help. But we can act in our own country to promote peace.

A higher terrorism alert level, police raids on terror suspects, the deployment of Australian military forces, Islamic State urging -attacks in Australia and a tragic fatality in Melbourne have led to increased tensions in the community. There have been reports over the past fortnight of abuse and threats directed at both Muslims and Christians.

The challenge for Australians is how we relate to each other on a personal level. Do we replicate the divisions and threats seen overseas, or do we respond differently?

We must not fall into the trap of adopting the conflicts of another region as our own. We shouldn't isolate people so their grievances and resentments are allowed to fester. Rather than exclude or shun people because of their religious beliefs, we should reach out to them as fellow Australians.

The purpose of terrorism is to divide and conquer. It is to shatter the trust that holds communities together and replace it with suspicion and fear. But distrust and fear only dominate if we let them.

The burden of suspicion has fallen on the minority Muslim community in Australia because of the actions of extremists. That is not fair, and we should not allow it to continue.

We should let the law enforcement authorities investigate and prosecute criminal behaviour, whether by people of faith or none. Our job as Australians is to build and strengthen relationships in local communities.

The next time you see someone of Muslim background say hello, smile and start a conversation. We need to talk to each other to find the common values we share. We are all part of the same community, and we have to learn to understand each other and get on.

One of Australia's strengths historically has been our ability to welcome people into our community, whatever their racial, ethnic or religious background.

Australian Muslim leaders have a crucial role speaking out against violence and the Islamic State. We should support them in their important work.

I commend the government for its humanitarian efforts on behalf of the people of northern Iraq. I support limited and measured military assistance from Australia to help defend the people of northern Iraq. But military solutions do not bring lasting peace.

Earlier this month Pope Francis counselled "war is never a necessity, nor is it inevitable. Another way can always be found: the way of dialogue, encounter and the sincere search for truth. The time has

come for religious leaders to co-operate more effectively in the work of healing wounds, resolving conflicts and pursuing peace.”

At first glance, such comments can seem naive. How can we counter violence except with armed force? But consider the fruits of war in Iraq and Afghanistan and other countries. The -results have not been a lasting peace.

The tension in the Middle East has again revived the views of some who see religion as divisive and threatening. But religion properly pursued is peaceful. Religious groups are no more than communities of people who share a common faith and values. As people of faith, we are obliged to live our faith and that means living it publicly. For some, that makes us easily identified. I’m -obviously a Catholic priest because of how I dress, and I hope to show I am a follower of Jesus in my words and actions. Many people of Muslim faith are also easily recognised by the clothes they wear and their way of life.

There is such a diversity of views in the community that we can only get along together by -respecting each of those beliefs — no matter how much we may disagree at times.

But in a good community we can go further. In a good community, we can empathise with our neighbours. We can empathise with Muslim people in our community that they are in a difficult spot because of the actions of a small number of extremists.

Our challenge is to reach out to each other to build the community we need for lasting peace in Australia. Don’t let the terrorists change our open hearts to suspicion and fear.