

Faith and Spirituality in Settlement

In her book, *Religion, Spirituality, and the Refugee Experience in Melbourne, Australia, 1990s–2010*, Dr Susan Ennis explored these roles that spirituality and religion play in refugees' flights from their home countries and during their resettlement. Working with Melbourne-based refugees from Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Iraq, who were of Christian, Muslim and Animist backgrounds of varying religiosities, Dr Ennis' research found that for nearly all refugees, their religiosity assisted or greatly assisted their experiences of seeking refuge and during initial settlement in Australia.

Australia can be much more secularised than other countries, and systems and services can sometimes overlook this important facet of people's lives. This Settlement Insights Special Edition Newsletter brings together thinkers who describe how settlement providers (both religious-specific but also non-religious specific organisations), practitioners, and settlement stakeholders can integrate understandings of faith into their settlement work.

This Special Edition Newsletter, Settlement Insights: Faith and Spirituality in Settlement, includes contributions from:

1. **Viv Nguyen AM, Chairperson** | Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) and Chair | Victorian Multifaith Advisory Group (MAG)
2. **Nesreen Bottriell, CEO and Fazlinda Faroo, Director of Community Programs** | Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR)
3. **Galila Abdelsalam OAM, Founder and CEO and Beengul Ali, Refugee Settlement & Community Development Manager** | IWA Australia
4. **Dr Susan Ennis and Dr Sarah Haggart** | Religions for Peace (RfP) Australia

Faith holds a crucial place in settlement for many refugees and migrants. This includes community connection, building a sense of belonging, and shaping the everyday settlement journeys of people building new lives in Australia.

Long before arriving in Australia, religion and spirituality often inform people's lives in their countries of origin and sustain people on their journeys.



Understanding Faith in Settlement Work: Reflections from Interfaith Practice



Viv Nguyen AM, Chairperson – Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) and Chair – Victorian Multifaith Advisory Group (MAG) Victoria

Through years of working in interfaith dialogue, I've witnessed firsthand how faith shapes the settlement experiences of refugees and migrants. Bringing together diverse faith communities has taught me valuable lessons that settlement practitioners can apply in their daily work.

Faith as Resilience and Continuity

Faith has sustained many refugees through persecution, displacement, and resettlement. Religious practices, daily prayers, weekly services, and annual festivals create continuity when everything else has been disrupted. For settlement workers, this means asking practical questions: How can we help clients access faith communities? Do our program schedules accommodate religious observances? These aren't peripheral concerns; they're central to wellbeing and identity.

Beyond Surface-Level Understanding

Working across multiple Christian denominations, various Islamic traditions, different Buddhist schools, and distinct Hindu communities has taught me that diversity within traditions is crucial. A Hazara Shia Muslim's experience differs vastly from a Rohingya Sunni Muslim's. Coptic Orthodox Christians face different considerations than Pentecostals.

Settlement workers must approach faith with genuine curiosity rather than assumptions. Create space for clients to share what their faith means to them. This demonstrates respect while providing practical insights for service delivery.

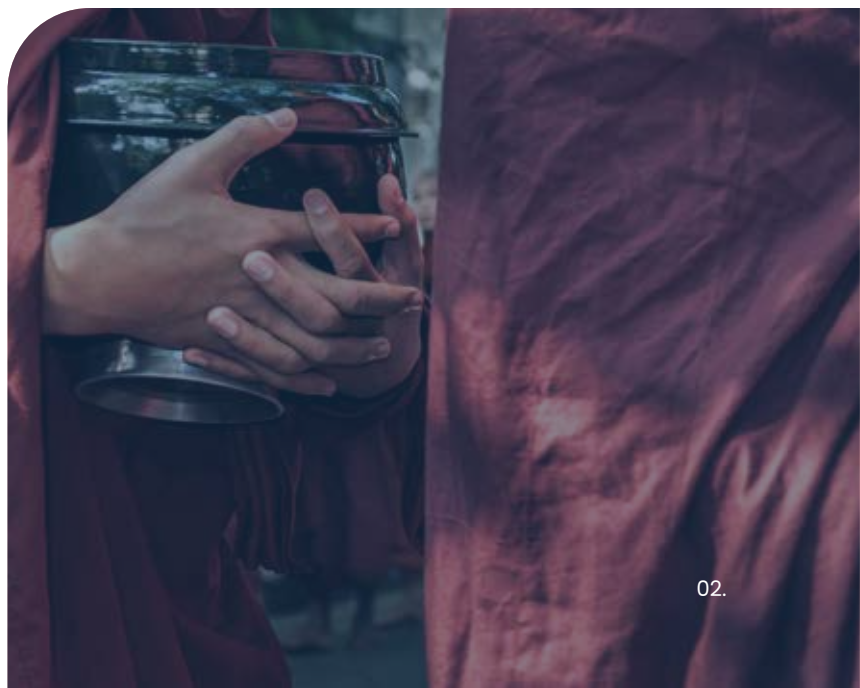
Navigating Complexity with Respect

Faith sometimes creates tensions in settlement. Women may experience religious expectations differently than men. Young people negotiate between family traditions and new cultural contexts. Some refugees carry trauma related to faith itself. LGBTIQ+ individuals may struggle with faith communities that don't accept them.

Interfaith work has shown me the importance of respectful, honest, robust conversation. Hold these complexities without judgment. Create safe spaces for difficult conversations while recognising when faith strengthens versus when it complicates settlement goals.

Interfaith Dialogue as Bridge-Building

One of the most powerful lessons from interfaith practice is that dialogue isn't just about discussing theology, it's about building social capital, reducing isolation, and creating networks of mutual support across boundaries.





Settlement workers can facilitate this by connecting clients with interfaith initiatives, supporting community events celebrating diverse traditions, and helping new arrivals understand Australia's religious pluralism. These connections have practical implications: faith communities often provide employment networks, emergency support, and cultural orientation that formal services cannot replicate.

Practical Steps Forward

Effective engagement with faith communities requires genuine partnership. Settlement practitioners can strengthen their practice by building relationships with diverse faith leaders and communities, attending training that includes religious literacy, and reflecting on their own assumptions and potential biases.

Remember that supporting clients' faith needs isn't separate from settlement support, it's integral to it. When we engage thoughtfully with faith, neither dismissing its significance nor assuming we fully understand it, we provide more responsive and effective support. Years of interfaith collaboration have proven that curiosity, humility, and genuine respect create the foundation for meaningful dialogue and practical outcomes.



Viv Nguyen AM is Chairperson of the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) and Chair of the Victorian Multifaith Advisory Group (MAG). Arriving in Australia as a 12-year-old refugee from Vietnam, Viv brings lived experience, executive leadership and over 25 years of service across corporate, community and government sectors.

A passionate advocate for genuine community engagement, Viv has long championed the role of cultural identity, faith and community connection in strengthening belonging and participation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she played a pivotal role in connecting government with Victoria's culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse communities, ensuring faith leaders and multicultural organisations were central to communication and response efforts.

Appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in 2021 for significant service to multicultural Victoria, Viv continues to advance inclusive leadership and amplify the voices of refugee and migrant communities across the state.

Faith in Migrant Communities – Insights From the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights



Nesreen Bottriell, Chief Executive Officer
Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR), Victoria

When families arrive in Australia, children's wellbeing sits at the heart of every settlement story; yet too often, it is overlooked in policy and service design. At Wellsprings for Women, we know that supporting children means supporting their mothers, carers and communities too.

For over 30 years, Wellsprings has worked alongside migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and children in Dandenong and surrounding areas, creating safe spaces to build skills, confidence and community connections that make settlement more secure and hopeful.



Fazlinda Faroo, Director of Community Programs
Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR), Victoria

In Australia today, Muslim communities represent approximately 4% of the total population. Muslims have had a long history in Australia, predating colonisation and continuing into modern day. Muslim communities in Australia are represented by a diverse mix of cultures, ethnicities, sectarian groups, languages and practices.

The role of faith in people's lives is equally diverse, with a range of factors influencing a person's connection, affinity to, and expression of faith, which can include cultural and familial practices and traditions, settlement and migration experiences, and political contexts in countries of origin. The notion of religion, religiosity, faith and spirituality differs between people and communities, meaning there is no singular version, or practice of Islam, within the Muslim community.

At AMWCHR, we recognise and celebrate these differences, and we refrain from making assumptions about religious identity and affinities. Acknowledging that religion can be experienced as both an oppressive and a strengthening force in a person's life, not one or the other.



Within this context of diversity, it is critical to understand that for some people, their experiences may have been shaped by the misuse of faith, where religion has been weaponised and/or politicised to cause harm, leading at times to traumatic experiences of persecution and rights abuses. Muslims in Australia have also been subjected to racism and discrimination as a consequence of their ethnicity and faith identity.

Responses to such experiences are varied and while some may disengage entirely from religion, others take protective steps to hide or minimise their outward expression of faith. Conversely, faith can also play a protective role for many Muslims who may draw from their beliefs to navigate traumatic experiences. Importantly, practitioners and services should adopt a person-centred approach that recognises the diverse expressions and exercise of faith that individuals hold to avoid stereotyping, bias, and assumptions.

For many migrant Muslims, faith, whether outwardly expressed or held more closely, is often a source of strength, guidance, hope and healing. Whether through community or religious practice and teachings, people use religion to make sense of life experiences. Faith for Muslims is both an individual practice as well as a source for collective connection through community-based prayers and celebrations, and is an integral part of their identity exercised in different ways and forms.

A person's ability to practice their faith and their beliefs is a human right. It is critical that services are at the forefront of countering anti-migrant narratives and those that vilify communities based on their faith beliefs.

Nesreen Bottriell is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) at AMWCHR, bringing 20 years of executive leadership experience from across the not-for-profit, community, and international development sectors. Drawing on her personal and professional experience, Nesreen is a dedicated advocate for social justice, equity, and the rights of marginalised women, children, and their communities. She seeks to foster understanding, challenge bias, and amplify issues that impact communities through meaningful dialogue that addresses social inequity.

Nesreen is a member of the National Women's Equality Alliance Gender-Based Violence Working Group and is a Board Member for Safe and Equal and Respect Victoria, and has a Master of Community and International Development (MCID), Master of Business Administration (MBA) and a Bachelor of Commerce (B.Comm). She has contributed to multiple research projects and publications, including on racism and Islamophobia, family violence, forced marriage and access to justice.

Fazlinda Faroo is the Director of Community Programs at the AMWHCR and is a social worker with 30 years of experience working with Muslim families and youth. Over the past 8 years, Fazlinda has focussed her work on preventive education, specialising in community work with Muslim and CALD communities delivering prevention initiatives on issues including family violence, early and forced marriage, women's rights and leadership, relationship and parenthood, and settlement.

Fazlinda holds a Masters in Social Work from Monash University, a PostGraduate Diploma in Social Research (Sociology) and a Hons in Social Work and Psychology. She is also certified in Narrative Therapy (Dulwich Centre) and an accredited DISC Personality consultant. She has further obtained a Diploma in Islamic Studies from the International Islamic University Malaysia. She is currently a member of the Australian Association of Social Workers and the Singapore Association of Social Workers.

Faith Matters: Supporting Refugees Through Settlement

Faith is a cornerstone in the settlement journeys of many refugees and migrants, offering strength, resilience, and a sense of identity. For newly arrived communities in Australia, religious support helps individuals navigate challenges, maintain cultural connections, and safely integrate into their new environments.



Galila Abdelsalam OAM, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, IWA Australia, Queensland



Beengul Ali, Settlement & Community Development Manager, IWA Australia, Queensland

Gaps in Faith-Based Support

While initial settlement programs provide new arrivals with addresses of local mosques, churches, or faith-based organisations and introduce them to community leaders, this support is often insufficient. Many individuals face complex situations without adequate faith-based guidance, including:

- Hospitalisation and access to faith-appropriate care or dietary requirements
- Youth experiencing identity crises without mentorship
- Families navigating relationship challenges with limited community guidance
- Individuals with life-altering injuries avoiding legal or compensation processes due to religious beliefs or a lack of clarity
- Young people navigating gender-related matters
- Young people feeling caught between cultural, religious and broader societal expectations

Religious sensitivity is frequently overlooked across workplaces, health services, education, childcare, courts, correctional facilities, and mainstream community programs. Addressing these gaps is critical for ensuring refugee and migrant wellbeing and successful settlement outcomes.

IWA's Approach

Since the early 2000s, IWA Australia has facilitated a wide range of workshops on cultural awareness and religious sensitivity, while actively contributing to research and consultations in these fields. Our initiatives are shaped by community needs, emerging trends, and evidence, and are guided by insights from religious leaders, academics, and service professionals.

We ensure all training and workshop materials are accurate, culturally relevant, and safe. Recognising that individuals from the same faith may practice differently based on ethnic or cultural backgrounds, we embed cultural awareness into all religious sensitivity programs. This holistic approach enables more nuanced, effective support for diverse communities.

Programs and Initiatives

IWA has contributed to a wide range of workshops, consultations, and publications, including but not limited to:

- Respectful relationships
- Islamic art and Indigenous history
- Conversations on gender for community empowerment
- Consultations on palliative care
- Consultations on religious burials and funerals
- Consultations on family planning
- Family disputes and court systems

We also provide cultural and religious awareness training to employers, aged care providers, hospitals, schools, and mainstream services. Our advocacy programs guide new arrivals in accessing faith-appropriate resources, navigating services, and building supportive networks.

Why it Matters

Integrating faith and cultural awareness into settlement services ensures refugees and migrants feel safe, respected, and empowered. It strengthens community connections, supports mental health and wellbeing, and fosters positive long-term outcomes.

At IWA, we remain committed to bridging gaps by delivering culturally and spiritually responsive services, creating environments where refugees and migrants feel supported and understood, and empowering individuals and families to thrive in their new communities.

Key Takeaways

- Faith is a vital resource in refugee settlement, supporting resilience and cultural identity.
- Settlement services must integrate religious and cultural sensitivity to respond to diverse needs.
- IWA's programs combine evidence, community consultation, and practical training to address gaps in mainstream and community support.
- Ongoing advocacy, workshops, and consultations ensure refugees can navigate complex challenges safely and confidently.

Faith is more than personal belief. It is a foundation for building inclusive, resilient communities where refugees can thrive.

Galila Abdelsalam OAM is a community leader and advocate with over 30 years of experience supporting multicultural communities in Australia. She was one of the founding members of the Islamic Women's Association of Queensland (IWAQ), established in 1991 to assist Muslim women and families with settlement, education, and support services; this organisation later expanded and became IWA Australia Ltd, where she now serves as Chief Executive Officer.

Under her leadership, IWA Australia has grown into a national service provider offering aged care, disability support, settlement engagement, and community development initiatives, with a mission to empower culturally and linguistically diverse individuals and communities.

Galila is recognised for her unwavering commitment to advocacy for women's rights and community inclusion. Her significant contributions have been acknowledged with the award of the Order of Australia Medal (OAM).

Beengul Ali is deeply committed to supporting multicultural communities. Having arrived in Australia as a refugee child, she has built a career marked by resilience and achievement, earning a Bachelor of Criminal Justice and Criminology (majoring in crime prevention), a Juris Doctor in Law, and a Graduate Certificate in Dispute Resolution and Mediation. She further broadened her understanding of community needs through four years of legal practice at a law firm.

Since 2010, Beengul has played a vital role at IWA Australia Ltd, working closely with communities to support newly arrived refugees with settlement, integration, and advocacy for their rights. She is also a proud mother of two daughters and is driven by a strong commitment to helping communities thrive and flourish.



Social Cohesion: Religions for Peace Australia and its Initiative



Dr Susan Ennis, Secretary - Religions for Peace Australia (RfP Australia), Victoria

Social cohesion in Australia has long been supported through multicultural policy initiatives. However, changing patterns of belief, belonging, and identity require renewed attention to religion and faith as important dimensions of social cohesion. Australia's success as a multicultural society depends not only on welcoming new arrivals but on understanding the deep role that religion and spirituality play in their lives. For many migrants and refugees arriving in Australia, faith is fundamental to their identity, provides crucial community support, and shapes how they navigate their new home. Yet, this essential dimension of settlement is often overlooked in mainstream services and policy discussions.



Dr Sarah Hagggar, Multifaith Administrator - Religions for Peace Australia (RfP Australia), Victoria

Since the early 21st century, Australia's religious profile has transformed significantly, shaped by increased religious diversity, declining Christian affiliation, and a movement away from institutionalised religion. The 2021 Australian Census showed Islam as the largest non-Christian faith (813,400 followers), followed by Hinduism, which increased from 21,500 in 1996 to 684,000 in 2021. Buddhism grew to 615,800 adherents, while the Sikh community increased markedly from 12,000 in 1996 to 210,400 in 2021. The Jewish population remained relatively stable at around 100,000. Simultaneously, the Census recorded substantial growth in those identifying with no religious affiliation. Importantly, the AGZ Study in 2019, from ANU, Deakin University, and Monash University, found that many young Australians describe themselves as spiritual or interested in faith beyond institutionalised religion. These findings highlight both the diversity and ongoing relevance of religion and spirituality in Australia.

Despite this increasingly multifaith reality, there remains limited in-depth understanding, coordinated strategy, and sustained funding at the Federal and State/Territory levels to address religion as a key component of social cohesion. Australian governments, bureaucracies, and agencies would benefit from significantly increased religious literacy and more consistent engagement with faith communities to strengthen trust and understanding.

Into this gap steps Religions for Peace Australia (RfP Australia), founded in the 1970s in Melbourne and currently the only national multifaith organisation with presence in every state and territory. RfP Australia has supported dialogue, cooperation, and shared action among faith communities, contributing often quietly to Australia's social cohesion through engagement with governments on social welfare and cohesion issues, networking best practice responses to family violence, advocacy for people seeking asylum, promoting multifaith education, and convening gatherings and events across Australia, increasingly through online platforms.

Public engagement with this work is reflected in the reach of the RfP Australia website, which recorded approximately 8 million visits in 2024. Additional websites dedicated to Multifaith– Education, Chaplaincy, and Prayers provide accessible resources that encourage understanding, spiritual reflection, and respectful collaboration.

Emerging from this changing context, the Multifaith Council of Australia (MFCA) is an initiative of RfP Australia to be launched mid-2026. It will bring together First Nations voices, major faith traditions representing over 99,000 people (according to Census figures), and RfP Australia representatives. The MFCA aims to strengthen social cohesion through inclusive leadership and collective discernment on issues affecting Australia's multicultural society.

RfP Australia also plays an active international role as a member of RfP Asia, headquartered in Tokyo. With 22 member nations representing approximately 52% of the global population, and links to RfP International based in New York, this work connects Australia's multifaith engagement to global peacebuilding and cooperation initiatives.



When settlement services recognise and respect the role of faith in people's lives, outcomes improve: newcomers who can practice their faith freely settle more successfully, and communities that understand religious diversity become more welcoming and cohesive. By raising religious literacy across government, service delivery, and community understanding, RfP Australia works to build a more harmonious nation for everyone.



Learn about Australia's Gen Zs: negotiating religion, sexuality & diversity Project

Learn about Religions for Peace Australia

Learn about the Multifaith Council of Australia

Dr Sue Ennis has a professional background in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) as well as coordinating language programs for newly arrived adult refugees/immigrants in Melbourne. She currently teaches in northern Melbourne. Sue has also taught English in Turkey, and the People's Republic of China, and worked in Israel. She was born into a Methodist then Uniting Church family. In late adolescence, she joined a social justice house church in a multifaith area. After working in Cambodia in 1992, she became a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). In the mid-2010s she completed a PhD and book on "Religion, Spirituality and the Refugee Experience". An outgrowth of her research has been her 15 year commitment to Religions for Peace Australia (RfPA), serving as Secretary for Religions for Peace Australia and previously Victoria. She now represents Australia on the Asian Conference on Religions for Peace Women's Committee, and is currently serving as the Deputy Secretary-General of the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace Oceania.

- PhD free download "Religion Spirituality and the Refugee Experience" RMIT <https://refugeespiritualityreligion.com/Ennis.pdf>
- Book: *Religion, Spirituality, and the Refugee Experience in Melbourne, Australia, 1990s-2010*, Palgrave Macmillan New York 2016

Dr Sarah Haggar is a social anthropologist and policy researcher specialising in religion, politics, and interfaith relations. She completed her PhD at the University of Queensland in 2024, examining organisational structures and decision-making in international interfaith organisations, with fieldwork across Asia and Australia. Sarah brings expertise in translating research into policy outcomes, having worked extensively with religious leaders, government officials, and community stakeholders. As Multifaith Administrator with Religions for Peace Australia, she conducts applied research on religious-political interactions, develops evidence-based policy submissions, and coordinates strategic engagement with national religious leaders and political decision-makers to advance multifaith collaboration and social cohesion. She holds concurrent Research Associate positions at the University of Queensland, contributing to projects on transnational communities, inclusive pedagogy, and curriculum development, and as a sessional academic teaching social anthropology courses.

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Settlement Insights was developed based on the continual discussions during SETSCoP meetings, events, and consultations, where policymakers and practitioners share insights on the latest settlement issues and trends.

The Settlement Engagement and Transition Support Community of Practice (SETSCoP) brings together service providers delivering the SETS program to collectively harness and maximise the sector's contribution to effective settlement of refugees and migrants in Australia.

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