

Interfaith dialogue builds bridges

ACU theologian Emmanuel Nathan is helping build bridges between different religious traditions, bringing faith leaders to campus to speak to students against the backdrop of conflict in the Middle East.

Dr Nathan is giving ACU students the chance to meet local faith leaders as part of a class this semester on Abrahamic religions.

"Conscious of what's going on in the world, we hosted an interfaith encounter at the Strathfield campus with Rabbi Zalman Kastel, founder of Together For Humanity, Fr Patrick McNerney, from the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, and Mr Ahmet Polat from the Affinity Intercultural Foundation," Dr Nathan said.

"Their presence with us at this difficult time, their willingness to still come, to share, to listen, to not shy away from what's affecting the world 'over there' and our communities 'here' - it was so humbling and quietly powerful."

Dr Nathan said interreligious learning was more important than ever.

"These encounters are happening at a time of setbacks, with a defeated referendum in Australia, and Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities hurting and in disarray with what's going on in Israel, Gaza and Palestine," he said.

"We realise how fragile interreligious learning is, and how responsibility for its transmission must be carefully passed on without bravado or too much ego.

"We are so grateful for small mercies - for words of wisdom, practical and profound. For silence in the face of irresolvable difference. For deep listening and learning. They are small steps, but steps all the same."

Third-year Bachelor of Education / Bachelor of Arts student Jennifer Marcus grew up in a Catholic family from a Middle Eastern background, where Islam played a big role.

"My background inspired me to delve deeper into the commonalities and differences shared by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," Jennifer said.

"Given the diverse multicultural community we belong to, I believe that understanding the Abrahamic faiths is a practical necessity in our interconnected world."

Jennifer said the interfaith dialogue on campus was a "profound" experience.

"The opportunity to engage with three leaders of different faiths provided me with a profound understanding of the importance of fostering genuine conversations," she said.

"There is a critical need for open and respectful dialogue to develop bridges across various faiths, especially during times of war and heightened tensions."

Final-year Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Arts student Amirah Elakhras said that as a Muslim student at a Catholic university, she saw firsthand the importance of transcending religious boundaries.

"This class bridges the gap between different faith communities, making it a valuable experience for anyone seeking to promote tolerance, knowledge, and unity," she said.

Amirah said the chance to meet faith leaders had sparked a new understanding of the need for genuine understanding and respect across the religious divide.

“Peaceful coexistence among people from diverse religious backgrounds is not only possible but essential,” she said.

“It became evident that we had much to learn from one another - we are unified by our humanity.

“Through this process, we can replace fear and hatred with mutual respect and understanding, which has the power to reduce violence and prejudice.”