BACKGROUND:
The Queensland Intercultural Society (QIS) held its annual ifthaar dinner at the Queensland Parliament House during the week. It was an opportunity to bring together various members of the local community and politicians in a social gathering and learn about the importance of the Ramadan month to Muslims around the world.

Copy of the Invitation
The Hon John Mickel MP requests the pleasure of your company for QIS 2010 Parliament House Ramadan Iftar Dinner on Wednesday 1 September at 5.30pm at the Premiers Hall, Queensland Parliament House.

A great many of the world's faiths are now represented in Australia and freedom of religion is cherished by all Queenslanders.

Religious and cultural awareness is an important ingredient for a harmonious society. Each faith has a set of core values and it is these common values that foster unity and peace in our community. The values of sympathy, mercy, justice, fairness, compassion, peace, love and friendship are universal values common to all religions.

The Iftar Dinner aims to enhance and deepen the relationship between Muslims and members of the wider community. Invitations have been extended to parliamentarians, journalists, consul generals, senior members of academia and faith and community leaders. On September the 1st, we celebrate with the Iftar Dinner. It is one of the most important events for the Islamic community.

The event is sponsored by the Queensland Intercultural Society. We expect the dinner will conclude by 8.00pm. As seating arrangements are very limited, your early response would be appreciated.
The proceedings commenced with the adhan, the call to prayer, and there was a recitation and translation from the Qu’ran.

Amongst the speakers were the Premier of Queensland, Anna Bligh, the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, John Mickel MP, Minister for Disability Services and Multicultural Affairs, Annastacia Palaszczuk MP, leader of the Opposition, John-Paul Langbroek MP, Chair of the Ethnic Communities Council of ECCQ, Ms Agnes Whiten OAM, QIS member, Mr. Murat Coskun and Prof Gerard Hall of the Australian Catholic University.

Master of ceremonies on the night was QIS Public Relations officer, Ms. Maria Maruca.

There was bi-partisan commitment to the continued support of multiculturalism in Queensland and the Speaker of the House, who welcomed the guests to Parliament House, wished that some of the spirit of Ramadan of tolerance, generosity, humility and forgiveness was more in evidence at Parliamentary sessions.
Mr. Murat Coskun described the day in the life of an Australian Muslim and Prof Hall talked of the increasing efforts of the Universities in Australia to encourage studies and dialogue on religion.

In her speech, Ms Agnes Whiten said that the ifthaar gave everyone present an opportunity to reflect on and value the significance of the occasion on a personal level. Australia, she said, stood as a beacon in today's world for the freedom of its citizens who are able to practice their religions and faiths without fear of victimization, discrimination or assault. "When we see what is happening in New York right now, with the controversy over the construction of a mosque and the violence that has followed that controversy, you will see why I can say that we here in Australia have much to be grateful for."

Mr. Fatih Asar, QIS president, concluded the night's programme with two QIS Special Achievement awards to Mr. Murat Coskun for his support of the soon-to-be-opened Resha College in Algester, and to Prof Gerard Hall for his work in fostering inter-faith dialogue.
Speech to Guests of the Queensland Parliament

Gerard Hall SM

Honourable Speaker of the House, John Mickel, ministers & parliamentarians, members of the Queensland Intercultural Society, representatives of other civic communities and religious faiths, journalists, consuls general, friends, colleagues and fellow-Queenslanders.

First may I express my appreciation for the invitation to be present on this occasion when we celebrate the end of Ramadan with our Muslim sisters and brothers. It is tribute to the Queensland parliament that this important celebration of our Muslim community is turned into an occasion for celebrating the multi-faith and multi-cultural reality of Queensland.

My own background and interests that seem to have landed me in the spot of speaking to you this evening spring from my life and work as a priest, academic and theologian at Australian Catholic University. Bearing in mind that many people are still rather wary of what all this talk of intercultural and interfaith dialogue means, it may be helpful to briefly mention something of my own, my church’s and my university’s understanding of and commitment to that little word ‘dialogue’.

The somewhat famous Swiss theologian, Hans Kung, has said (repeated at Parliament of World Religions in Melbourne last year): “No peace on earth without peace among the nations. No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. And no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions”. Situating this within our Queensland/Australian context, we would want to say harmony, peace and justice in our land depend on the quality of our lives and relationships that embrace all the traditions, religions and cultures that call Australia home. This includes, first and foremost, intercultural dialogue with our Indigenous peoples, something many Australians are only beginning—or are still yet—to learn.

Secondly, it means building respect—something more profound than tolerance—among all religious and cultural traditions. Such respect cannot remain at the level of an abstraction—such as agreeing there are wonderful things in the Inuit culture without ever having actually met an Eskimo! It needs to be built on relationships of life and action through dialogue. It requires meeting people of other traditions and engaging them as fellow human beings at school, work and in the market-place. In certain cases it may involve other types of dialogue—such as intellectual and spiritual sharing. But it is the dialogue of life and action that is the most crucial.

In any case, this is what my own church now teaches in terms of relations with other traditions—which is not to say it is something that all, or even
most, Christians are very good at putting into practice! On the positive side, most Christian churches in Brisbane have their own committees and commissions to promote dialogue across the religions and cultures of our land. In our church, this is spearheaded by the Archdiocesan Commission for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations. And there is a particular Committee with responsibility for promoting dialogue with Jews and Muslims (with whom we share a rich biblical tradition going back to Moses and Abraham). In terms of the Muslim community here in Brisbane, we have been guests to their mosques and Muslim celebrations—as many of them have visited our churches joined us for special Christian feasts.

At the academic level, Australian Catholic University is not on its own in promoting dialogue. Here in Brisbane we have the excellent example of the Multi-Faith Centre at Griffith University. Among other initiatives was its hosting of the Interfaith Summit ["One Humanity, Many Faiths: an Interfaith Summit for Peace and Harmony in Australia and the Asia Pacific Region] Brisbane City Hall, February 2009. However, speaking now for Australian Catholic University, in 2006 the Asia-Pacific Centre for Interreligious Dialogue was established and, in 2007, the Fetullah Gullen Chair in the Study of Islam and Muslim-Catholic Relations (Professor Ismail Alabyrak). The university also provides a Graduate Certificate in Interfaith Relations focussing on women’s leadership (approximately 30 have now graduated from this program).

Another important initiative in recent times has been the annual International Abraham Conferences held in Sydney, Melbourne and occasionally Brisbane. These conferences, promoted by the Australian Intercultural Foundation / and QIS and sponsored by Jewish, Christian and Muslim groups look beyond themselves to broader social concerns e.g. recent conference: “Walking Together: Our Faiths and Reconciliation”.

At the informal level many other things are happening. To take but one example: Fatih came to my class to speak of his experience as a pilgrim on a Muslim-Christian interfaith Tour of Turkey and Rome. One of my students said to me afterwards that this was the first time she had ever met a Muslim ... which surprised me. But this is a typical challenge we now face ... providing meeting points and opportunities to meet across cultural and religious barriers.

I believe that despite occasional racist views and xenophobic behaviours that unfortunately occur, there is a movement of consciousness in our nation and state that has energy and vision for intercultural and interreligious dialogue. It has the support of mosques, temples, synagogues and churches, governments at all levels, community, civic and other non-government bodies. One has only to surf the internet: “Sea of Faith in Australia”;
“InterAction: Multifaith Youth Network”; “Australian Partnership of Religious Organizations”. It is at especially the grass-roots level of intercultural and interfaith networking that things are most promising for the future growth of the movement.

Tonight we celebrate that achievement and recommit ourselves—with our Muslim brothers and sisters—to making Queensland a home where people can celebrate their religious, ethnic and cultural identities and live together as one people in harmony, peace and dialogue.