

# A Christian Perspective on Social Cohesion

## NCCA Policy Paper

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## Executive Summary

Australia is one of the world's most successful multicultural societies. People from hundreds of cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds have helped shape a society characterised by democratic institutions, respect for the rule of law, and a strong commitment to the common good. Yet, social cohesion cannot be taken for granted.

Recent years have seen increasing social tensions arising from economic uncertainty, housing pressures, political polarisation, racism, and growing antisemitism, including the appalling Bondi Beach massacre. Islamophobia is increasing. The impact of overseas conflicts reverberates in Australian communities. These pressures challenge trust between people and weaken the relationships within our multicultural society. They raise an urgent question: what actually holds Australian society together, and how do we strengthen it?

For Christians, social cohesion is not simply a public policy objective. It is an expression of the Gospel's call to love our neighbour, welcome the stranger and seek the common good. This paper argues that churches make a distinctive contribution to Australian society by strengthening three essential dimensions of social cohesion:

**Belonging** – creating communities where people are welcomed, valued and included.

**Bonding** – nurturing relationships of trust, mutual care and shared responsibility.

**Bridging** – building respectful relationships across differences of culture, faith, ethnicity and social background.

These three dimensions provide a practical framework for understanding how churches contribute to stronger communities through worship, education, community services, advocacy, ecumenical cooperation and interfaith dialogue.

The paper also argues that social cohesion depends upon supportive public policy. Governments, civil society, faith communities and local organisations all share responsibility for fostering inclusion, reducing inequality and creating opportunities for meaningful encounter between people of different backgrounds.

The National Council of Churches in Australia believes that a cohesive society is one in which diversity is recognised as a strength, human dignity is respected and every person has the opportunity to participate fully in the life of the community.

# 1. What is Social Cohesion and Why it Matters?

Australia is living through a period of significant social change. Communities are experiencing the pressures of rising living costs, housing insecurity, and increasing political polarisation. At the same time, the rapid growth of digital media has transformed public debate, creating new opportunities for connection while also amplifying misinformation, hostility and social division.

International conflicts increasingly affect relationships within Australian communities, contributing to heightened tensions and increases in antisemitism, Islamophobia and racism; reminding us that social harmony cannot be taken for granted. They have prompted renewed questions about what holds Australian society together; and what is social cohesion?

Social cohesion describes the strength and quality of relationships within a society. It reflects whether people feel they belong, whether they trust one another and whether they are willing to work together despite their differences. Social cohesion cannot exist without justice, inclusion and respect for the equal dignity for every person.

For the National Council of Churches in Australia, social cohesion is not about demanding conformity or suppressing difference. Nor is it simply the absence of conflict but rather creating the conditions for genuine dialogue to occur. It is about building relationships of trust that enable people from diverse backgrounds to live together with mutual respect, shared responsibility and hope.

One of most significant contributions to the study of social cohesion has been the work of the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute. Since 2007, its *Mapping Social Cohesion* surveys have tracked Australians' attitudes towards belonging, trust, participation, inclusion and acceptance.

The Scanlon research identifies five interconnected dimensions of social cohesion:

- **Belonging** – people's sense of connection to Australia and to their local communities.
- **Worth** – emotional and material wellbeing.
- **Social inclusion and justice** – perceptions of fairness, opportunity and trust in public institutions.
- **Participation** – involvement in civic, community and democratic life.
- **Acceptance and rejection** – attitudes towards diversity and experiences of discrimination.

Taken together, these dimensions demonstrate that social cohesion is not simply about people "getting along". It is about whether individuals feel valued, whether institutions are trusted, whether communities are inclusive and whether everyone has opportunities to participate fully in society.

The 2025 *Mapping Social Cohesion* report offers encouraging insights. Despite economic pressures and global uncertainty, Australians continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience. One of the strongest protective factors identified in the research is the strength of local communities. Neighbourhoods where people know one another, participate in community life and support each other during times of crisis consistently display higher levels of social cohesion. This finding is significant. It reminds us that social cohesion is built from the

ground up. Churches present at the local level can and do contribute significantly to social cohesion.

When social cohesion is strong, communities become more resilient. People are more likely to volunteer, support neighbours during times of crisis, participate in civic life and resolve differences peacefully.

When social cohesion weakens, suspicion grows. Communities become isolated from each other, public trust declines and social divisions become more difficult to overcome.

For Christians, these concerns are deeply familiar. Scripture consistently calls believers to build communities marked by justice, compassion, hospitality and reconciliation. Love of neighbour, care for the vulnerable and the pursuit of peace are central to Christian discipleship.

Churches therefore have an important contribution to make—not only through public advocacy but through the everyday work of building relationships within local communities across Australia.

## **2. Understanding Social Cohesion**

Although there is no universally accepted definition of social cohesion, most researchers agree that it concerns the quality of relationships that bind people together within society. This paper proposes a simple framework built around three interconnected ideas: Belonging. Bonding and Bridging. Together these capture both the personal and social dimensions of cohesion.

### ***Belonging***

Every person needs to know that they belong. Belonging is more than membership of an organisation. It is the experience of being recognised, accepted and valued by others. People develop a sense of belonging through families, neighbourhoods, schools, sporting clubs, workplaces, churches and community organisations. These communities shape identity, provide support during difficult times and give meaning to everyday life.

For churches, belonging begins with the conviction that every person possesses inherent dignity because each is created in the image of God. Christian communities therefore seek to become places of welcome, hospitality and inclusion where people can grow in faith while contributing to the wellbeing of others.

### ***Bonding***

Belonging alone is not enough. Families and communities also require strong relationships built on trust, care and shared responsibility. Bonding refers to the strength and quality of relationships within a community. It is seen in friendship and when neighbours care for one another, volunteers support local organisations and communities respond together during times of crisis. Strong bonds create resilience. They encourage generosity, reduce isolation and foster confidence that people will not face life's challenges alone.

Churches have traditionally played an important role in strengthening these relationships through worship, pastoral care, education, charitable services and local community engagement. For Christians, these relationships are grounded in Jesus' command to "love your neighbour as yourself." Christian communities seek to embody this command through prayer and practical service.

## ***Bridging***

While strong internal relationships are essential, they are not sufficient. Healthy societies also require people to reach beyond the boundaries of their own communities. This is the work of bridging. It occurs when individuals and communities build relationships with people whose experiences, cultures, beliefs or backgrounds differ from their own. These personal encounters develop understanding, reduce prejudice, challenge stereotypes and strengthen trust across society.

The Christian tradition offers a powerful model through the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus deliberately chose a Samaritan—a member of a community regarded with hostility by many of his audience—to demonstrate what genuine neighbourliness looks like. The message remains profoundly relevant today: to reach out beyond our safe boundaries, to encounter and care for those who are different.

Social cohesion is strengthened when individuals choose encounter over suspicion, dialogue over hostility and cooperation over division.

## ***Belonging, Bonding and Bridging Together***

These three dimensions reinforce one another. People who experience genuine belonging are better able to develop strong relationships within their communities. Communities that possess strong internal bonds are more confident in reaching outward to others. Societies that encourage meaningful engagement across cultural, religious and social differences become more resilient, peaceful and united.

For Australia, this means building a society in which diversity is not simply tolerated but recognised as a source of strength. For the churches, it means contributing to communities where every person is welcomed, relationships are nurtured and bridges of understanding are continually built across difference to people of other faiths and none.

## **3. Australian Identity and Multiculturalism**

Discussion about social cohesion inevitably raises questions of national identity. What does it mean to be Australian today? What values unite us? How can people from many different cultural and religious backgrounds share a common future while maintaining their distinctive identities? These questions have become increasingly important in recent years as Australia has become one of the world's most culturally diverse nations.

The National Council of Churches in Australia believes that diversity and unity are not opposing ideas. A confident national identity can embrace cultural, religious and historical diversity while strengthening the bonds that hold society together.

## ***Multiple Identities***

Identity is rarely defined by a single characteristic. People belong simultaneously to families, neighbourhoods, professions, sporting clubs, faith communities and cultural traditions. A person may identify as Aboriginal, Christian and Australian; or Lebanese, Muslim and Australian; or Chinese, Catholic and Australian. These identities do not compete with one another. They enrich one another. Social cohesion is strengthened when people are free to express these multiple identities while participating fully in Australian civic life.

## ***Three Narratives of Identity***

Indigenous leader Noel Pearson offers a helpful framework for understanding Australia's national story. He argues that Australian identity is shaped by three great interconnected narratives.

The first is the enduring heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whose cultures represent the oldest continuing civilisations on Earth and whose relationship with Country stretches back more than 65,000 years.

The second is Australia's Anglo-Celtic inheritance, which established many of the country's democratic institutions, legal traditions and systems of government that continue to shape Australian public life. It also includes the painful legacy of colonisation, history of dispossession, exclusion and the denial of rights of First Nations peoples.

The third is modern multicultural Australia, shaped by successive generations of migrants who have contributed to the nation's economic prosperity, religious diversity, cultural richness and social vitality.

Pearson argues that Australia's future depends upon recognising and holding all three stories as integral to our national identity. This vision offers an important foundation for social cohesion because it encourages inclusion and an interwoven narrative rather than competition between different histories and communities.

## ***Social Cohesion, Multiculturalism and the Churches***

Australia's multicultural success has not happened by accident. It has been built through public policy, community leadership and the everyday willingness of millions of Australians to live respectfully with one another.

Churches have played an important part in this story. Many migrant communities first found belonging through local congregations, which provided practical support, language assistance, friendship and opportunities for participation in Australian society.

To acknowledge the contribution of churches also requires honesty about our failures. Australian churches have publicly acknowledged the profound harm caused by child sexual abuse within church institutions and have accepted the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Churches have also reflected deeply on their involvement in aspects of colonisation and the policies that harmed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including the forced removal of children from their families. These histories continue to shape relationships today. Trust cannot be restored through words alone. It requires truth-telling, accountability, justice and a sustained commitment to change. Social cohesion is never built by ignoring the past. It is strengthened when we have the courage to acknowledge failure, seek forgiveness and work towards reconciliation.

The National Council of Churches in Australia affirms multiculturalism as one of the nation's great strengths. At the same time, multiculturalism requires ongoing investment. Building trust between communities, addressing racism and creating opportunities for dialogue are essential if diversity is to remain a source of national resilience rather than division.

Social cohesion therefore requires more than celebrating diversity. It requires building relationships across diversity. This is the work of belonging, bonding and bridging.

## **4. Christian Perspective on Social Cohesion**

The Christian commitment to social cohesion is not simply a response to contemporary public policy. It is deeply rooted in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and has shaped the Church's understanding of community for two thousand years.

At its heart, Christianity is about relationships: our relationship with God, with one another, with the wider community and with creation. The biblical vision of justice and peace is one in which every person is treated with dignity, communities are marked by compassion and reconciliation, and those who are vulnerable or different are welcomed rather than excluded.

Many of the qualities that define social cohesion today; belonging, participation, trust, inclusion and mutual responsibility, are also central themes throughout Scripture.

### ***Love of Neighbour***

When Jesus was asked to identify the greatest commandment, he joined together love of God and love of neighbour (Matthew 22:37–39). These two commands cannot be separated.

Christian faith therefore has both a personal and a social dimension. Love is expressed not only in prayerful worship but in practical care for others. It is seen in hospitality, generosity, forgiveness, concern for those experiencing hardship and poverty, and working for social and climate justice.

This understanding of neighbour extends well beyond family, friends or members of one's own community. Christians are called to recognise the dignity of every person and to work for the common good of society as a whole.

### ***Welcoming the Stranger***

Hospitality is one of the Bible's most consistent themes. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, God's people are called to welcome the stranger, care for the outsider and protect

those who are vulnerable. Jesus identifies himself with those who are hungry, homeless, imprisoned and displaced: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." (Matthew 25:35)

For many Australian churches, this teaching has inspired long-standing ministries with refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, people experiencing homelessness and newly arrived communities.

Welcoming the stranger is therefore not simply an act of charity. It is a way of recognising our shared humanity and affirming that every person belongs within the human family.

## ***The Good Samaritan: A Blueprint for Social Cohesion***

Few biblical stories speak more directly to social cohesion than the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). Jesus deliberately chose a Samaritan as the hero of the story. Samaritans were widely regarded with suspicion and hostility by many Jews of the time. By making the Samaritan the compassionate neighbour, Jesus challenged deeply held assumptions about identity, prejudice and belonging. The story teaches that neighbourliness is defined not by ethnicity, religion or social status but by compassion expressed in action.

The Samaritan crosses social boundaries, responds to suffering and restores the dignity of another person without expecting anything in return. For Christians today, this remains a model for life in a socially and culturally diverse society. Social cohesion grows when people move beyond fear and division to embrace personal encounter, compassion and practical solidarity.

## ***Jesus and the Crossing of Boundaries***

The Gospels repeatedly show Jesus engaging with people who were considered outsiders. He speaks with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), praises the faith of a Roman centurion (Luke 7), eats with those rejected by society and welcomes people regardless of social standing. These encounters reveal that genuine dialogue with those who are different is not a threat to faith but an expression of it. They also demonstrate that openness to others can become an opportunity for mutual learning, deeper understanding and unexpected grace. In an increasingly diverse Australia, these Scripture stories continue to provide an important model for respectful engagement across cultural and religious differences.

These insights echo the wider Christian conviction that peace is not simply the absence of conflict but the presence of just and compassionate relationships. For churches, social cohesion is therefore much more than social harmony. It is the active work of reconciliation, hospitality and shared responsibility for the wellbeing of others.

## ***Peace-making***

Pursuing such ideals can seem difficult if not impossible at a time of fear and anxiety in society. The Risen Christ's greeting "Peace be with you" (John 20:19) is spoken into a space of fear as the disciples locked themselves away feeling anxious and uncertain after the crucifixion. The peace of Christ is offered in the midst of fear. At a time of mistrust of institutions, economic insecurity and suspicion of difference; the peace of the Risen Christ

enters in to our hearts, calling us to reconciliation, dialogue and compassion. We are called to make peace not with our friends but with our enemies!

## **5. Ecumenism & Interfaith Dialogue: Building Bridges**

Perhaps the churches' most distinctive contribution to social cohesion lies in the experience of building relationships across difference. For more than a century, the modern ecumenical movement has sought to overcome deep historical divisions between the Christian traditions through dialogue, shared prayer and common witness. The ecumenical movement has allowed previously perceived enemies to be transformed into friends through respectful dialogue. This experience may offer insights to deepen understanding of social cohesion.

### ***Unity Without Uniformity***

Ecumenism is often misunderstood as seeking organisational merger or doctrinal agreement on all matters of faith. Its purpose has shifted to recognise that seeking unity does not require uniformity.

Christians united by their common faith but from different traditions remain faithful to their own traditions while learning to respect one another, pray together and cooperate on the pilgrimage to unity. This can provide an important model for social cohesion. Communities can remain distinctive while holding to a common shared vision and values. Difference need not become division.

### ***Spaces of Encounter***

Meaningful relationships rarely develop through debate alone. They grow through personal encounter. Architects sometimes speak of "interstitial spaces"—the places between buildings where people naturally meet, pause and interact. These spaces may appear incidental, yet they often become the places where community is formed.

Ecumenical and interfaith dialogue creates similar spaces. It is about designing places and times where people listen before judging, seek understanding before disagreement and discover common hopes despite different beliefs. Such encounters do not erase difference. Rather, they transform difference from a source of fear into an opportunity for friendship.

### ***Interfaith Dialogue in a Multicultural Australia***

Australia's religious diversity continues to grow. This diversity presents both opportunities and responsibilities. Interfaith dialogue enables people of different faiths to build trust before misunderstanding becomes conflict. It creates relationships that become especially valuable during times of social tension.

Across Australia, churches regularly participate in interfaith councils, shared community projects, religious events and educational programs that bring people together across religious traditions. These relationships contribute quietly but significantly to Australia's social cohesion.

## ***Educating Future Bridge Builders***

Young Australians will inherit an increasingly diverse society. Education therefore plays a critical role in preparing them to live confidently within multicultural communities.

Faith-based schools have a particular opportunity to help students develop both a confident understanding of their own tradition and an informed appreciation of others.

Visits between schools, shared service projects, dialogue programs and visits to places of worship enable students to move beyond stereotypes through personal encounter.

Strong identity and openness to others are not opposites. In fact, they strengthen one another. Young people who understand their own tradition are often better equipped to engage respectfully with people whose beliefs differ from their own. Church schools therefore have an important role in preparing future generations to become builders of social cohesion.

## **6. Conclusion**

Australia's diversity is one of its greatest strengths. Over many decades, people from different cultures, languages, faiths and histories have helped shape a society that is dynamic, resilient and internationally respected. Yet social cohesion cannot be assumed. It requires continual attention and renewal.

Economic inequality, social isolation, racism, political polarisation, the influence of social media and the impact of international conflicts all place pressure on the relationships that bind Australians together. When trust declines, communities become more vulnerable to division, fear and misunderstanding.

The response to these challenges cannot rest with governments alone. Families, schools, community organisations, sporting clubs, businesses, faith communities and local neighbourhoods all play essential roles in creating societies where people feel they belong and where differences become opportunities for cooperation rather than causes of conflict.

Churches have a distinctive contribution to make. Across Australia they nurture communities of belonging, strengthen relationships of trust and create opportunities for encounter across cultural, social and religious boundaries. Through worship, education, pastoral care, social services, advocacy and dialogue, churches contribute quietly but significantly to the common good.

The Christian understanding of social cohesion is grounded in the conviction that every person is created in the image of God and possesses inherent dignity. This conviction calls Christians to love their neighbour, welcome the stranger, seek justice, pursue peace and work for reconciliation. The parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us that neighbourliness is not only measured by who belongs to our own community but by our willingness to cross boundaries in compassion and service.