I too acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathering and pay my respects to their Elders past and present; and to Uncle Colin and other Elders with us this morning.

I am delighted to join you this morning, but I confess that when I saw the invitation cross my desk, my instinct was to shy away from it. I am no theologian. I am not an academic, and certainly not in the mould of the other distinguished speakers that you will be privileged enough to hear in the next two days.

But I was, rightly or wrongly, buoyed by two thoughts.

The first was that you have kindly asked me to open this conference. You haven’t asked me to provide the definitive answer as to how to reshape the public sphere….thankfully…. for me and, most particularly for you.
Secondly, a commitment to the public good, to a vision of dignity for all, and to being inclusive and just, are not only key parts of your program, but naturally, have been prominent in my thinking since I have been Governor.

My opening comments are short. They are personal. And they revolve around the perspectives I bring to the role of the Governor and the big issues that you raise, in large part the perspectives I have as a former Family Court judge.

As I have said, I have reflected upon how I can best serve Victoria. What can I do to enhance public discourse at a time when there is concern expressed by many as to the need for harmony and self-inclusion?

That reflection was prompted in part because of the inevitable response to my appointment as the first female Victorian Governor, and the State’s first Jewish Governor too. It was quickly brought to my attention that I was the first Governor who was schooled at St Catherine’s, the first Churchill Fellow, the first AFL Commissioner or, for that matter, the first Essendon Football Club supporter. (The latter, by the way, can’t be verified: the historical records, strangely, don’t categorise the governors according to their footy affiliations!)

With all those claims, what I saw was the desire, without doubt well-intentioned, but still the ardent desire, to categorise, to be claimed as “one of a group”, as it were. And, proud of who I am, of my background, associations and my beliefs, and conscious of the warmth and self-worth that flows from that sense of belonging to a particular group, I really had nothing to complain about in that process.

Except, on 1 July 2015, I took an oath to perform the role of Governor of Victoria, without fear or favour. To be the Governor for all Victorians, not just for female Victorians, nor Jewish Victorians, nor for those just from the city or the country.

It brought into focus for me the duality – or the need for balance - between a firm commitment to one’s own beliefs and background, and a genuine attempt to be open to the beliefs and backgrounds of others.

I suspect that being alive to the “push/pull” effect of those two parts of us all could help us greatly, whether as religious or other community leaders, or as individuals, as we seek a kind and effective public discourse on a wide range of social and moral issues.

Central to that discourse for me is the aspiration for people to recognise what unites rather than what divides them.

It started for me when I was a Family Court judge. I always tried to talk to the parents at the start of a case about their children. In that most adversarial setting, the courtroom, I tried to briefly normalise
the discussion with them, sucking some of the focus away from the impending battle, back to the children they really did cherish but had perhaps temporarily overlooked when lining up for the case with their familial and legal armies.

An image stayed with me, to the point that I mentioned it when I was leaving the court. I was on the bench looking down at the parents who were placed equidistant before me on either side of the courtroom. I read out to them a passage from the Family Report, prepared by a psychologist who had interviewed all of the family members, including their young daughter alone.

I read out how, in the course of the interview, their child had softly cried as she described both her mum and her dad as very kind and attentive parents and that she loved them both “heaps”. She said she didn’t mind how much time she spent with each one, just so long as their fighting would stop. She sobbed as she described her feelings: “As if mummy and daddy were pulling my arms, which just get longer and longer and I feel they’ll break off....”

I couldn’t imagine a more poignant endorsement for parents to call a halt to hostilities, to ensure that despite their own hurt and frustration, their child was not caught in the crossfire.

I was encouraged by the look of “light” on each parent’s face. My encouragement was extremely short-lived as each quickly turned to glare at the other. Despite what I had read to them, what each had distilled from it was that their child was suffering.... and it was all the fault of the other parent.

They could each tell me in technicolour detail what the other had done wrong. The fact that their daughter felt both had done so much that was right completely eluded them.

Although the concept of there being more that unites than divides us is not new to leaders across faiths and other callings, again I suspect there is still much we can do by our deeds and our words to help people find the common rather than the uncommon ground.

In fact, many years as a Family Court judge led me to reflect on the family as a microcosm of larger community groups.

Naturally I saw the suffering of family members during and in the aftermath of family breakdown. I saw the importance of effective dialogue between them, to keep the unit together, or to effect the least harmful way of living apart.

The corrosive nature of disharmony is of course as common to the broader community as it is to the family unit.
So is the need for open and trusting dialogue, dialogue that doesn’t shy from the tough issues, but which promotes a sufficiently trusting relationship from which bridges can then be built.

It takes courage as leaders to broach those bridges.

At my recent inauguration, I referred to the words towards the end of our National Anthem: “With courage let us all combine”, words that resonated strongly with me.

I have no doubt that in drawing inspiration from Pope Francis and other religious leaders it will take courage from us all to work together, and to help others to work together towards social harmony and inclusion, mutual respect, justice and fairness.

So, in concluding, I am conscious that I have done no more than touch on some of the important reasons for this conference theme.

I look at the program and think how wonderful it would be to join you in this endeavour. But for now, there are other engagements, such as an Australian Citizenship Ceremony to be held today at Government House.

I commend you in your dedication to this important work, and am pleased to announce this conference officially open.