

Guest Editorial

Joris de Bres

When unknown persons, under cover of darkness, broke over 90 headstones and set fire to the prayer house in the Jewish section of the Makara cemetery in Wellington in August 2004, their hateful vandalism evoked a level of solidarity with the Jewish community that crossed all cultural and ethnic boundaries. It was the second such attack in three weeks, and served to remind people not only of the ghastly historical excesses of anti-Semitism, but also of the ever present threat of racial prejudice in our multicultural society.

In response to this, Parliament passed a unanimous resolution condemning anti-Semitism and all forms of racial discrimination, and over 200 community representatives came together at a forum in the Beehive to discuss what could be done to counter intolerance and to strengthen cultural diversity. They considered email feedback that had been invited by the organisers in the lead-up to the meeting, and out of that emerged a programme of ten key steps and ten key actors to strengthen cultural diversity.

The wider context of these events included the major debate on race relations that had been going on all year: the breakdown of political consensus on issues relating to the Treaty of Waitangi, the Foreshore and Seabed, Maori seats in Parliament and ethnically targeted programmes to reduce economic and social inequalities; instances of harassment of Muslims; and a degree of anti-migrant sentiment, particularly focused on the large community of new migrants as well as international students from the Asian region.

What people sensed was that there were few networks and spaces where people were able to meet across ethnicities or cultures, and that while many people “wanted to do something” there were no readily available mechanisms through which to do so in concert with others.

I was asked, as Race Relations Commissioner, to facilitate what became known as the New Zealand Diversity Action Programme. The ten points of the Programme were all included in the New Zealand Action Plan for Human Rights³, which was completed by the Human Rights Commission later that year. It is now the key focus of the Commission’s work in race relations⁴.

The concept evolved from some initial agreements with a small number of organisations to undertake projects in support of the Programme. It has since grown into a network of some 150 organisations all registering existing or new diversity projects. The potential for further growth is considerable, with national, sectoral, institutional and community diversity action programmes under the umbrella of an overall New Zealand programme. All participants and projects are profiled on the Commission’s website at www.hrc.co.nz/diversity.

Central to the concept is the fact that organisations are asked to do things in their own organisation, in their own community and with their own staff, members, associates, clients or customers, to

³ Mana ki te Tangata, New Zealand Action Plan for Human Rights, available from www.hrc.co.nz or in hard copy from the Human Rights Commission.

⁴ See *Getting it Right in Race Relations*, Human Rights Commission Statement of Intent, 2006

achieve their own organisational outcomes. The Programme is able to add value by sharing ideas, putting people into contact with each other and promoting their projects.

There are now networks of organisations and individuals to support a variety of the programme themes including Te Waka Reo for national language policy, Te Korowai Whakapono for interfaith cooperation, and a media and diversity network. All demonstrate a high level of activity and interaction.

Last year's New Zealand Diversity Forum, held at Te Papa on the first anniversary of the community forum at Parliament, attracted over 400 people from all over New Zealand. The Forum will now be an annual event, where practical actions to strengthen diversity and to promote positive race relations can be discussed. This year, many Diversity Action Programme participants are hosting their own forums within the framework of the New Zealand Diversity Forum to discuss their particular issues while also participating in broader discussions. This includes, for example, public libraries, museums and galleries, diversity researchers, local government community development staff, interfaith groups, and media practitioners.

Aside from creating networks, forums and practical projects, a key focus of the Diversity Action Programme is to foster research and informed discussion. The Programme recognised the need for research and hard evidence to inform public debate on race relations. The Human Rights Commission contributes to that process through the publication of an annual review of race relations⁵, which provides a record of key events and initiatives as well as indicators of diversity and equality, but equally important is academic research and the provision of forums for dialogue and debate.

The Aotearoa Ethnic Network, which was registered with the New Zealand Diversity Programme by Wairua Consulting last year as a diversity initiative, has already made an important contribution to on-line debate and dialogue, as well being a lively market for information exchange. The AEN Journal, registered as a further Diversity Programme initiative for 2006, adds to that contribution significantly by

providing a forum for more substantial and considered discussion of the issues.

Ruth DeSouza and Andy Williamson are indefatigable workers for cultural diversity and intercultural understanding. They embody the spirit of the New Zealand Diversity Action Programme. They are making an enormous contribution, and serve as an inspiration to others who want to do something to ensure that Aotearoa New Zealand lives up to its promise as a place where different peoples can live together in mutual respect and appreciation.

I welcome the AEN Journal as a valuable new resource for people who have an interest in our race relations.

Joris de Bres is New Zealand's Race Relations Commissioner/ Kaihautū Whakawhanaunga a Iwi at the Human Rights Commission. Before his appointment he was General Manager, External Relations in the Department of Conservation. He spent many years as a senior union official in the NZ Public Service Association. Born in the Netherlands he came to New Zealand as a seven year old with his parents and six brothers and sisters. Joris has been an active campaigner on race relations issues since the 1970s. He has worked as a teacher, journalist and community organiser and is currently Vice Chair of Oxfam New Zealand, a member of the Advisory Board for the Victoria University Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies and a Trustee of the Project Crimson conservation trust.



The AEN Journal is a New Zealand Diversity Action Programme Project

The New Zealand Diversity Action Programme, a ten point plan to strengthen cultural diversity, was adopted by a community forum at Parliament in August 2005 following the desecration of two Jewish cemeteries in Wellington. The Programme includes a call for dialogue and exchange between different views, cultures and faiths, and the establishment of networks.

www.hrc.co.nz/diversity

⁵ Race Relations in 2004; Tui, Tui, Tuituia, Race Relations in 2005, available at www.hrc.co.nz, or in hard copy from the Human Rights Commission