

Auckland City Interfaith Project - A case study. A Secular Institution Engages with Faith

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How does a city council engage with faith and interfaith groups? How does it build relationships with these groups and support relationships between faith communities?

The term interfaith or interfaith dialogue refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions, (ie. "faiths") at both the individual and institutional level [1].

Auckland City Council's Interfaith project focuses on religious and spiritual diversity within the community. It works to strengthen existing relationships between communities and to foster new ones. Within the project the council's role is to support, promote and facilitate these relationships. Given its budget and the political impetus behind it, the project is fairly high profile for Auckland City Council's Community Development Group. A number of factors contributed to the establishment of this project. Whilst Community Development practitioners within Council recognised there was an opportunity to work with different faith groups in an 'Interfaith' capacity, Auckland City Councillors were working to engage with different faith communities in the region, recognising their unique role in the communities of which they are a part and their contribution within the city as a whole. This project followed an international trend of similar initiatives such as the Greenwich

Multi Faith Forum and the Interfaith Network in the City of Greater Dandenong [2].

Auckland, both the city and the region, is becoming more diverse with greater religious pluralism. According to recent census figures 'over one-third (37.0 percent) of people who live in the Auckland Region were born overseas... [And] it is the most ethnically diverse region in New Zealand.' This backdrop of diversity also reflects growing religious diversity. As the number of people affiliated with Christianity continues to drop there has been an increase in people affiliating with non-Christian religions and of people indicating that they have no religion. Christianity is changing as well, the 2006 census figures indicate that, 'the number of people affiliating with Orthodox Christian religions increased by 37.8 percent, and affiliation with Evangelical, Born Again and Fundamentalist religions increased by 25.6 percent, affiliation with Pentecostal religions increased by 17.8 percent [3]. The 2001 census showed massive percentage increases in the Hindu (56%), Buddhist (48%) and Muslim (74%) faiths since 1996 [4].

In October 2005, Auckland City Council's Partnerships Committee which focuses on 'the council building strong partnerships with the community to celebrate and harness the rich diversity and vitality of the city' accepted the Interfaith Project report [5]. The report focussed

on key themes: Interfaith groups, community development, strong, healthy and safe communities, belonging

To quote directly from the report:

'Harmonious relationship between communities of different faiths is intrinsic to ensuring strong, healthy and safe communities in our city. Auckland City, takes pride in its safety and to maintain this culture it is critical to respond to the growing multi-faith profile of our city. There has been a focus on multi-faith relationships internationally and there is a growing recognition that government, and especially local government, has to have a stronger commitment to these relationships.

The faith communities also are realising the growing importance of ensuring that members of different faiths are educated and aware of each other's traditions, have mutual respect and are able to coexist harmoniously. This also helps establish the personal links critical to ensure positive and rapid response if occasional religion tension occurs. Interfaith groups are an emerging sector that needs to be supported through local government.'

From the beginning the project had the support of His Worship the Mayor, Dick Hubbard and strong leadership from the Interfaith Project Working Group on the Partnerships Committee. The project is delivered by the Interfaith Project Team within Community Development. This team works alongside Deputy Mayor Bruce Hucker, and Crs Cathy Casey and John Hinchcliff from the Partnerships Committee Interfaith Working Group.

The council's role is to support, promote and facilitate. The project objectives are;

- To support the safety culture of Auckland city by building a community that has respect and understanding of our religious diversity.

- To establish dialogue and partnership with different organisations both nationally and locally those are working to promote inter-faith respect and understanding.
- To facilitate spaces and opportunities to bring people of different faiths together to learn more about each other
- To raise community awareness and understanding around different faiths that co-exists in the city

Building the project

Initially the most important element of the project was to develop relationships within and external to Council. Community Development staff met with Auckland City councillors, faith leaders and the Auckland Interfaith Council. We attended meetings held by other groups including the Council of Christians and Muslims. Councillor Hinchcliff and staff also attended the National Interfaith Forum in Wellington in February 2006.

Auckland City Council had a number of existing relationships with faith communities. Community Development, for example, was engaged through community networks and funding relationships. Our team began building a database of contacts.

His Worship, the Mayor and Auckland City Councillors had hosted a breakfast for faith leaders in 2005 and in May 2006 our Partnerships Committee hosted an Interfaith Planning Workshop.

The workshop's purpose was to gauge interest in the project and gather community perspectives. Faith leaders and members of the Auckland Interfaith Council were invited. The Mayor, Dick Hubbard opened the gathering.

The workshop provided an opportunity for relationship building and strengthening, to explore opportunities for interfaith dialogue.

Auckland City was also able to be clear about its commitment to supporting Interfaith activities in the Auckland region. New ideas were examined and fed into the project with a diverse mix of faiths including Bahai, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist representatives amongst the 30 people who attended. A Working Group of faith representatives formed at the meeting that continues to work with Auckland City.

This was followed in June 2006 by the Interactive Community Forum on Interfaith Initiatives in Auckland.

The community forum was structured with speakers who provided an international, national and local perspective before breaking into small groups for discussion. We were able to draw on the experiences of Bishop Richard Randerson, a member of the group of faith leaders who accompanied Prime Minister Helen Clark to the Asia Pacific Regional Dialogue in Cebu, Rohan Jaduram from the Human Rights Commission (HRC) in his role as facilitator of Te Korowai Whakapono – The National Interfaith Network, and Suzanne Mahon, Secretary of the Auckland Interfaith Council as our resource people.

On the invitation participants were asked the question: Do you participate in activities with different faith groups? And were offered the opportunity to:

- Hear about regional, national and international interfaith initiatives and approaches.
- Focus on how we can work together in terms of common approaches to interfaith activity.
- Take the opportunity to engage in dialogue with interactive small group work.

Approximately 70 people attended. The small group work provided an opportunity for those who are working in their local environments with people of other faiths to share and learn about

each other's work and to discuss their visions for interfaith activity.

The strength of interfaith activity already within the Auckland area was highlighted. Examples of this include the positive relationship between neighbours the Ponsonby Mosque and St Colomba Centre, the active Councils of Christians and Muslims, and Christians and Jews who also combine for an annual meeting and the variety of community education programmes such as the 'Understanding Islam', workshop run by Sister Catherine Jones for Christians to understand and appreciate Islam. Agencies like Migrant Support Services work with a cross-cultural group of migrants visiting each others' places of worship.

Feedback on the community forum was very positive. The next one will be held in June 2007.

These two events served as a strong base for us to work from and helped us to build our own relationships. Auckland City Councillors were able to engage as participants. Facilitating these Interfaith events was a pleasant experience given the levels of respect and goodwill. People spoke of the wish to not simply be 'tolerated like a bad rash' but be respected. This sentiment is articulated time and again at Interfaith gatherings.

Working locally

The Auckland City Council Interfaith working group established at the May workshop continues to meet. From this group came the idea of an Interfaith e-list or network to continue the sharing of information and to highlight different events happening in the Auckland region. To avoid duplication, this was discussed with the Human Rights Commission and the Auckland Interfaith Council who affirmed there was a need and the e-list was developed.

The working group acts as a sounding board for Auckland City Council and raises issues. Amongst the many topics members have discussed, the proposed 'Draft National Curriculum' [6] and the 'Draft National Statement on Religious Diversity'

[7] sat alongside discussions around building dialogue and interaction locally.

In an effort to keep building knowledge, awareness of others' traditions and supporting spaces for dialogue, the project team continues to work closely with the Auckland Interfaith Council. Auckland City Council support their 'Lifecycles' series of panel discussions with invited speakers from different faith communities to discuss the rituals and traditions of their faiths regarding different milestones within life. The series started with 'Death', moved onto 'Birth', and will be followed with a discussion on 'Youth – Rites of passage and coming of age ceremonies'.

We also supported the Auckland Interfaith Council on September 21 2006, the International Day of Peace, when they organised a large and successful concert to celebrate the day. Our mayor attended and Auckland City Council provided the venue.

The strength of this project is being able to support and respond to local initiatives. In December 2006 I was invited by the Glen Innes Health Project facilitator to work with members of the community in Glen Innes where I facilitated a workshop at the Glen Innes library. It was an opportunity to discuss interfaith work at a grassroots community level.

In Mt Albert, for example, the Auckland City Council Urban Facilitator has strong relationships with that community. Ministers in the area want to engage in Interfaith work and in Community Development we now have the links to support locally focussed activity.

Working Nationally

Although Auckland City works in the Auckland region this project has been of interest nationally. I presented on the project in August 2006 at the Interfaith Strand of the Diversity Forum alongside the Ministry of Social Development (MSD), the Office of Ethnic Affairs (OEA) and the Human Rights Commission (HRC). Auckland City is working with Professor Paul Morris of Victoria

University to host the Interfaith Strand of the forum to be held in Auckland in August this year.

Race Relations Commissioner Joris de Bres asked Auckland City to host the Auckland Regional Consultation Hui in November 2006 on what was then the Draft National Statement on Religious Diversity. We facilitated some very active engagement from groups who had previously not responded to our invitations such as Destiny Church and the Association of Rationalists and Humanists.

January 2007 marked a year since the project team came together. Auckland City Council participated in the National Interfaith Forum in February and attended the women's forum. It was dynamic, energised and highly engaged, relying on the strength of storytelling and women sharing their different experiences.

Current Plans

At the forum, plans for visiting Canadian, Dr Lois Wilson's nationwide speaking tour, 'When Freedom's Collide' were discussed. As part of Lois' tour Auckland City Council, in particular, is supporting through a panel discussion at the Anglican Cathedral entitled 'Does Religious Diversity Undermine Christian Faith?'

The topic came about particularly from conversations and questions raised around the "Draft National Statement on Religious Diversity" and provides a space for these conversations to continue. A broad range of speakers from across the Christian spectrum will be speaking.

Internationally Auckland will be the city in which Helen Clark hosts the High Level Symposium on the Alliance of Civilizations Report on 24 May 2007. The Prime Minister is then hosting the Asia Pacific Regional Dialogue in Waitangi. We would value the opportunity to observe these processes as they inform our own as we continue to make the connections between local, national, and international work.

Linkages nationally and internationally

One of the foci of the Interactive Community Forum held in June 2006 was to link international and national developments with the local and personal efforts of people and groups in the community. Much is happening at both national and international levels. Prime Minister Helen Clark and the current government are committed to the Asia Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue process. These conversations and their outcomes inform our project just as the government's political leadership strengthens it. Working at local government level provides a unique opportunity to straddle and link national and international efforts locally and regionally.

As part of the Asia Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue the government was part of developing the Declaration of the Cebu Dialogue on Regional Interfaith Cooperation [8]. Our project fits comfortably within the following excerpts of the Declaration.

'We believe that interfaith dialogue builds understanding, goodwill, and relationships across religions and among peoples,

We recognize that believers, communities, and institutions exercise a distinct and vital role in the promotion of peace, development, and human dignity in this region,

- We will hold local, national, and regional forums to build knowledge, respect, and understanding and to provide opportunities for dialogue, thereby deepening relationships and friendships among faith communities and enhancing capacity for interfaith cooperation.

-We will promote interfaith dialogue at the grassroots level to serve as an instrument to promote sustainable livelihoods and community cohesiveness or unity, thus, becoming the basis of civil society to promote the democratization process.'

Nationally, the project is part of the Human Rights Commission's Diversity Action Programme (DAP). Whilst many of the programme's 'Ten Steps to Strengthen Our Cultural Diversity' tie in with the project, Point 10 is most relevant [9].

'Information and education alone is not enough. People need to meet face to face, experience diversity and discuss issues with people who differ. Communities need to reach out to each other. Dialogue and exchange between people of different views, cultures and faiths is the glue that will hold us together and enrich us all.'

The DAP also refers to our responsibility as local government,

'Territorial local authorities (regional, city and district councils) are required to have community plans, and to provide for economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing. They form a crucial link between central government and local communities and have a key role in fostering safe, connected and diverse communities. A particular focus is to develop refugee and migrant settlement plans, provide opportunities and support to celebrate diversity, connect with heritage and promote dialogue.'

The nature of the project

The importance to this project of political will cannot be underestimated. The project has high-level support and the Deputy Mayor Bruce Hucker regularly attends working group meetings.

Working within a community development context essentially means a 'bottom up' approach. We work alongside politicians who often work at a more 'macro' level. There can be a myriad of styles at work, goals and visions to achieve.

The work is extraordinarily multi-layered. It is always a challenge to stay abreast of what is happening at a community level. At what level do we work? Within the space of an hour communication can be taking place with the Race Relations Commissioner, Joris de Bres, on national strategic level, with the Auckland Interfaith Council on a regional level and with Jenny Harrison an Anglican Minister in Onehunga.

Given the project is so focussed on relationship building and the strengthening of relationships, linking with other diversity workers has been very positive. Amongst these relationships, working closely with the Human Rights Commission has provided strong linkages, support and publicity for the project. Additionally, taking part in the Aotearoa Ethnic Network offers access to information, learning, dialogue and the strengths of that community.

Our relationships with those working at the grassroots level are the nourishment for the work we do within a local government context. These offer the opportunity to be able to address the most basic building blocks of the conversation, to work out how to build relationships through coffee groups or shared dinners. We are consistently working to challenge, remove and lessen the sense of 'otherness' or at the very least to provide an opportunity to get to know 'other'.

Within Auckland there is a committed group of people who actively engage with these issues and participate in many public meetings and activities. We frequently need to question how we reach others and if there are individuals and communities out there doing the work (as of course there are) that we do not know about. Working within local government always runs the risk of us talking to who we want to talk to for its ease and convenience.

Of the dedicated group we do work with, we need to ask ourselves if we are supporting them appropriately so they have the time, energy and capacity to keep doing the work they do within their own communities, the 'Interfaith community' and in their wider relationships. Do they have the ability to engage with the council as much as the council may want?

'Preaching to the converted' is a term that is bandied around our office. One of our challenges is trying to engage with those who do not want to be engaged, ensuring they can be part of the conversation if they wish to be. Some may consider that there is not a conversation to be

had, or is the conversation the right one and do people know about it?

I recently attended a community development practitioner's forum. As practitioners, forum participants were challenged to act as power brokers, and use their roles to redistribute power. How does this sit with this project?

For me, coming from a background in peace work, this project allows me to be part of a peace building process. I also bring experience as a Treaty educator and peace activist to this work. Working with a dominant culture, in this instance a nation with a dominant religion, raises challenges as to how space is created and how change happens to allow for expansion of diversity, understanding and acceptance. If you are in a position of power and privilege what makes you question that position? It is also challenging for me to ask these questions knowing I sit in a position of power within local government structures. Given the complexity and multi-layered nature of this work, these reflections raise as many questions as they answer. We continue to wrestle with them in the everyday work we do in partnership with others, working towards establishing dialogue, promoting Interfaith respect and understanding of our religious diversity.

In conclusion the Interfaith Project continues to explore ways to achieve its objectives. The conversations around interfaith can be both enlightening and challenging. As the face of Auckland city changes so does the range of faith communities and the importance of the development of a cohesive society that understands, acknowledges and respects its diverse parts. This Auckland City Interfaith Project recognises the work of others, working alongside them to strengthen and support interfaith dialogue, respect and understanding. We recognise the work of the Human Rights Commission (HRC), the Office of Ethnic Affairs (OEA), Ministry of Social Development (MSD), New Zealand Police, Interfaith Councils and the myriad of faith groups, organisations, communities and individuals who are involved in Interfaith and ongoing relationships.

Resources for this article

[1] Wikipedia Interfaith Definition

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/InterfaithAuckland_City's

[2] Web based resources regarding interfaith projects

overseas <http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g4s54.html> and
www.greaterdandenong.com

[3] Quick Stats About Culture and Identity, 2006 Census,
Statistics New Zealand

<http://www.stats.govt.nz/census/2006-census-data/quickstats-about-culture-identity/quickstats-about-culture-and-identity.htm?page=para012Master>

[4] Census Snapshot Cultural Diversity, 2001 Census figures,

Statistics New Zealand <http://www.stats.govt.nz/products-and-services/Articles/census-snpst-cult-diversity-Mar02.htm>

[5] Auckland City Partnerships Committee, Interfaith Project
Report

http://www.aucklandcity.govt.nz/council/members/committeemeetings/partnerships/20051114_1330/Part%2D141105%2Dopn%2Dagd%2D%2307.pdf

[6] Draft New Zealand Curriculum

<http://www.tki.org.nz/r/nzcurriculum/>

[7] National Statement on Religious Diversity

<http://www.hrc.co.nz/home/hrc/introduction/tengirathenzdiversityactionprogramme/nationalstatementonreligiousdiversity.php>

[8] Declaration of the Cebu Dialogue on Regional Interfaith
Cooperation for Peace, Development and Human Dignity 14-
16 March 2006

http://opapp.gov.ph/downloads/Regional_Interfaith_Dialogue_Declaration_Cebu_2006.pdf

[9] Diversity Action Programme

<http://www.hrc.co.nz/home/hrc/introduction/tengirathenzdiversityactionprogramme/tenstepstostrengtheneculturaldiversity261.php>

Abigael Vogt is a 5th generation Pakeha and a community and peace worker. She is strongly committed to working within peaceful group processes and for tino rangatiratanga. She is an experienced facilitator and is actively involved in inter-faith work, Treaty networks and community development.