

The Religious Leaders Forum 2023
Meeting at St Johns Theological College
St Johns Road Meadowbank Auckland
Tuesday 5 December, 10.00am to 3.30pm

On 5 December, the Religious Diversity Centre hosted another successful Religious Leaders Forum in Auckland.

20 (????) leaders of diverse religions from across Aotearoa New Zealand gathered at St John's Theological College where they identified and discussed critical issues and potential solutions for these issues.

Starting with concerns about some of the new government's policies related to te Tiriti o Waitangi and te Reo, about the effects of overseas conflicts and tensions on some communities in Aotearoa New Zealand which led to the need for providing security for places of worship.

Other issues that were raised were the long-lasting impacts of the Covid pandemic, the challenges of diversity and a crisis of identity - with particular concern for young people.

The religious leaders were aware of their important roles in today's society – especially if leaders of diverse religions were able to speak in one voice. This is where the Religious Leaders Forum presents an opportunity to engage in national conversations.

However, as the structures within the religions differ, it has to be considered that the process of identifying the right leader might differ.

How that important role might be fulfilled was discussed in response to the Statement from the Human Rights Commission and the RDC published on 8 November, 'Roles and Responsibilities of Religious Leaders in Aotearoa New Zealand':

The leaders would need to meet together regularly, with time to consult together in order to develop a depth of dialogue and trust, and time to consult the different processes and structures in their communities in order to be able to speak with authority from within their organisations.

Possible actions were proposed:

compose an interfaith charter, organise summer camps for young people, identify a space in the media for religious leaders to share, investigate interfaith advocacy or lobbying in Parliament, provide religious diversity training workshops in the Immigration Department and other government departments.

In response to the HRC/RDC Statement urging the Leaders to encourage their communities to act with respect and compassion in their dealings with one another, it was agreed that rather than rejecting hate and hate speech, it was better to think of transforming hate into understanding and respect.

Jocelyn Armstrong, the co-chair of the RDC reported that the Executive Director of the Ministry for Ethnic Communities had announced to religious leaders that the Ministry would provide a point of contact in the government for religious communities. The RDC was invited to co-host with the Ministry a second meeting of religious leaders in November. The agenda was to identify community-led initiatives to promote community safety and security in response to the government's concern at the erosion of social cohesion in the society, a reaction to the violence in

Israel and Gaza.

Looking back to the four topmost concerns of the first religious leaders meeting in 2017 the results of actions taken to address the concerns have been:

1. Education about religions in schools: the study of diversity in the Social Studies curriculum now includes religious diversity. Religious matters can now be included in the teaching of Social Studies where appropriate. The first Professional Development workshop in Religious Diversity for teachers has been held and the first discussion concerning the curriculum has taken place. This is a truly significant development for our NZ schools.

2. Care for the environment and the sustainability of the planet: In 2021, the RDC Climate Action Group produced a Statement to Government before the UN COP26. In 2023, a series of webinars were held and are available on the RDC website: www.rdc.org.nz The Group has also organised the endorsement of the Call for a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty by religious leaders and communities in preparation for the UNCOP28 meeting taking place in Dubai in December 2023.

3. The growing levels of inequality and poverty in New Zealand: In March 2022 the Religious Leaders' submission to the Government's Social Cohesion Consultation recommended that the connection between the Social Cohesion Panui Framework and the causes of a fractured social cohesion that were noted in the 2021 Wellbeing Budget, be identified and made the focus of a solid programme. The report raised as to whether this activity might now be undertaken by religious organisations with the support of the Religious Leaders Forum.

Guest speaker at the event was Rohan Jaduram. He introduced the 'Religious Communities Disaster Resilience Guide' which was produced by Auckland Emergency Management and the RDC, led by Rohan Jaduram, and Prof Morris.

The guide was launched in July 2023 and is available on the RDC website.

At this point Professor Paul Morris proposed a workshop for religious leaders. Led by experienced persons, it would offer training in de-escalating trouble, countering disinformation and promoting positive relationships.

The proposal was discussed and warmly received. It was agreed that the RDC pursue the proposal further in dialogue with religious leaders.

Jocelyn Armstrong concluded the day with a call for a commitment from the religious communities and organisations to support the Religious Diversity Centre financially so that the work that has proven to be relevant and future-oriented can continue.

The Leaders decided to meet again in March 2024.