



The Religious Diversity Centre in Aotearoa New Zealand Religious Leaders Forum

November 11th 2025 St Johns Theological College, Auckland

a Report by Ricky Waters, RDC Executive Director

Attendees : Lloyd Popata and Wayne Te Kaawa - St Johns Theological College

Suzanne Mahon and Kat Eghdamian - Baha'i National Assembly

Rev Uesifili Unasa - Methodist Churches in NZ

Talib Al Bayati - Islamic Council

Rabbi Dean Shapiro - Beth Shalom Synagogue

Carrie Barber - Quakers

Ram Lingham - AUT Hindu Chaplain

Rev Prince Devanandan - RDC / RLF Moderator

Anthony Green - RDC Trustee / Co-Chair

Prof Paul Morris - RDC Trustee / Presenter

Mary Eastham - RDC Trustee / Presenter

Sione Tu'itahi - RDC Trustee

Ricky Waters - RDC Executive Director

Mary Nissen - RDC Administrator / note-taker

Mervin Singham - CE Ministry for Ethnic Communities – keynote speaker

Paul Naidu – Strategic Programme Lead, Ministry for Ethnic Communities

Nizar Mohamed - RDC Climate Action Group / Presenter

Rev Bonnie Robinson - Director Salvation Army Social Policy & Parliamentary Unit - presenter

Jill Shaw - Weaving Empathy / Presenter

Apologies : Robert Hunt (Buddhist Council); Archbishop Don Tamihere (Anglican); Te Rito Peyrouz (Methodist); Te Aroha Rountree (Trinity College); Sheikh Najam (AUT Muslim Chaplain); Stephen Goodman (Jewish Council); Archbishop Paul Martin (Catholic)

Programme : The Gathering began with a cuppa and catch-up from 10am, begun with a Mihi Whakatau conducted by Lloyd Popata and Tony Green / Prince Devanandan.

Session 1 - Keynote speech from Mervin Singham - 'Faith Communities and Social Cohesion in a Changing World' Below is a Summary provided by Mervin. A fuller text is available at <https://rdc.org.nz/the-religious-leaders-forum-2025/>

Key Themes

1. **Role of Faith Communities in Social Cohesion**

- *Social cohesion = sense of belonging, trust, and willingness to work for the common good.*
- *Faith communities are strong sources of social capital, fostering identity, belonging, and civic engagement.*

2. **Positive Contributions**

- *Provide moral compass and shared values.*
- *Promote altruism, volunteerism, and social services (e.g., food banks, Covid-19 support).*
- *Influence public policy on equity and social justice.*
- *Encourage conflict resolution through compassion and dialogue.*

3. **Challenges**

- *Risk of exclusion and fragmentation through in-group/out-group dynamics.*
- *Extremist misuse of religion (e.g., ISIS, divisive movements).*
- *Tensions in secular societies over moral issues (e.g., abortion, LGBTQ+ rights).*
- *Social media amplifies division and misinformation.*

4. **Global and Local Context**

- *Rising faith-related conflicts globally; Gaza conflict impacts local Muslim-Jewish relations.*
- *Harmony Accord and interfaith initiatives in New Zealand show dialogue matters.*

5. **Recommendations**

- *Promote interfaith dialogue and inclusive practices.*
- *Policy support for religious tolerance and collaboration on social issues.*
- *Integrate religious literacy in education.*
- *Fund initiatives that strengthen interfaith understanding and social cohesion.*

Closing Message:

Harness the positive role of faith communities to build inclusive, cohesive societies, especially amid global polarisation and local diversity challenges.

This presentation was followed by a Q & A moderated by Prince Devanandan. Most questions referenced the 'Harmony Accord' which is a document forged between some Muslim and some Jewish communities in Aotearoa New Zealand under the curation of the Ministry for Ethnic Communities. Questions were around whether / how other communities might engage with it. The 'Harmony Accord' can be accessed at

https://www.ethniccommunities.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0028/77284/NZ-Harmony-Accord-1.pdf

Session 2 A - Paul Morris provided some feedback on the **RDC Religious Literacy & Competency Survey** which has now been renamed as the **Inter-Religious Literacy & Competency Survey**. Paul also spoke to the ethnic diversity within religious communities in Aotearoa New Zealand, and indicated that a number of reports including such data can now be accessed from the 2023 Census at <https://explore.data.stats.govt.nz/?lc=en>

Session 2 B - Jill Shaw reported on the successful **Weaving Empathy Project** which she managed through the RDC with funding from the MEC. Her summary included the number of conversations over meals, conversations around craft activities. She also mentioned a set of Weaving Empathy Conversation Starter Cards (which RLF participants engaged with over lunch) which can be accessed through the RDC – admin@rdc.org.nz . Jill's full report is available at <https://rdc.org.nz/the-religious-leaders-forum-2025/>

Session 2 C – Nizar Mohamed / Mary Eastham introduced the “*E tū te mana o te ao: Building a Climate of Hope: Faith and Action Guide*” book which had been produced as a resource requested at last year’s religious Leaders Forum. RLF participants were provided with a hard copy of the book – which will be launched across the country at events co-ordinated by local Interfaith councils and the RDC (mostly during ‘Inter-Faith Harmony Week’ at the beginning of February 2026). A copy of Mary’s promo can be found at <https://rdc.org.nz/the-religious-leaders-forum-2025/> . This publication is also available in a pdf format through the RDC web site (download is free) at <https://rdc.org.nz/climate-action-booklets/>

Session 3 - Rev Bonnie Robinson spoke to the Christian Leaders Presentation to the Prime Minister in July of this year (at which Bonnie was present) ‘**A responsibility to place and people: A faith based call to honour Te Tiriti, Tangata, and Taiao**’. She provided printed copies of this document – which is accessible online at <https://nzccss.org.nz/a-responsibility-to-place-and-people-a-faith-based-call-to-honour-te-tiriti-tangata-and-taiao/> . Bonnie spoke about how these concerns of social injustices could be addressed and why the church Leaders Network was keen to provide these challenges to the Government at their annual meeting with the PM. She also felt leaders from other religious communities might also like the opportunity to endorse these concerns. (further discussion on this followed in the afternoon)

The RLF then broke for lunch – which was a co-operative venture due to a last minute catering cancellation.

Session 4 - Rev Bonnie Robinson presented the 2025 annual ‘**State of the Nation Report**’ produced by the Social Policy & Parliamentary Unit of the Salvation Army. The Report focuses on a number of social deprivation indices including child poverty, domestic violence, crime, housing / homelessness, employment & income. The full Report can be accessed at <https://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/research-policy/social-policy-parliamentary-unit/state-nation-2025/> This Report formed the basis of the Church Leaders call to the PM (see above) and paints a rather challenging picture of the health of Aotearoa New Zealand society, and the social cohesion we desire.

A Q & A time followed where questions were raised regarding both of these documents. There was a general expression of surprise that most present were unaware of these documents – but certainly aware of the issues they addressed.

It was agreed that the Forum should endorse the '**A responsibility to place and people: A faith based call to honour Te Tiriti, Tangata, and Taiao**' and there were some suggestions made. Tony Green, RDC Co-Chair, agreed to write this up as a document to send to the Prime Minister. Those present agreed to have their names recorded as being in agreement.

This “A Responsibility to Place and People. Words in support of the call” has now been sent to the Prime Minister (with receipt acknowledged by his Office) and is available also at <https://rdc.org.nz/the-religious-leaders-forum-2025/> .

Ricky spoke briefly of other activities of the Religious Diversity Centre, and the desire of the Dunedin Interfaith Council to re-establish the National InterFaith Forum. We were encouraged to mark this in our calendars for March / April 2027, and to look forward to a trip to Dunedin.

*(Since the RLF this has been firmed up for **March 13 & 14 2027**)*

Rev Wayne Te Kaawa led us in a Poroporoaki to conclude the 2025 RDC Religious Leaders Forum just after 3pm.