

# FAITH LEADERS SPEAK AT OPEN LETTER PRESENTATION EVENT

At the event to present the Open Letter on climate change to Parliament, a highlight was the series of comments made about the Open Letter by three Wellington faith leaders. The three invited speakers were Father Gerard Burns, Mr Paul Barber and Ms Ronja Ievers. Mons. Gerard Burns is Vicar-General in the Catholic Archdiocese of Wellington, Paul Barber is a senior parishioner from St. Andrews on the Terrace Wellington and member of its Sustainability Group, and Ronja Ievers is co-manager of the Soka Gakkai Buddhist Institute. Each of these speakers in their comments provided the audience profound insights relevant to our human condition in relation to our environment, and also deep insights into their own faiths and institutions. Here are summaries of their comments. Thanks to Martin de Jong (Caritas) for the photographs.

## Father Gerard Burns

Debra Russell mentioned in her words accepting the letter that she saw our planet as a gift. I would like to pick that up and say that in the Catholic Christian tradition we acknowledge particularly the Giver.

The gift is our Common Home. Home - a beautiful word and we can all sense what it is to have a home, a place where I am 'at home', a place of harmony with those I share that home.

We Christians say that this creation - basically and deeply good - comes from a source of all Goodness and Beauty. This source we name as pure Love ('God is Love' John's gospel says). This Love is an energy that fills our universe with its still expanding billions of light-years.

Science - especially the contemporary exploration of the wider cosmos (Hubble and Webb telescopes) - gives us glimpses of this majesty and wonder. And also tells us of how we humans have damaged and are damaging the beauty and goodness of this planet, Mother Earth.

My Christian faith brings me to a deep gratitude for this gift and a desire to respond appropriately to what this gift put into my/our hands. This response is to take responsibility for doing something about the destruction.

This constant creative energy sounds something similar to a word in te reo Māori: Mauri. Mauri is often translated as 'life force'. 'Mauri ora' is also used to express/wish life for a time, gathering, event. I conclude with that wish for us and our Common Home - 'Mauri ora!'



## Paul Barber

Rev Dr Fei Tale'ale'ausumai, minister of St Andrews on The Terrace Presbyterian Church, sends her warmest Pacific greetings on this occasion. She comments that as someone of Samoan and New Zealand heritage the challenge of climate change is very personal. People of the Pacific are already hugely impacted by climate change through more intense and frequent weather events and rising sea levels. The peoples of Aotearoa and the Pacific are bound together by shared cultural and spiritual traditions, where care for the environment and precious natural resources are central values. The time for action is now. Aotearoa New Zealand needs to partner with Pacific nations in our response to climate change.

Sir Lloyd Geering, now 108 years young, was for many years our theologian in residence at St Andrews. We all have been richly blessed by Sir Lloyd's decades of research and writing on faith and religion in the modern world. He has written much about religion in the age of accelerating climate change, calling on us all to rethink our approach to faith and action in the light of our growing understanding of the universe.

He calls on us to reimagine our understanding of God to recognise an earth-centred moral imperative for care of the earth, and all who dwell upon it. In his book *the Greening of Christianity* Sir Lloyd offers Ten Resolutions as a kind of re-imagining of the biblical Ten Commandments. He invites us to "stand in awe of this self-evolving universe" and includes, in the spirit of the Golden Rule, "let us set the needs of the coming global society before those of ourselves, our tribe, our society or nation".

Our mahi at St Andrew's around sustainability and climate action has grown out of two of our core values as a community: respect for the whole of creation, and striving for social justice. We are a member of [Eco Church New Zealand](#) and as part of this network we are committed to caring for the whole ecosystem. We do all we can to be a sustainable church and demonstrate our care for creation.

This open letter we are supporting today, urges politicians to join with us and others to embrace the **opportunity** that the transition to a low emissions society brings. It is not just a necessity – we can make it a blessing for us all, if we strive together to share the costs and benefits of change fairly and equitably.



## Ronja levers

Thank you, Dr Deborah Russell and Francisco Hernandez, for jointly accepting this Open Letter, and thank you to the Religious Diversity Centre and everyone who has contributed to bringing it together.

It is my privilege to be here representing our Soka Gakkai Buddhist community in Aotearoa New Zealand, and to stand alongside my brothers and sisters from the Wellington Interfaith Council, and wider faith communities.

We endorsed this letter because it calls for responsible leadership, meaningful action based on a transformation in how we think, act and relate to one another, and a fair approach that centres the wellbeing of our people and communities. It is a call that reaches across political and faith traditions, while recognising the important role faith communities can play in inspiring the transformation essential to addressing the climate crisis.

Global problems require people and groups to work together, united across cultural, religious, and national divides by focusing on our shared humanity.

Buddhist philosopher, peacemaker, and founder of Soka Gakkai International, Daisaku Ikeda called for many decades for efforts to realise peace and human security. In his annual peace proposals he submitted to the United Nations for 40 years, he strongly emphasised that because global crises are created by humans, our capacity to resolve them also lies within human beings themselves, particularly through a transformation in the way we think, act and relate to one another. Taking responsibility for transforming our own lives is the first step towards creating a society based on compassion and respect for the dignity of all life.

We see climate action as both a personal and a collective responsibility and remain committed to working together with others. Different religious traditions already work together in cooperation, such as the many interfaith councils across Aotearoa New Zealand, striving to unite people for common good, rather than destruction and division.

And from our perspective here in Aotearoa, at the heart of the Pacific, we have both a particular responsibility and an opportunity to contribute to that effort.

We hope this open letter contributes to dialogue, solidarity and concrete collective action and to a more hopeful future for Aotearoa and our wider Pacific community. We stand ready to partner with others to help make that future possible.

