

Interfaith Dialogue

Our Vision

For the first time in New Zealand's political history the Labour Party has established the portfolio of Interfaith Dialogue in recognition of the unprecedented plurality of faiths and religious beliefs that exist today, and the significant role faith plays in the lives of many New Zealanders. This paper manifests Labour's commitment to building peace and the promotion of harmonious relations amongst diverse groups and greater appreciation between faith communities and all New Zealanders.

There have been a variety of faith groups that have been active in different parts of New Zealand over the past 20 years. These regional groups hold regular meetings to promote and foster appreciation, understanding and cooperation between all faiths in Aotearoa New Zealand. Moreover, these groups have evolved to form the New Zealand Interfaith Group which convenes as a national body at an annual National Interfaith Forum that encourages people of all faiths to engage with one another and with all New Zealanders.

Background

From the Statement of Religious Diversity in New Zealand we find that, "At the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, Governor Hobson affirmed, in response to a question from Catholic Bishop Pompallier, "the several faiths (beliefs) of England, of the Wesleyans, of Rome, and also Maori custom shall alike be protected". This foundation creates the opportunity to reaffirm an acknowledgement of the diversity of beliefs in New Zealand.

Today New Zealand has become a country of many faiths and its increasing religious diversity (with a significant number who profess no practicing religion) has become a common feature of public life.

According to the 2006 Census there are a total of more than 2 million Christians in New Zealand or 53.6% of the total population, 204,000 non-Christians or 5.4%, and 1.3 million people with no religion or 34.3%, with the remaining 7% of people either not stating, or refusing to answer, or declare their status on religion.

Religion continues to play an important part in the lives of many New Zealanders today.

Christianity has played and continues to play a formative role in the development of New Zealand in terms of the nation's identity, culture, beliefs, institutions and values.

Labour recognises the importance of preserving the heritage of Christianity in New Zealand and acknowledges this as an important part of New Zealand's cultural identity.

New settlers have enhanced New Zealand's religious diversity, and only recently have the numbers of some of their faith communities grown significantly as a result of migration from Asia, Africa, Central Europe, the Pacific and the Middle East. These communities have a positive role to play in our society.

The Temples, Mosques, Chapels, and places of worship for many faiths have become the focal point for a range of religious, educational and community events. These facilities also serve as villages where cultural ceremonies and special celebrations take place, and where information is disseminated and support provided to those in need amongst their membership.

International treaties including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights uphold the right to freedom of religion and belief - the right to hold a belief; the right to change one's religion or belief; the right to express one's religion or belief; and the right not to hold a belief.¹

These rights are reflected in the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act and Human Rights Act. The right to religion entails affording this right to others and not infringing their human rights.

It is in this context that Labour recognises the right to religion and the responsibilities of faith communities.

Religion and the State

Labour recognises that Religion and the State are two separate and different structures that serve the wider community.

The freedom of religion and belief requires allowing other people to think about God in ways that you do not think are true and extending to all people the same privilege to worship how, where, or what they may in accordance with the dictates of their own conscience.

The challenge the State has in New Zealand is to promote the rights and freedom of religion, recognise the diversity of faiths, and commit to fostering understanding, maintaining peace, respect, tolerance, and the promotion of harmonious human relations through open dialogue between the faith communities and with the rest of New Zealand.

Labour respects and upholds the non-political nature of the faith communities and this principle will serve as the basis for Labour's on-going community engagement with the Interfaith community.

Labour will build strong relations with the Interfaith community and institutions by celebrating the rich diversity and vitality of the multi-faith profile that make up New Zealand today.

Labour will commit to building harmonious relationships between communities of different faiths as intrinsic to ensuring strong, healthy and safe communities of understanding and tolerance in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Labour will establish on-going relationships with the Interfaith community through regular and open dialogue and the sharing of expertise that can assist in the development of policy that benefits all people in New Zealand.

¹ Most recently New Zealand has ratified the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples wherein Article 12 part 1 says, "Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains."

Labour will contribute to the on-going discussion of the Religious Diversity in New Zealand - Statement on Religious Diversity and support the work of the NZ Interfaith Group in building understanding and appreciation between the faith communities and the rest of New Zealand.

The Pursuit of Peace & Conflict Resolution

The maintenance of peace is fundamental to the building of a thriving and prosperous society and country. Yet, the sudden riots and violence that spread through several cities and towns in England from 6-10 August 2011, sparked by a peaceful march responding to the Metropolitan Police Service attempt to arrest a 29 year old black man whom police shot and killed in the process, shows just how quickly emotions can re-ignite tensions between different communities and cultures and lead to widespread violence, deaths and destruction of property.

This is only one example of how the pursuit of peace and the maintenance of harmonious relationships amongst diverse groups don't just happen by themselves. Serious levels of violence continue in our society and in the world today. Peace, respect, tolerance and the maintenance of harmonious relationships must be pursued, fostered, nurtured, protected and promoted. Many believe that the greatest challenge of our time is the non-violent resolution of conflict. Yet, very little is being done to study peace and conflict resolution, and very little is done to recognise the need for developing peace and conflict resolution courses and programmes of study.

Despite New Zealand having a rich heritage of peace initiatives drawing from its indigenous and other cultures, its continuing recourse to violence presents a challenge to the development of a peaceful society.

Labour is committed to the pursuit and maintenance of peace, respect, tolerance and maintaining harmonious relationships for all New Zealanders.

Labour will work collaboratively across all government sectors to ensure that New Zealand's diverse cultures and communities of faiths will be protected from racism, discrimination, prejudice and injustices.

Labour will work with the education sector to establish sustainable peace and conflict resolution courses and programmes of study, and support the work of existing Centres for Peace and Conflict Studies in Aotearoa, New Zealand.