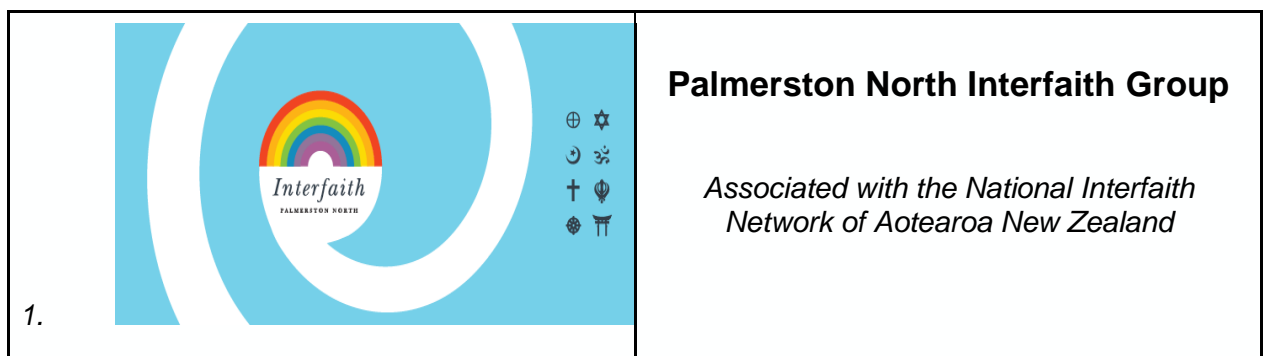


**INTERFAITH WOMEN RESIST THE CLIMATE OF HATRED AND FEAR:  
SHARING DIFFERENT FAITH PERSPECTIVES ON BUILDING BRIDGES OF  
TRUST, FRIENDSHIP AND LOVE**

held on 24 August 2017 at  
Events Central, Palmerston North City Library

Organized by The Palmerston North Interfaith Group



Edited by Mary Eastham

Layout and Design by Margaret Sinclair-Jones

## Interfaith Women Resist the Climate of Hatred and Fear:

### *Sharing Different Faith Perspectives on Building Bridges of Trust, Friendship and Love*



From left to right, Jan McPherson, Jenny Boyack, Gurveer Kaur, Joanne Wilson, Heba Hegazi, Wibha Desai Sarathi, Hadassah bat Avrohom uVatsheva

## Table of Contents

Mary Eastham	Introduction	1
Hadassah bat Avrohom uVatsheva	Council of Jewish Women	4
Wibha Desai Sarathi	Massey University Hindu Forum	7
Heba Hegazi	Representative of the Muslim Faith	14
Joanne Wilson	Representative of the Baha'i faith	19
Jenny Boyack	All Saints Anglican Church	30
Jan McPherson	Amitahba Buddhist Centre	34
About the Palmerston North Interfaith Group		39
Appendix 1	Carly Simons.	

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/manawatu-standard/lifestyle/96994119/manawat-worshippers-finding-common-ground-despite-their-differences>.

## Introduction

Throughout the world, people from every culture and faith tradition interact with one another in the normal course of their day. Dialogue is unavoidable.<sup>1</sup> The only question is whether this dialogue celebrates the diversity of the many cultures in our midst, and so too the faith traditions which enrich many peoples' lives, or whether dialogue has been replaced by nasty rhetoric which tears down the fabric of humane community and discriminates toward vulnerable people.

On 24 August 2017, women from seven faith traditions addressed the climate of hatred and fear in public discourse which legitimates destructive attitudes and violent behaviours towards people considered "other". That these attitudes and behaviours were taking place in secular religiously pluralist countries whose constitutions protect the religious freedom of all citizens and guarantee the free exercise of religion, indicate how crucially important moral leadership is from elected public servants and religious leaders.

When the language of hatred and fear is used in public discourse, women and children<sup>2</sup> are always the most vulnerable to its message of exclusion and discrimination. This is especially true for women whose religious and cultural convictions oblige them to wear distinctive garments in public, like the hijab for Muslim women.<sup>3</sup>

The great world religions are depositories of wisdom distilled through many years of lived experience and reflection on all aspects of human life, such as what causes hatred and fear within human beings, and how people of faith can transform these destructive emotions into creative avenues of justice and peace.

This booklet records the wisdom of six women from Palmerston North, New Zealand from the Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Baha'i, Christian and Buddhist traditions. They are teachers, wives, mothers, healers, musicians, artists and

---

<sup>1</sup> Raimon Panikkar, "The Encounter of Religions: The Unavoidable Dialogue", in *Dialog der Religionen*, Nr. 1 (1991)

<sup>2</sup> At present, children are being separated from their parents who have crossed the US border illegally because if parents are prosecuted and sent to jail, children cannot be in jail with them

<sup>3</sup> Countries across Europe and even Canada have been wrestling with the issue of the Muslim veil - in various forms such as the body-covering burka and the niqab, which covers the face apart from the eyes. The debate takes in religious freedom, female equality, secular traditions and even fears of terrorism. The veil issue is part of a wider debate about multiculturalism in Europe, as many politicians argue that there needs to be a greater effort to assimilate ethnic and religious minorities.

community workers as well as being recognized leaders in their faith communities. They have pondered deeply the causes of hatred and fear within our world today from the perspective of their faith traditions, and suggested creative ways to build bridges of trust, friendship and love.

Our sincere thanks to the Palmerston North City Library for hosting this event. Thanks to Sr. Maureen O'Hanlon, OP for taking photos, and to Margaret Sinclair-Jones for IT support.

Finally, a most gracious thank you to everyone who attended. If we "think globally and act locally"<sup>4</sup>, each of us in our own way can become the change we need to see in our broken world.

Mary Eastham

Member of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Committee for Interfaith Relations and the Palmerston North Interfaith Group  
20 June 2018, World Refugee Day



---

<sup>4</sup> French philosopher, sociologist and lay theologian Jacques Ellul coined the phrase, "Think globally, act locally" (penser global, agir local).

*Interfaith Women Resist the Climate of Hatred and Fear  
— Sharing different faith perspectives on building bridges  
of trust, friendship and love*

*A lot of the hatred directed at us has been because we are seen as "other", as strangers. And our fear of others and of their attitudes towards us comes from the sense that they and we are strangers...The Torah, the five books of Moses that make up the first five books of what the Christians call the Old Testament, contains for the Jewish people both our history and our practice, our lore and our law. It contains 613 commandments. It is significant that of those there are at least 36 commandments that tell us how we should relate to strangers.*

**Hadassah bat Avorohom uVatsheva (Council of Jewish Women)**

*Interfaith Women Resist the Climate of Hatred and Fear  
— Sharing different faith perspectives on building bridges  
of trust, friendship and love*

*Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam, shechichianu, v'ki'manu,  
v'higi'anu lazman hazeh.*

*This means: Blessed are You, Adonai Our God, Ruler of the Universe, Who has kept us  
alive, sustained us, and brought us to this time.*

For most of the time, over the generations since we left Eretz Yisrael in the early years of the Common Era, Jewish women and Jewish children and Jewish men, have lived in a climate of hatred and fear— the hatred of others and our fear.

Within the last hundred years the most striking example of hatred and fear for us was the Holocaust.

Of course, it was not just the Jewish people who lived in a climate of hatred and fear - talk to the Rom, to the gay community, to the Chinese and the prisoners of war who suffered under the Japanese regime, to the Russian people who suffered under Stalin or to the Cambodians who suffered under Pol Pot amongst many others.

More recently, it seemed as if sanity might prevail in the world and that we Jews, in the western world at least, could live safely amongst our neighbours. But in the last month we have seen examples of anti-Jewish feeling in Charlottesville in the United States and in Switzerland.

Here in New Zealand, at least, when there are attacks fuelled by racial hatred, there has been immediate condemnation, not just by our fellow citizens but also by those in power.

A lot of the hatred directed at us has been because we are seen as “other”, as strangers. And our fear of others and of their attitudes towards us comes from the sense that they and we are strangers.

The Torah, the five books of Moses that make up the first five books of what the Christians call the Old Testament, contains for the Jewish people both our history and our practice, our lore and our law. It contains 613 commandments. It is significant that of those there are at least 36 commandments that tell us how we should relate to strangers.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth has given us eight examples from Torah on the treatment of strangers:

1. *You shall not wrong nor oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 22:20)*
2. *You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 23:9)*
3. *You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger; I the Eternal am your God. (Leviticus 19:10)*
4. *When strangers reside with you in your land, you shall not wrong them. The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I the Eternal am your God. (Leviticus 19:33-34)*
5. *You too must befriend (love) the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:19)*
6. *You shall not abhor an Edomite, for such is your kin. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in that land. (Deuteronomy 23:8)*
7. *You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless; you shall not take a widow's garment in pawn. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that the Eternal your God redeemed you there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment. (Deuteronomy 24:17-18)*
8. *Cursed be the one who subverts the rights of the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. And all the people shall say, Amen. (Deuteronomy 27:19)*

The fourth commandment of the Ten Commandments gives another clear instruction that the stranger in our country is to be treated as one of us: it says *"Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath unto the Eternal Your God, in it you shall not do any manner of work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your man-servant, nor your maid-servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger that is within your gates; for in six days the Eternal made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested on the seventh day. Wherefore the Eternal blessed the Sabbath day, and made it holy". (Exodus 20:8-11)*

Other examples are the commandments regarding two of the pilgrimage festivals, the feast of weeks and the feast of tabernacles. These commandments both include a commandment to *rejoice before the Eternal your G-d and to include your son, and your daughter, and your man-servant, and your maid-servant, and the Levite that is within your gates, and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow.*



It is clear then, that Jewish people are directed by G-d to look after the strangers living among us.

But how do we, as Jewish women, do this? From earliest times we have been caring both for our families and for the strangers in our midst.

In Genesis chapter 18 we learn that Abraham, our father, was hospitable. Even as he was recovering from his circumcision he ran to welcome three strangers and invite them to wash their feet and to eat with him. Fresh food was prepared – cakes were baked and a calf was killed and cooked. These were presented to the guests with curds and milk. Abraham did not know that these visitors were messengers from God. He offered them hospitality because they were strangers coming to his home.

But who did the preparation? In chapter 18 verse 6 we read: *And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said: 'Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes.'*

So, it seems that, although we, as Jews, are individually required to welcome the stranger and to treat him or her as we would treat one of our own, when it comes to the practicalities of doing that, it generally falls to us, the women, to make sure it happens.

Traditionally, Jewish women have not been constrained to observe any commandments which are time bound. This is specifically so that we can be the carers, the people who feed the household and keep it clean and tidy and of course, be the parent who teaches the child how to behave towards others.

In this modern world, many fathers take on a nurturing role. But this must not stop us, the women of the world, reaching out to the strangers who live within our community, thus helping us all to resist the climate of hatred and fear which many in power in other lands are trying to impose upon us.

Let us make a start here in Palmerston North by forging links between the women of our different communities. From this I hope that we can grow stronger bonds between our communities as a whole.

Shalom Aleichem

*Interfaith Women Resist the Climate of Hatred and Fear  
— Sharing different faith perspectives on building bridges  
of trust, friendship and love*

*When we are all one family there is no room for fear and hatred.  
There is only trust, love and friendship in a family.*

Wibha Desai Sarathi (Massey University Hindu Forum)

# वक्रतुण्ड महाकाय सूर्यकोटि समप्रभ । निर्विघ्नं कुरु मे देव सर्वकार्येषु सर्वदा ॥

Vakra-Tunndda Maha-Kaaya Suurya-Kotti Samaprabha ।  
Nirvighnam Kuru Me Deva Sarva-Kaaryessu Sarvadaa ॥

Namaste

Firstly, I would like to thank you, the PN Interfaith Group, Mary and the library for this opportunity to share with you today.

Today's topic is about sharing different faith perspectives on building bridges of trust, friendship and love.

I will share a few points that can uncover the bonds of trust, friendship and love. Or can say the Building blocks of the bridge of trust, friendship and Love.

This topic has made me not only read and hear what the great masters have to say but also introspect and learn. I have selected 3 points to share today from our Masters which would address the subject from the perspective of Hindu Sanathan Dharma.

1<sup>st</sup> point is **Truth is one**

एकं सद्भिप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति

ekam sadvipraa bahudhaa vadanti

"Truth is one, sages express it variously."

It is from the Sanskrit phrase

एकं सद्भिप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति

*ekaM sadvipraa bahudhaa vadanti*

It comes from the Rig Veda and it means "Truth is one, sages express it variously."  
Or God is one, but we can approach Him in many ways

The different Prophets and messengers: Mohamed, Buddha, Jesus, Adi ShankaraCharya, to name a few have come with teachings for people according to their geographical location, historical time and social conditions. Each with a unique practice that suited the people there while they all had one ultimate goal, which is union with God.

We are all searching for that one truth. Depending on our ability and background, we follow a path, but the destination is the same. The differences are superficial and external.

We honour the fact that "Truth is one, the ways our different faiths approach it are many.

2<sup>nd</sup> point is Oneness

Everything is pervaded with the divine.

ईशा वास्यं इदं सर्वं

IshA vAsyam idam sarvam

Everything is pervaded with the divine.

ईशा वास्यं इदं सर्वं = IshA vAsyam idam sarvam  
From Isavasya Upanisad

Isha meaning God. "vAsyam" means "to cover, envelop" or "to inhabit". Idam means this and sarvam is all.

God inhabits all the objects of the Universe.

In other words, God is the inner-most Self, Innermost Reality, the substratum of the Universe.

Everything is pervaded with the divine. Everything in Creation is one with God. This understanding can bring about oneness.

If I was in Timbuktu or Greenland and happen to meet a Kiwi there, we would instantly bond because we have something in common. We speak the same language and know what a Tui is. I am sure you have had this experience when you meet someone you don't know but have something in common, such as the same high school, or hometown?

We all, irrespective of our faith, background and different thoughts, have a common thread that binds us. Like a garland. It is like different types of flowers having one common thread. That thread is the life support, the light or spirit of god, Self, that divinity that enlivens us. It is this reality which is our true identity, and which connects us all into this oneness.

You must have heard the phrase, “God is in my heart or God lives within me.” We are all divine beings. We all have the same divinity in us. The practice of greeting one another with “Namaste” is a good way to cultivate oneness. Namaste means “the divinity in me bows to the divinity in you”, and in this way, we recognize one another.

The divinity within is like our Family name, our identity. Realizing our true identity or the divinity within us is the key to oneness.

Once we realize the divinity within us, then we can also see the divinity in others, and then that common identity brings the feeling of oneness. When there is Oneness there is no fear or hatred but only friendship, love and trust.

3<sup>rd</sup> Point is

वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् (vasudhaiva kuTumbakam)  
(The whole world is a family)



“vasudha”, the earth; “iva”, is ; and “kutumbakam”, family)

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam this Sanskrit phrase means that the entire world is truly just one family.

In a family we do things that benefit the members of our family. We look after each other when we are sick and make them smile. We want them to be happy, successful and their Spiritually fulfilled.

And when the family is defined to be the whole world, it is clear that we wish everyone in the world to be happy, successful, Spiritually fulfilled and look after them in times of need. The Vedic affirmation that captures this sentiment is Sarve Bhavantu sukhina "May all people be happy." Which is part of a common prayer.

When we are all one family there is no room for fear and hatred. There is only trust, love and friendship in a family.

"Truth is one, sages express it variously."

There is Divinity in all of us. We are one.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam – We all are a family.



In conclusion, I would like to leave you with the sentiments:

"Truth is one; the sages express it variously."

There is Divinity in all of us. We are one.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam – We all are a family.

Thank you for listening. As a student and still learning, I have tried to express what the great masters are teaching and will try and answer any questions, but if I can't, I will find out for you from our teacher.

I will finish with a very prayer that underlines the 3 points discussed.

ॐ सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः

सर्वे सन्तु निरामयाः ।

सर्वे भद्राणि पश्यन्तु

मा कश्चित् दुःख भागभवेत् ।

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

Om Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah

Sarve Santu Nir-Aamayaah |

Sarve Bhadraanni Pashyant

Maa Kashcid-Duhkha-Bhaag-Bhavet |

Om Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

1: Om, May All become Happy,

2: May All be Free from Illness.

3: May All See what is Auspicious,

4: May no one Suffer.

5: Om Peace, Peace, Peace. All be in Peace.

Namaste and Thank you.



Interfaith women resist the climate of hatred and create bridges of communication

***“I am here to acknowledge and confirm the beauty, completeness, and perfection of diversity in all aspects of our lives presented in the different communities and societies.***

***In fact, I am here tonight to celebrate difference, for we are all created from same one Man (Adam) and same one woman (Eve), for a great and noble purpose to continue prosperous and meaningful life on Earth. This fact indeed makes us all remember that we are all brothers and sisters as human beings. “oh you people, fear your Lord who created you from one soul and He created from it its mate and who created from them many men and women. And fear your Lord and guard the womb ties” Surah Al Nesaa, Chapter4, Verse 1”***

Heba Hegazi (Member of the Muslim Community)

## **Interfaith women resist the climate of hatred and create bridges of communication:**

Kia Ora, Alsalamu aleikum and welcome to our tonight event

First of all, I would like to thank all who have been working hard together to make tonight's event a reality. I would like to thank Interfaith sisters, Mary Eastham in particular for inviting me to be part of tonight's event. I would like to thank everyone who participated in planning, organizing, implementing tonight's event.

Introduction

I am Heba Hegazi a member of the Palmerston North Muslim community. I am not representing any particular organization tonight. I come as an ordinary Muslim woman living in Palmerston North for the last 13 years with my nuclear family who have enjoyed the peace, tranquillity, and cultural diversity of New Zealand society.

When I thought about tonight's topic, I thought it's a very current, interesting topic, and it would at the same time create an amazing debate during the discussion time for sure.

Then I asked myself. Why women?

Well, I thought women are the most important component of any family, we all agree on that. They represent half of any community and raise the second half.

She is the mother, wife, sister, daughter, granddaughter, and she is also the friend.

Women are the essential component in upbringing, nurturing young and growing families who constitute the future adults' generation both men and women alike. Women influence all aspects of the wellbeing of their families including physical health, social skills, education, and how the younger generation perceive their outside world and reality.

Women are commonly affected by international and national conflicts, political unrest, economic crisis and instability, wars and displacement consequences.....etc

Women are also vulnerable due to their usually obvious symbolic cultural representation of their faith revealing in their unique dress code. For example, wearing the well-known head covering or Hijab of Muslim women.

As I am here tonight, I feel strongly about creating bridges for communications, resisting hate messages in any way among people from diverse cultural and religious

background in our New Zealand society for the sake of all of our communities' wellbeing.

I am here tonight to support and celebrate diversity in cultures represented in different languages, religious beliefs and political affiliations, norms, values, and even different ways of cooking and celebrating our weddings, funerals and cultural events. This diversity is a healthy sign of community wellbeing and development. It does serve the individual member and the whole community alike.

I am here to acknowledge and confirm the beauty, completeness, and perfection of diversity in all aspects of our lives presented in the different communities and societies.

In fact, I am here tonight to celebrate difference, for we are all created from same one Man (Adam) and same one woman (Eve), for a great and noble purpose to continue prosperous and meaningful life on Earth. This fact indeed makes us all remember that we are all brothers and sisters as human beings.

“oh you people, fear your Lord who created you from one soul and He created from it its mate and who created from them many men and women. And fear your Lord and guard the womb ties” Surah Al Nesaa, Chapter 4, Verse 1

How to create communication bridges:

In a healthy and stable environment like the one we all luckily enjoy here in New Zealand, culture is highly respected as a basic human need/ right. This status was in my opinion a result of the Treaty of Waitangi, and while acknowledging Maori as *Tangata whenua* of Aotearoa, that notion consequently guaranteed the respect and protection of the rights of all people from all other cultures within New Zealand equally. For example, when I get asked about my head scarf or Hijab, it's always more than enough to say it's an essential part of my culture. And immediately they know what I do mean by that. For someone who chose to leave his own homeland by his/ her free will looking for a better life and better opportunities far far away from his/ her original roots, it does not matter whether you were a skilled immigrant, war zone refugee, asylum seeker, or coming to work and spend your summer holiday in New Zealand. Always you will be judged somehow according to your colour, dress code, ethnic background, religious belief, socio- economic status, and even your accent...which we all have one!

And there will always be, although uncommon in New Zealand, statements of rejection, exclusion, intimidation, humiliation, bullying, verbal and even physical

violence representing the non- acceptance and hatred, which can keep the spiral of violent actions of hatred in the one society spinning.

The only way out of this situation is for every one of us to be accepting of diversity, and have a role in raising public awareness starting within own family and local community.

In my opinion, the steps to counteract the hate message is:

1. Always smile
2. Always have an open heart and mind
3. Always have good intentions
4. Be aware of the sociological phenomenon of (us and the other) it's healthy and normal. Explain....
5. Try not to be judgemental
6. Be positive
7. Be an objective and critical thinker (question yourself)
8. Beware of the media bias, intentions and political agenda.
9. Use various and reliable resources to seek the truth.
10. Treat people the same exact way you would like them to treat you.
11. Remember that we are in fact brothers and sisters.

In the name of Allah(God) the most gracious the most merciful

“O Mankind reverence your guardian- Lord who created of like nature its mate and from them scattered (like seeds) countless men and women. Reverence Allah(God), through Whom Ye demand your mutual(rights), and reverence the wombs (that bore you): For Allah ever watches over you”

Surah An- Nisa, Chapter 4, Verse 2

For me and as a Muslim woman, I always wonder about my faith, and Islamic religion as the last of the Abrahamic religions and by which the heavenly revelation has completed. In fact, it is considered one of the fastest growing religions in the west in today's world. Of course, that makes me wonder. There must be reasons for that, and those reasons must be great reasons. There are some basic facts that unfortunately have not been talked about enough, covered in the media enough, if at all. But also remember that we are living today in the most advanced era of IT and communication technology.

The religion that started in a difficult desert Bedouin and tough environment, the religion that had no previous heritage of knowledge of the Holy books or known civilization before. That religion that stood strong and is preserved in it's original Arabic text till today, and till the day of judgement as God Himself guaranteed. It's the religion that does not reform or need a reform, as it's always current, valid, and

makes sense at all times and eras. The religion that is comprehensive, with answers for all sorts of questions about this life and hereafter.

From the trivial and detailed ethics and protocols to be followed by children to get permission to their parents' room at different times of the day, to highly specific and scientifically proven knowledge about history, astronomy, embryology, anatomy and even mathematics.

In fact, this religion had always contributed, still contributing, and will always contribute to societal stability and mankind's prosperity by its amazing moderate, just, and spiritual teachings.

I can reassure you all that there is no such term that made up of two opposite words called "Islamic Terrorism". Same as "Christian genocide". .....Islam was, is, and will always be the great message of peace to all people without any discrimination based on sex, colour, or background ...etc.

The God (Allah) who forgave all the sins of a thirsty man who gave a thirsty dog in the hot desert of Arabia a drink of water that was enough to keep him alive, is the same God who guaranteed eternal hell fire for the woman who locked up a cat and watched her dying in front of her eyes. Neither she did feed her, nor she released her to find food from earth. It's the same God who made all human souls sacred, and superior to all other creatures and forbade its wastage in any unlawful way.

In the Name of Allah(God) The Most Gracious the Most Merciful

"Oh you people We have created you from a man and a woman and made you nations and tribes to know one another, indeed those who have more fear from Allah(God)is the most pious of you, Allah is the all- knowing" Surah Al Hugaat, Chapter 49, Verse 13

Thanks for your attention and kind listening. I am looking forward to hear your questions shortly.

Please note that the verses quoted are only translations and the actual and true meaning is in the original Arabic text, which adds further depth and beauty to the meaning.

Thank You

## Interfaith Women Resist the Climate of Hatred and Fear

***Baha'u'llah revealed, in numerous proclamations and writings, from the 1860s until his passing in 1892, that the main purpose of his revelation was to announce that the era for the unification of humanity has arrived. For this he was imprisoned, tortured and exiled from Iran to Palestine, the Holy Land, but he always continued to proclaim his message...He promised that the unification of humanity is inevitable, and that 'The Most Great Peace' will come in time. We understand this to be the Kingdom of God on earth as promised in many faith traditions...***

***As Baha'is, we observe the process of unity in diversity taking place quietly in local communities across the planet, giving rise to community building and social and economic initiatives based on unity, both inside and outside our faith.***

Joanne Wilson, (representative of the Baha'i faith)



### **Interfaith Women Resist the Climate of Hatred and Fear**

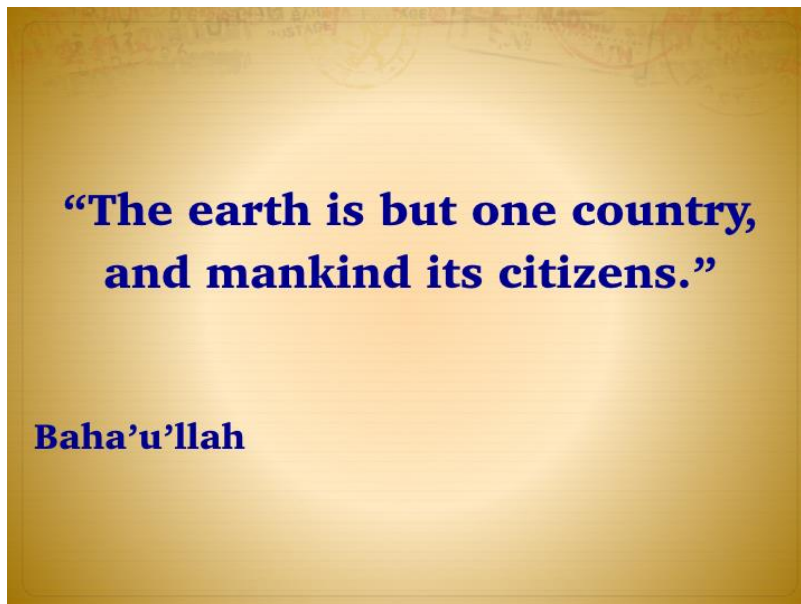
E nga mana, e nga reo, nga rau rangatira ma, tenei te mihi uruhau ki a koutou katoa. (Warm and happy greetings to all esteemed and noble people who have gathered here)

I'm Joanne Wilson and thank you Mary for inviting me as the Baha'i representative to contribute our perspective to this really important discussion tonight.

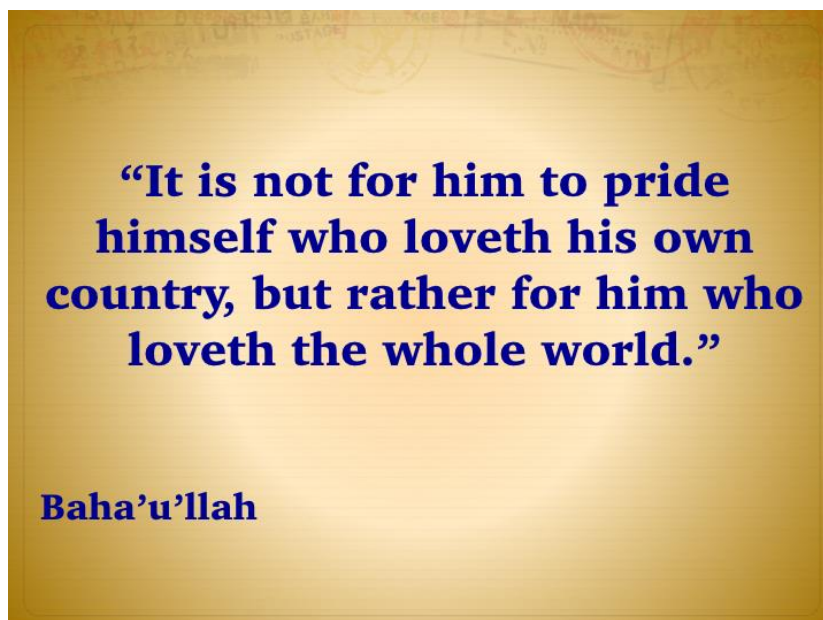
A little bit about my own faith background: My forebears were from the Christian tradition, a mixture of Scottish Presbyterians, Methodists and English Anglicans. I was brought up an Anglican myself and attended an Anglican church secondary school which included religious instruction. At school, the question that set me off on my own spiritual journey at about age 16, away from the path I was born into, was a simple one really: how could the undoubtedly good people of other faiths be condemned to an eternity of suffering, just because they had been born into another religious tradition? I knew I needed to look further for answers that satisfied my soul. It just didn't sit right with me that a loving god would require such an outcome.

After many twists and turns I found my answers several years later in the Baha'i spiritual teachings, and at the same time, I definitely gained a deeper appreciation of

my own Christian heritage. The first Baha'i teaching that pretty much set me on fire at the time, and one that is entirely relevant to our discussion tonight, was this one:



This was the understanding I was searching for, and to find it was such a relief to me. The rest of the quote goes:



My understanding of this teaching is that someone who 'loveth the whole world' is not divided from others by national or cultural divisions. This doesn't mean that we



are required to give away our own cultural identity however. The principle here is a favourite with Baha'is: unity in diversity, which is explained by our founder this way:

**“Ye are all leaves of one tree  
and the fruits of one branch.”**

**Baha'u'llah**

The next slide further explains this teaching:

**“By this it is meant that the world  
of humanity is like a tree, the  
nations or peoples are the  
different limbs or branches of that  
tree, and the individual human  
creatures are as the fruits and  
blossoms thereof.”**

**Abdu'l Baha**

To continue with the gardening metaphor, we have another quotation which helps show the Baha'i perspective on ethnic and cultural differences.

**“The world of humanity is like a garden and the various races are the flowers which constitute its adornment and decoration.”**

**Abdu'l Baha**

This means to me that in essence, humanity is not divided, and that our diversity is a beautiful expression of the same thing. The divisions that appear to exist are those that we make ourselves.

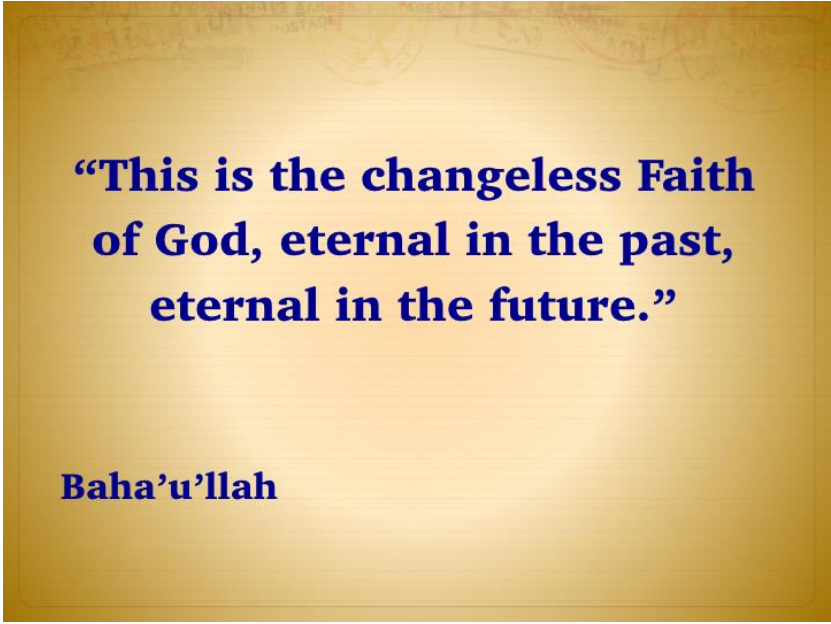


Some of you might be thinking that is a familiar looking scene...It's Lynne Atkins' garden Greenhaugh at Whakarongo. I googled 'Beautiful gardens' to look for a scene to illustrate this point, then remembered we have a sublime local example and I had my own photo of it. Lynne has a myriad of plants in her garden. Together, all the different plants create a serene and uplifting beauty. The point here is that they are all just different varieties of one thing, plants, but together, they are more than the sum of the parts.

The challenge for us of course, is how to create our beautiful garden, i.e. a unified world, in these uncertain times.

The paradox facing us all is that in these days of instant everything, our species is both more connected than ever before, but at the same time, deeply divided, and becoming more so, as peoples and nations appear to be retreating into their known cultural boundaries and paradigms.

That is how it might seem from the constant flow of discouraging and heartbreaking information we receive about events around the planet. From the Baha'i perspective, this apparent retreat from love and compassion isn't the whole picture. Our founder Baha'u'llah, the author of the quotations already discussed, was born 200 years ago this year in Persia, now Iran. He stated this about the revelations he received which began this new world religion:

A rectangular graphic with a gold gradient background. The text is in a dark blue, serif font. The quote is centered and reads: "This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future." Below the quote, the name "Baha'u'llah" is written in the same font and color.

**“This is the changeless Faith  
of God, eternal in the past,  
eternal in the future.”**

**Baha'u'llah**

To Baha'is, this means that there has only ever been one creator, one God, one unknowable essence. Therefore, as a species we've never been without spiritual guidance. Revelation from God has come, over the ages, through the founders of all the great religions, those wonderful spiritual teachers who changed and reordered their societies. Baha'is honour all these teachers as Manifestations of God, and see Baha'u'llah as the most recent, but not the last, of these great souls. One outstanding similarity is how in all our faiths we embrace, in one form or another, the Golden Rule...do unto others as you would have done unto yourself.

Baha'u'llah revealed, in numerous proclamations and writings, from the 1860s until his passing in 1892, that the main purpose of his revelation was to announce that the era for the unification of humanity has arrived, that is, back to the metaphor, the time for making the beautiful garden full of all the different peoples of earth. For this he was imprisoned, tortured and exiled from Iran to Palestine, the Holy Land, but he always continued to proclaim his message.

He promised that the unification of humanity is inevitable, and that 'The Most Great Peace' will come in time. We understand this to be the Kingdom of God on earth as promised in many faith traditions.

As Baha'is, we observe the process of unity in diversity taking place quietly in local communities across the planet, giving rise to community building and social and economic initiatives based on unity, both inside and outside our faith.

At the same time, the structures global society has in place are less and less able to deal with our changing and globally connected world society. What we are witnessing on the world stage is the imploding, and indeed failure, of adversarial systems on one hand, and the growth of inter-cultural, dynamic new ways of community building on the other, both quietly and locally, plus visibly and internationally.



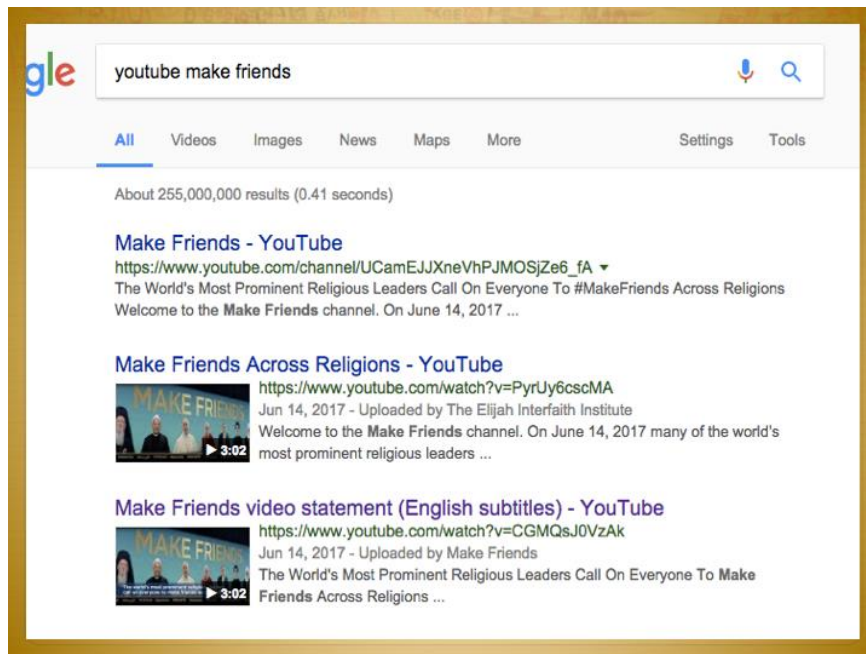
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGMQsJ0VzAk>

One such international example of global community building towards a peaceful and united humanity, which may have seemed impossible even quite recently, is the stunning 'Make Friends' initiative launched in June this year by 22 of the most prominent religious leaders in the world. The leaders are featured here:



Screenshot of the 22 leaders from the video

In the video, they each ask their followers, and all of us, to take the time to learn about each other, to actually make friends and to find our commonalities, instead of focusing on our differences.



Slide of google search “You Tube Make Friends”

You can find the video by googling You Tube make friends, and I really recommend it as an antidote to the worrying things we see and hear via mainstream news.

We are witnessing action and reaction. As dynamic change such as this fantastic initiative happens, there is also is fear of what will be lost in the process.

Recent events in Charlottesville can be seen through this lens of action and reaction. The more unity in diversity becomes a possibility, the more we will see pushback from those who fear for the loss of what they have and know best.

However, as pushback in the form of crimes of hate intensifies, people of integrity then stand up for unity in diversity. This slide is from Heather Meyer’s funeral. Heather was the young woman protesting against hate speech etc., who was run down and killed by a car driven by a member of the Alt Right in Charlottesville, Virginia, recently



[https://www.google.co.nz/search?biw=1440&bih=703&tbm=isch&sa=1&q=heather+Meyer+susan+bro+funeral&oq=heather+Meyer+susan+bro+funeral&gs\\_l=psy-ab.12...35067.41526.0.47993.24.21.0.0.0.0.569.2754.0j2j6j1j0j1.10.0....0...1.1.64.psy-ab..15.2.785...0i30k1j0i24k1.LnWWQ6m0VPg#imgrc=VIm65rBtCFhXWM:](https://www.google.co.nz/search?biw=1440&bih=703&tbm=isch&sa=1&q=heather+Meyer+susan+bro+funeral&oq=heather+Meyer+susan+bro+funeral&gs_l=psy-ab.12...35067.41526.0.47993.24.21.0.0.0.0.569.2754.0j2j6j1j0j1.10.0....0...1.1.64.psy-ab..15.2.785...0i30k1j0i24k1.LnWWQ6m0VPg#imgrc=VIm65rBtCFhXWM:)

This is her poor mother Susan Bro who spoke so bravely, stating that Heather's death will be a call for even more people to stand up for equality for all. We can already see what a galvanizing effect this tragic event is having in the US. So many people are coming forward to say that they actually want a society that is embracing rather than divisive.

As Baha'is, we try to do our best to leave behind the barriers of otherness and to show by our attitudes and actions that unity is not a dream but a reality. Reaching out, not drawing back, is our key to overcoming hate and fear.

Here is a challenge and a starter:

For just a minute or two, please turn to a person you don't know in the row in front or behind and see if you can find a couple of things you have in common with each other.

Thank you everyone for listening tonight. Here is a brief prayer from the Baha'i writings to finish with:

**God grant that the light of unity  
may envelop the whole earth,  
and that the seal the Kingdom is  
God's may be stamped upon the  
brow of all its peoples.**

**Baha'u'llah**





***An address to the Interfaith Gathering***

***What can we learn from Francis [of Assisi] and his encounter with the Sultan?... The first thing is that this involved two people meeting face-to-face – no ambiguous email exchanges, no escalation of hostilities as they sought to upstage each other, no manipulative power struggles. Just two men sharing honestly about what they believed and why. And two men willing to give the other the time of day and to listen from the heart. So, this must always be our first step in interfaith initiatives.***

Jenny Boyack (All Saints Anglican Church)

An address to the Interfaith Women's Gathering,  
Jenny Boyack, All Saints Anglican Church

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this inaugural interfaith event for women. It is a privilege to share the stage with such thoughtful, compassionate and courageous women and I hope that I can build on some of the ideas and experiences that have already been spoken of tonight.

I also feel a huge responsibility to communicate something of what it means to represent Jesus and the Christian faith at this event. I'm very mindful of Mahatma Gandhi's comment "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

I'd like to begin with a personal story about pilgrimage, something that is common to all the great religious traditions.

In recent years my husband and I have had the opportunity to visit Italy on a number of occasions, to work there for the Anglican Church and subsequently to lead fellow-New Zealanders on pilgrimage in the Steps of St Francis and St Clare of Assisi. When we are in Assisi, one of the visits we make is to a beautiful Franciscan sanctuary in the hills above Assisi. We try and leave the town in the early morning and after about an hour's uphill walk we arrive at the gate of the sanctuary. There we are greeted by a statue of St Francis, arms outstretched in welcome and encircled by a hoop on which can be seen the symbols of the world's major religions. The story of how Francis, who lived in the time of the Crusades, one of the most disgraceful and shameful periods of Christian history, came to be associated with interfaith respect and dialogue is too long to tell now, except to say that it began with a visit to the Sultan of Egypt and a deep desire to convert the Sultan to Christianity or to die in the attempt, and it ended with a total shift in Francis's attitude towards those of other faiths. He and the Sultan parted as friends, as

brothers seeking God and sharing common values of compassion and humanity in their dealings with others.

What can we learn from Francis and his encounter with the Sultan?

The first thing is that this involved two people meeting face-to-face – no ambiguous email exchanges, no escalation of hostilities as they sought to upstage each other, no manipulative power struggles. Just two men sharing honestly about what they believed and why. And two men willing to give the other the time of day and to listen from the heart. So, this must always be our first step in interfaith initiatives.

As the conversation between Francis and the Sultan opened up they shared more of the broader shape of their faith, the core beliefs and teachings that guided their lives. If I was to share some of these with you tonight they would involve Jesus' teachings about love for God, our neighbours and ourselves; about the centrality of forgiveness in our relationship with others; about our responsibility to care for those in need. These things are summed up in the words of the Old Testament prophet Micah who tells us that the Lord requires us to 'act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.'

Of course, when we begin to speak about our core beliefs and teachings with those of other faiths we can find ourselves at odds over small or larger matters. However, when we analyze these differences and are ready to honestly explore them together, we often find that the difficulties arise because we have strayed from the core beliefs and teachings that are truly at the centre of our faith. Perhaps we have covered them over with rules and rituals and conditions and exclusions that obscure the deep truths that will bind us together rather than push us apart.

As our communication deepens, we find that we can enter into more difficult conversations about things that might divide, we become more open to hear or read

about perspectives that may be at odds with what we have taken as truth. This doesn't mean that we have to compromise or water down our core faith positions, but it does mean we can become more understanding and respectful of how other's core faith positions might have developed.

These are possible starting points for our journey together. But as women who share so much on a human level, hopes for our children's and grandchildren's futures, the practical challenges of caring for loved ones while working outside the home and building careers, we should feel encouraged by our shared willingness to grow and learn together, to support each other, to recognize our separate gifts and abilities.

I'd like to conclude with a comment from Imam Jamal Rahman, a member of the Interfaith Amigos group which formed in the American North-West following 9/11. He said:

*Interfaith dialogue is not about conversion. It's about completion, about becoming a more complete, fully-human being. And from this place of inner spaciousness we can then collaborate on projects that are dear to all our hearts, issues of social justice and earth care.*

So, as we 7 women share our stories, our hopes, our commitment to building relationships of peace and friendship, we are also walking in the steps of saints and mystics and contemplatives and teachers from many different faiths and traditions. My prayer is that as each of us, speakers and those who are here to listen, holds the integrity of our own faith story, we remain open-armed to greet each other, to learn more about what we have in common, and to mobilize our collective strength to work for healthier and more united communities both here and in the wider world.

*Interfaith Women Resist the Climate of Hatred and Fear.*

*A Buddhist perspective.*

***So how can we strengthen this inner core, this good heart, that protects us from negative attitudes, feelings and actions associated with fear and hate?***

***First the Buddha tells us that the best way for us to maintain a happy and peaceful heart is to do an about face: so instead of relentlessly focusing on our own well-being, we gradually learn to focus our love and concern on others (like flipping the camera option on your phone from 'selfie' to the other side). This flies in the face of the way we usually do things: Shantideva, A Buddhist poet and scholar from the 8<sup>th</sup> century puts it like this:***

***All the happiness in this world  
Arises from wishing others to be happy,  
And all the suffering in this world  
Arises from wishing ourself to be happy.  
Shantideva, (2002, p.134)***

Jan McPherson (Amitahba Buddhist Centre)

## **Interfaith Women Resist the Climate of Hatred and Fear. A Buddhist perspective.**

Jan McPherson,  
Amitabha Buddhist Centre  
Palmerston North.

It is important to let you know at the outset that this is 'a' Buddhist perspective rather than 'the' Buddhist perspective. As with other religions there are many diverse views within Buddhism, and this is just one.

- I would like to start with some ideas about how I think fear and hate can eat away at our common humanity;
- and then say a little about how some Buddhist teachings might help us protect ourselves from fear and negativity;
- and finally, some brief and tentative ideas about how we, as an interfaith community, might respond to what is happening in our world.

### Fear and hate: Poison for the soul

We are living in anxious times: some psychologists suggest that there is an 'epidemic of anxiety', and a recent article in the NY Times, used the phrase 'the United States of Xanax', describing anxiety as "a shared cultural experience that feeds on alarmist CNN graphics and metastasizes through social media" (Williams, 2017). The way we live our life means that there are genuinely good reasons for us to be anxious. It is almost inevitable that we will live anxiously: if our lifestyle is dependent on the use of re-sources which threaten the earth; if our well-being is gained at the expense of others; if we believe that our security is based on treating others as enemies; if our sense of community drives us to exclude others; and/or if we believe that our religion re-quires us to prove that we are right and others are wrong. (Kinnamon, 2017).

This free-floating anxiety can pretty quickly morph into fear that can be both obsessive and excessive, and all too often it focuses on false targets. As Ghandi observed: "the enemy is fear; we think it is hate, but it is fear – because fear is so often the root of hatred."

Fear, clearly, may be necessary for our survival in times of crisis. However, much is unwarranted and misdirected, and it pushes us towards a particularly self-centred view of our world. It undermines our willingness to work with others constructively. Obama, when he was president, warned that: "Fear can lead us to lash out at those who are different, or lead us to get some sinister 'other' under control" (National Prayer breakfast, 2016).

When our fear is misdirected it corrodes our trust in others and erodes the bonds of community. Literally and metaphorically fear and hate makes us believe that we need walls to protect ourselves and keep others away.

Alternatively, fear can lead us to succumb to despair, paralysis or cynicism. And this means that we can feel alienated and disenfranchised from political processes; or we may hold a

sense of futility and hopelessness which further feeds our mistrust of others. Martin Luther King suggested that this sort of fear:” constantly poisons and distorts our inner lives” (1991, 511).

Fear is also a tool which those in power can deliberately use to keep others down; it can be used to attract adherents to a cause; or threaten others into silence.

In Aotearoa, we may feel that we are far, far away from the worst excesses of this public discourse of fear, however, we are by no means immune from it. And even from a distance, as we watch the world’s issues unfold on our TVs, we can also feel that things are out of control. As we watch, we can feel alarmed and deeply saddened by the racism expressed in Charlottesville, the terrible suffering of people in Syria, Gaza, the Yemen or Sudan. We can feel overwhelmed, numbed and helpless. So, we turn the TV to another channel, and switch off from the crazy things that are happening.

To summarize, fear has the potential to undermine our sense of connectedness across difference. We become selfish rather than generous, and suspicious rather than trusting. This indeed poisons our inner, spiritual lives.

It also blinds us to the positive things that are happening (for example, there has been a reduction in the number of people living in extreme poverty, and fewer children are dying of starvation). Importantly though, even as terrible events occur – we need to ‘look for the helpers’ (Fred Rogers, children’s show host, 1986). In every situation, we see people acting with compassion, kindness and generosity.

#### Protecting ourselves from fear and hate

In these times, it would seem that religion and those who believe in the importance of our spiritual well-being have an important role to play in comforting and protect-ing those who are afraid; and helping us remain compassionate and loving rather than hateful.

All the speakers here tonight, have emphasized the importance of embracing others across difference; and the value of compassion and kindness rather than fear and anger. We have so much in common. Buddha also offers some practical advice, which I believe can be useful for all of us no matter what our spiritual affiliation.

First, I like the idea that when things seem to be coming at you from all sides; when greed and fear and hate seem to be the dominant feature of public discourse, then we need to ‘hold to the centre’. As with other religions, at the heart of Buddhism is a deep sense of compassion, love and kindness. From a Buddhist perspective, this is our true nature; and we all have the potential to access and nurture these aspects of ourselves (and at the same time reduce our negative habits of anger and greed). Look for the helpers! Kindness is everywhere.

So how can we strengthen this inner core, this good heart, that protects us from negative attitudes, feelings and actions associated with fear and hate?

First the Buddha tells us that the best way for us to maintain a happy and peaceful heart is to do an about face: so instead of relentlessly focusing on our own well-being, we gradually learn to focus our love and concern on others (like flipping the camera option on your phone from 'selfie' to the other side). This flies in the face of the way we usually do things: Shantideva, A Buddhist poet and scholar from the 8th century puts it like this:

All the happiness in this world  
 Arises from wishing others to be happy,  
 And all the suffering in this world  
 Arises from wishing ourself to be happy.  
 Shantideva, (2002, p.134)

Second, Buddha tells us that we all have this potential for becoming more loving, more caring, kinder and more patient. One other speaker referred to 'the divinity within us' – in Buddhism we refer to it as our 'Buddha nature' or our Buddha seed – and we believe that all living beings have the seeds of compassion and wisdom at our hearts. It is this compassion that protects us: with love, there is no room for fear. We need to hold to this centre.

Third, meditation provides us with a way of tapping into the deep sense of peace within us. Through meditation we can familiarize our minds with the positive qualities of love and compassion, so that we can access them more easily when we are 'off the meditation mat' and out there interacting with the world. I believe that prayer can be very much like meditation in this respect.

Through meditation we are more able to recognize our own fears and prejudices as they arise. When we recognize them, and can spot them coming, it is easier to choose NOT to head off in that direction. Meditation is an especially effective tool with which to cut a different pathway in our minds.

By acknowledging our own tendencies to distance or blame others, and our own negative (and painful) thoughts and attitudes, we are able to see the harmful consequences that these have for both ourselves and others. Rather than characterizing the 'other' as enemy we can choose to respond with greater tolerance and compassion. We may even be able to see that the hate and intolerance that we perceive in others may stem from their own fears and isolation, and rather than anger or hate driving our response we can choose to act and react with compassion. (Note: for some of us this has clearly not happened overnight, and it can be a life's work to really move from a self-centred perspective to becoming truly and always compassionate. However, this mind of compassion is sublimely peaceful for us, and is probably good for the people around us too – so it seems a worthy goal).

To summarize, caring for others rather than for ourselves makes us happy and peaceful. We all have the potential to gradually reduce our negative qualities and increase our positive qualities. Meditation is a very useful way to do this.

Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, our main teacher writes:

Without inner peace, outer peace is impossible. We all wish for world peace, but world peace will never be achieved unless we first establish peace within our own minds. We can send so-



called 'peacekeeping forces' into areas of conflict, but peace cannot be imposed from the outside with guns. Only by creating peace within our own mind and helping others to do the same can we hope to achieve peace in this world. (2016)

Basically, we need a mind shift, an inner transformation, and I believe that this is a spiritual journey, and one that we share across religions. This seems to be an especially important role for religion in a world which can seem pervaded by fear and hate.

So, what do we do?

- Hold to the centre: hold an open heart, compassion and wisdom as our spiritual 'pou' so that we are sustained and nourished and strong.
- Make sure that we use our words well. We have examples everyday of politicians using speech which is divisive and creates suspicion, anger and violence. We should guard against being swayed by these words; we should speak up and call it out when appropriate; and we should be careful about how we use words ourselves.
- We should demonstrate compassion and generosity whenever we can. We should also notice it in others, and we should notice and acknowledge the helpers always.
- Finally, I believe that we should stand up, speak out, and protect others whenever we can. I believe that activism can be motivated by compassion rather than anger. A peaceful mind may be able to provide the basis for more constructive action than anger and hate.

Audre Lorde, a black American feminist, lesbian activist (who always spoke up) said: We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned, we can sit in our safe corners as mute as bottles, and still we will be no less afraid. (1980)

Gyatso, Geshe Kelsang. 2016. Transform your life. A blissful journey. Tharpa: Cumbria.

Lorde, Audre. 1980. "The transformation of silence into language and action". In The Cancer Journals. Argyle, NY: Spinsters Ink.

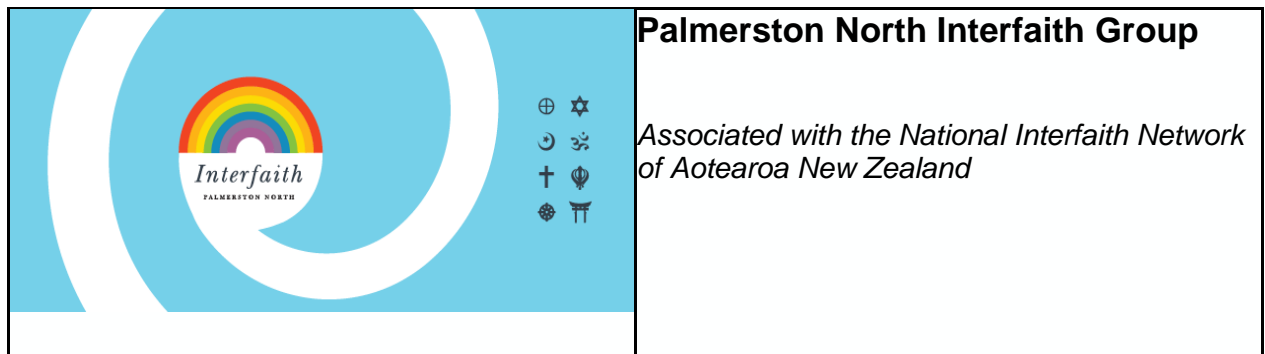
Kinnamon, Michael. 2017. The Witness of religion in an age of fear (Kindle Locations 1749-1751). Presbyterian Publishing. Kindle Edition.

King, Martin Luther Jr. 1991. "Antidotes for Fear," in The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., James Washington (Ed). San Francisco: HarperCollins.

Rogers, Fred. 1986. "Disasters: When Children Face Tragedy." Deseret News, 25 July 1986.

Shantideva. 2002. Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life. Tharpa: Cumbria.

Williams, Alex. 2017. Prozac Nation Is Now the United States of Xanax. June 10



## Palmerston North Interfaith Group

*Associated with the National Interfaith Network of Aotearoa New Zealand*

The logo is simple, elegant and meaningful. It was designed by Tom Parkes, the grandson of Peter MacGillivray<sup>5</sup> from St. David's Presbyterian Church and reveals the vision of the group. A white koru against a blue border, symbolising new life, growth, strength and peace. Its shape conveys the idea of perpetual movement, while the inner coil suggests returning to the point of origin<sup>6</sup>... like returning to the vision of a spiritual leader to make the vision new against the challenges of the day.

The rainbow above the words "Interfaith" symbolizes HOPE and HARMONY. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the rainbow reminds us that God has promised never again to destroy the world by flood. But this does not mean that people with the gift of free will, cannot misuse this gift, and thus bring calamity upon the world by their own actions.

There are eight traditional symbols of faith traditions<sup>7</sup> on the right of the koru, set against the colour blue, the coolest colour in the colour spectrum. We see it in nature, in the colours of the sky, lakes and oceans. In ancient Egypt, lapis lazuli, a beautiful blue gemstone, represented heaven. The meaning of the colour blue is

<sup>5</sup> Peter MacGillivray is a founding member of the Palmerston North Interfaith Group. He was a lecturer in farm management at Massey University and director of the Diploma of Agricultural Studies. Peter was 2011 recipient of the Massey University Distinguished Alumni Service Award. In the Interfaith Group, he had been treasurer from 2011 to 2016 and on the planning committee from 2011 to 2018. Peter organised hospitality for three major interfaith events, 2015-2017, and has been our liaison person with Marise Clark at Pit Park.

<sup>6</sup> "Māori creation traditions". Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand. New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage / Te Manatū Taonga. Retrieved 14 March 2010.

<sup>7</sup> The symbols in the left and right groups of four represent top to bottom: the Sun Cross, frequently found in the symbolism of Paleolithic cultures; the Star and Crescent, a symbol of the Islamic faith; the Cross symbolises the Christian faith; the Wheel of Dharma, a common symbol of the Buddhist philosophy; the Star of David, a common symbol of the Jewish faith; the Om or Aum, a symbol of the Hindu faith; the Khanda, the symbol of Sikhism; and the Torii Gate, a symbol of the Shinto faith. (Cf. *Sacred Symbols* by Robert Adkinson (Editor), Annice Jacoby (Editor) 2009. Unfortunately, a symbol for the Baha'i faith was not included when the logo was designed. Since 2013 the Baha'i have made an invaluable contribution to interfaith dialogue in Palmerston North. An appropriate symbol would probably be the Nine-Pointed Star. While the star is not a part of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, it is commonly used as an emblem representing "9", because of the association of number 9 with perfection, unity and Bahá'. (Cf. Smith, Peter (2000), "greatest name", A concise encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith, Oxford: Oneworld Publications)

peace, calm and spirituality. Blue is also uplifting. It is the colour that connects us to our spiritual side and the energy of the universe.

Taken together, the eight symbols represent the encounter between the wisdom of the East and that of the West. This encounter is more important now than ever before given the current devastation to the planet, and the constant state of war which has created the greatest refugee crisis the world has ever seen. As of 20 June 2018, World Refugee Day, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people around the world had topped 65 million. This is a catastrophe.

What can people of faith do about this? A lot, actually. If we can establish bridges of understanding and trust between people of different faiths and cultures, we can model to world leaders how they themselves can build bridges rather than barriers of hatred and fear.

Hope and harmony might replace despair and conflict.

### *Origins*

In May 2011, an inspirational Presbyterian minister from California, USA, Rev. Jim Symons, brought this vision to St. David's Church in Palmerston North.<sup>8</sup> He organized a lecture series called "Talk Back on the Terrace: Varied Viewpoints" at the Coffee on the Terrace cafe, which paired two speakers from different faith traditions to address three crises confronting the human family. The challenge of "consumerism" was addressed by the late Prof. John Flenley<sup>9</sup> and Gen Demo Kelsang, resident teacher at the Amitahba Buddhist Centre. Dr. Nasser Shehata<sup>10</sup> and Dr. Mary Eastham<sup>11</sup> addressed the topic of "population" from a Muslim and Catholic Christian perspective respectively. Helen Chong from the Council of Jewish Women<sup>12</sup> and Ahmed Zaoui,<sup>13</sup> discussed the controversial issue of "war"

<sup>8</sup> I am told that Jim Symons organised interfaith conversations wherever his ministry sent him in the USA and other parts of New Zealand as well.

<sup>9</sup> Rev. Dr. John Flenley was Professor of Geography at Massey University; he was ordained a deacon in the Anglican Church in 2009, with special responsibility for the Environment. He ran the local branch of A Rocha, the Christian Conservation organisation.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Nasser Shehata is a gynecologist who was born in Egypt and practices medicine at Palmerston North Public Hospital.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Eastham has a PH.D. in Ethics, Religion and Public Life from the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. She was Director of the Pastoral Centre from 1996- 1999, and Catholic Tertiary Chaplain from 2001 to 2004. She has been on the planning committee of the Interfaith Group since 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Chong was President of the National Council of Women from 2013-2017. She is a member of the Wellington Progressive Jewish congregation and contributes at services, through discussion/commentary on the Torah portion read on that day.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed Zaoui is an Algerian representative of the Islamic Salvation Front who claimed refugee status in New Zealand in 2002.

from a Jewish and Muslim perspective, and Prof. Jim Veitch from Victoria University in Wellington spoke about religious pluralism. Closing remarks were given by Dr. Christopher van der Krogt from Massey University's Department of Religious Studies.

The seminar attracted some 50 people every Monday night for four consecutive weeks to engage with these speakers and these issues in a spirit of good natured but earnest intellectual exchange. The organizers of the event: Dr. Robert Skipp<sup>14</sup> and Peter MacGillivray, speakers Mary Eastham, Helen Chong, John Flenley and Gen Demo Kelsang, as well as participants became the foundation for the Palmerston North Interfaith Group, established later that year in July. Adding impetus for the prospects of increased interfaith dialogue at this time, Mary Eastham was appointed as Bishop Peter Cullinane's representative on the New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Committee for Interfaith Relations.<sup>15</sup>

The Palmerston North Interfaith Group began meeting on a regular basis from July 2011 and almost immediately engaged in every dimension of interfaith dialogue as illustrated below: 1) the dialogue of religious experience; 2) the dialogue of theological exchange; 3) the dialogue of action; and 4) the dialogue of life.<sup>16</sup>

### *The Dialogue of Religious Experience*

The dialogue of religious experience occurs: "When persons grounded in their own faith traditions, share riches, for instance, with regard to prayer and contemplation, ceremonies and places of worship".<sup>17</sup> On 27 October 2011 at the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, a multi-faith prayer service took place to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the first Assisi World Day of Prayer, a landmark moment in the interfaith movement. At Assisi, Pope John Paul II convened representatives of the world's religions<sup>18</sup> to gather at the Church of Saint Francis of Assisi, in Italy to pray

---

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Robert Skipp graduated from Imperial College, London, moving with his family to New Zealand in 1977 to conduct research in Plant Pathology at Ag Research (formerly DSIR) Grasslands, Palmerston North. He is an elder in the Presbyterian Church and a founding member of the Palmerston North Interfaith Group. Bob has played a major leadership role both in the planning committee, in communication and in liaising with other community groups. He has designed many flyers for interfaith events and contributed to writing funding applications and accountability reports.

<sup>15</sup> This committee was established in 2009 by the New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Conference. Inspired by "*Nostra Aetate*" (*In our Age*), the landmark document from the Second Vatican Council, members of the Committee representing the six dioceses of Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin embrace the mission to promote dialogue, understanding and mutual respect between the Catholic Church and members of the world religions in New Zealand, and to work together for the common good.

<sup>16</sup> The 2012 publication of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Committee for Interfaith Relations notes these four expressions of interfaith dialogue. Cf. *Promoting Interfaith Relations in Aotearoa New Zealand* 2009, first edition.

<sup>17</sup> *Promoting Interfaith Relations in Aotearoa New Zealand*, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> These representatives included: African animists; Amerindian animists; Bahai's, whose faith stresses universal brotherhood; Buddhists; Christians; Jains, whose beliefs resemble Buddhism;

together for the first time in history. their spiritual in his remarks to religious leaders, the Pope said:

The form and content of our prayers are very different...and there can be no question of reducing them to a kind of common denominator. Yes, in this very difference we have perhaps discovered anew that, regarding the problem of peace and its relation to religious commitment, there is something which binds us together."

At the Cathedral in October 2011, the multi-faith prayer service<sup>19</sup> reflected the richness of our Maori heritage and the depth of five faith traditions, all praying for peace in their own way. Manaki Tibble called people to attention with the majestic sound of the *putara*. The karanga was performed by Maru Karatea-Goddard, after which Rev. Deacon Danny Karatea-Goddard greeted the congregation warmly with his *whaikorero*. Participants Haddassah bat Avrohom uVatsheva (Helen Chong), Gen Demo Kelsang, Nirmala Nand from the Palmerston North Indian Cultural Society, Dr. Ibrahim Al Bahadly from Massey University Islamic Centre, Rev. Chris Purdy, Army chaplain, Presbyterian minister, Venerable David van Oeveren, Anglican Archdeacon of the Manawatu, and Emeritus Bishop Peter Cullinane presented prayers of peace or meditation from their respective traditions, and in so doing, touched the centre of the Assisi World Day for Peace, and made it new.

Since visiting the places of worship of our partners in dialogue is a very important dimension of the dialogue of religious experience, we were very honoured to visit the Sikh Temple in Awapuni in 2011. Dr. Jaspreet Singh<sup>20</sup> made this visit possible for us.

Other very enriching visits to places of worship of our partners in dialogue included:

\* 2014, attending the Bat Mitzva of a young woman at Temple Sinai in Wellington, made possible by Hadassah bat Avrohom uVatsheva.

---

Jews; Hindus; Moslems; Shintoists, a Japanese sect that emphasizes the worship of nature and ancestors; Sikhs; and Zoroastrians, who believe in the continuous struggle of good against evil. Among those attending was the Dalai Lama, the exiled Tibetan Buddhist leader; the Most Rev. Robert Runcie, Archbishop of Canterbury and Primate of the Anglican Communion; Metropolitan Filaret of Kiev, who represented the Russian Orthodox Church; and Muneyoshi Tokugawa, president of the Shinto Shrine Association of Tokyo.

<sup>19</sup> The 25th Anniversary Commemoration was organised by Mary Eastham from the Bishops' Committee.

<sup>20</sup> Dr. Jaspreet Singh from the Dera Sacha Sauda social welfare and spiritual organisation is a tireless worker for Shah Satnam Ji Green 'S' Welfare Force Wing which is engaged in tree planting and other community supporting activities throughout New Zealand and internationally. He is a scientist at AgResearch specializing in plant-microbe interactions. Here is the YouTube link to their video of our Sharing Care of the Earth Forum - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvXYbvjggnQ>.

- \* 2015, visiting the Amitabha Buddhist Centre for a talk and guided meditation on “Stillness” facilitated by Gen Demo Kelsang.
- \* 2016, a multi-faith prayer service at the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in response to the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, called by Pope Francis, and observed by Catholics, ecumenical and interfaith groups around the world from 8 December 2015 until 20 November 2016.<sup>21</sup> Standing shoulder to shoulder and presenting prayers of mercy and forgiveness from their sacred texts were: Maru Karatea-Goddard, Rev. Danny Karatea-Goddard, Sam Te Tau, Dr. Mohammed Tellawey from the Manawatu Muslim Association, Hadassah bat Avrohom uVatsheva, Wibha Desai from the Hindu faith, Kelsang Deden from the Amitabha Buddhist Centre, Jaspreet Singh and Gurveer Kaur from the Dera Sacha Sauda social and spiritual organisation and Emeritus Bishop Peter Cullinane.
- \* 2017, celebrating Eid Al-Fitr with our Muslim brothers and sisters at the Cook Street Mosque, facilitated by Mohammed Tellawey from the Manawatu Muslim Association; we also celebrated the bicentennial of the birth of Baha’u’llah, the Founder of the Baha’i Faith, facilitated by Joanne Wilson from the Baha’i faith.
- \* 2018, celebrating Naw Ruz, the Baha’i New Year in March with our Baha’i brothers and sisters, facilitated by Joanne Wilson; in April, celebrating Buddhist Enlightenment Day at the Amitabha Buddhist Centre facilitated by Gen Demo Kelsang. We also celebrated Vaisakhi in April with our Sikh brothers and sisters, facilitated by Harminder and Karl Gill.<sup>22</sup> In June, we shared an Iftar meal with our Muslim brothers and sisters at the Cook Street Mosque, facilitated by Mohammed Tellawey.

### *The Dialogue of Theological Exchange*

When dialogue partners deepen their understanding of their own religious heritage as they also seek to appreciate the spiritual beliefs and practices of other faiths, the dialogue of theological exchange occurs.<sup>23</sup> By 2012, the Palmerston North Interfaith Group had established partnerships between members of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh communities. We could establish therefore a monthly programme of interfaith education beginning from 1 February, the first day of World Interfaith Harmony Week until the Week of Prayer for World Peace, which always takes place the third week of October.

---

<sup>21</sup> The New Zealand Catholic Bishops’ Committee for Interfaith Relations organised a similar event in all six dioceses.

<sup>22</sup> Harminder Kaur Gill is the President of the New Zealand Sikh Society in Palmerston North. Karl Gill is Patron of the Amesbury Sikh Temple and member of the New Zealand Sikh Society in Palmerston North.

<sup>23</sup> *Promoting Interfaith Relations in Aotearoa New Zealand*, 2009, op. cit., p. 8.

- \* World Interfaith Harmony Week in 2012, attracted contributions from Dr. Bob Stewart<sup>24</sup>, Jaspreet Singh, Ibrahim Al-Bahadly, Dr. Hazim Arafeh<sup>25</sup>, Bishop Peter, Bob Skipp, Peter MacGillivray and Mary Eastham.
- \* A talk from the late Dr. Scott Eastham on the principles of interfaith dialogue from the life's work of Raimon Panikkar.<sup>26</sup>
- \* John Flenley gave a talk on "The Experience of Landscape: Exploring the Meaning and Symbolism of Landscape".
- \* Sociologist Paul Green from Massey University led a discussion on "Science and Theology: The Sources of Cultural Pluralism."
- \* The meaning of Ramadan was explained by Dr. Ibrahim Al-Bahadly of Massey University Islamic Centre.
- \* Bob Skipp and Mike Christensen organised the Midwinter Interfaith Festival Evening. Without verbal commentary, Bob used great music and art inspired by the Biblical account of the birth of Jesus to open up the ancient symbolism of Christmas as events that are re-created every day. Not just symbols of light and the tree, but profound cross-cultural expressions of humanity as represented by spiritual revelation, the Holy Family and the massacre of the Holy Innocents, recognized even today in countries ravaged by war, and the plight of refugees in detention centres.
- \* In 2012, we were honoured with a visit from Sr. Milada,<sup>27</sup> a Missionary Sister of Charity, who shared experiences of her life with Mother Teresa of Calcutta.
- \* In 2012, Helen Chong facilitated a beautiful conversation on how life cycle rituals at birth, coming of age, marriage and death reflect the many ways that divine blessing and human responsibility interact.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Dr. Bob Stewart was Professor of Human Development and Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji. He is also founding Editor of "Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal". This is a worldwide journal in social psychology published 10 times per year on the web and in print (1973-present).

<sup>25</sup> Dr. Hazim Arafeh is President of FIANZ, The Islamic Federation of New Zealand.

<sup>26</sup> Panikkar's mother was Spanish Catholic and his father was Hindu; he is considered the father of interreligious dialogue. Scott Eastham was his English editor for 30 years.

<sup>27</sup> Sr. Milada was from Czechoslovakia and met Mother Teresa in Calcutta when she was in the process of making her first vows to Christ within the mission set out by the Missionary Sisters of Charity. She now works in Porirua, New Zealand with people in nursing homes who experience the "poverty of loneliness."

<sup>28</sup> In 2018, Helen again facilitated this conversation as new members had joined the group.

Furthermore, on 3 October 2012, Bob Skipp, Helen Chong, Jaspreet Singh and Mary Eastham signed the Constitution of the Palmerston North Interfaith Group, written by Helen and Bob. 3 October was the Eve of the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, considered by Catholics to be the patron saint of interfaith dialogue, and the third day of Sukkot, which for Jews commemorates the forty years of passage from bondage in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. For a group dedicated to sharing the message of peace, religious freedom and celebration of religious diversity, it was fitting indeed to sign our Constitution on that particular day.

*Peace, Compassion and the Care of the Disabled*

In 2013, the major public event, “Making Peace with Abraham, our Father in Faith” was organized by Mary Eastham on behalf of the Bishops’ Committee and took place at the Sound and Vision Centre of Palmerston North City Library. Some 200 people attended to hear Hadassah bat Avrohom uVatsheva, Bishop Peter, Ibrahim Al-Bahadly and Sam Te Tau from the Baha’i faith, share firstly with each another and then everyone present the contribution of each Abrahamic branch to making peace today. For many people in Palmerston North it was the first time they saw four members of different Abrahamic traditions occupy the same podium and talk about peace.

In 2014, the theme of Compassion featured prominently. Rev. John Hornblow and Jenny Hornblow presented an evening on interfaith activities, especially modern slavery and human trafficking. We also organized the ecumenical and interfaith event, “Prisms of Light: An Interfaith Conversation on how Compassion Transforms our Communities.” This theme, proposed by Bob Stewart, was explored with reference to four dimensions of the call to compassion for the 21st century: Compassion for the Poor: The Question of Poverty; Compassion for the Human Race: The Question of World Peace; Compassion for the Earth: Our Responsibility to Nature; and Compassion for Future Generations: Our Responsibility to the Next Generation. The facilitated panel included Helen Chong, Presbyterian minister Rev. Rilma Sands, Gen Demo Kelsang, Jaspreet Singh, Sreejith Sreekumar from the Hindu faith, Catholics Thomas Kigufi and Antoinette Umugwaneza from Rwanda, Sam Te Tau and Bishop Peter.

\* In 2013, another programme emphasising compassion was interfaith perspectives on the care of the disabled facilitated by Mike Christensen and Rev. Anne Bennett.

\* In 2013, Jaspreet Singh made a presentation on Earth Day about compassion for the Earth.

\* In 2018, Helen Chong facilitated an enriching conversation on Interfaith Approaches to the Life Cycle in April and May. Wibha Desai made a fascinating



presentation about Food for Spiritual Growth from a Hindu Perspective in July, and Thomas Nash will speak to us in August about his peace work in abolishing nuclear weapons and banning cluster bombs.

\* Our main public event for 2018 will be the multi-faith concert, “Celebrating the Diversity of Faith in our Community”, scheduled for 30 November at Queen Elizabeth College. Initiated by Harminder and Karl Gill of the New Zealand Sikh Society, the planning committee includes Maruna Engu from Papaioea Pasifika Community Trust, Mohammed Tellaway from the Manawatu Muslim Association, Peter and Sheryl Stanford from the Church of the Latter Day Saints, John Thornley from Broadway Methodist Church, Joanne Wilson and Gerry Lew from the Baha’i faith, Julie Randall from the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, Leigh Scott from the Amitabha Buddhist Centre, Merv Dykes and Bob Skipp, Margaret Sinclair-Jones and Mary Eastham. The Red Cross and the Manawatu Multicultural Centre will receive proceeds from the koha to assist in their work with refugee resettlement in Palmerston North.

### *The Dialogue of Action*

This dialogue occurs when people of faith motivated by sincere good will towards one another collaborate for the preservation of the environment, and for the integral development and liberation of people.<sup>29</sup> A great example was the voluntary planting of 1400 trees under the Green Corridors project for the City Council on 13 May, Mother’s Day in 2012. This project was initiated by Jaspreet Singh and his colleagues from the Dera Sacha Sauda social and spiritual Organisation. In July, they planted over 3000 native plants at Edwards Pit Park, Palmerston North.

In 2014, the Interfaith Group was invited by the Manawatu Multicultural Council to participate in the “Bring Back Our Girls Movement”, an international protest to raise awareness about the plight of the young Chibok girls kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria.

### *Sharing Care of the Earth*

By 2015, the group felt confident enough to host the North Island Regional Interfaith Forum.<sup>30</sup> With a wealth of talent to draw from within the interfaith community and the University Community, we set about organizing the forum: *Sharing Care of the Earth: Science- Faith-Action*. Held at Te Waiora Centre at Massey University, experts in the science of Global Climate Change and people of Islamic, Jewish, Christian,

---

<sup>29</sup> *Promoting Interfaith Relations in Aotearoa New Zealand*, 2009, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> The National Interfaith Forum and the Regional Interfaith Forums take place every other year, respectively. If a Regional Forum is held, a National Forum is not held. Regional Forums alternate between the North and South Island.

Hindu, Buddhist, Baha'i and Maori spiritual traditions explored together ways in which our world's faiths shared the view that human beings have a sacred responsibility to care for the Earth, its people and all living things so that we could develop a common will to solve problems threatening the future of our planet. The late Dr. Kevin Tate gave the key note address and provided invaluable assistance to the organising committee. Other eminent speakers included Dr. Anwar Ghani, Dr. Alec Mackay, Dr. Ralph Sims and Prof. Marjan van den Belt. To present an interfaith theological vision on the care of the Earth was Dr. Paul Blaschke and David Zwart from the Jewish faith; Martin de Jong from *Caritas Aotearoa*; Jaspreet Singh and Gurveer Kaur; Gen Demo Kelsang, John Maats from the Baha'i faith, Hone Morris on Maori spirituality; and Sreejith Sreekumar from the Hindu faith. Paul Stock, from Massey's chaplaincy Centre opened the event with a prayer and Heather Tate, from St. David's Church; Sam Te Tau, Dr. Mohammed Tellaway, Gurveer Kaur, Dr. Todd Nachowitz (Hamilton Interfaith Council) offered beautiful prayers from their own faith traditions to close the Forum. We were honoured that Dr. Sita Venkateswar from Massey University was MC for the day; and Jill White, former mayor of Palmerston North, facilitated the afternoon discussion session which composed the Forum Statement.<sup>31</sup>

The Forum Statements affirmed: We

1. Acknowledge that, if we hope to ensure the future of life on Earth, we must urgently change from the path we are on
2. Reject the theological understanding of a disposable earth and the incessant drive for limitless growth motivated by a relentless focus on profit
3. Affirm that the economy should benefit humanity within the bounds of a sustainable earth
4. Acknowledge the interconnectedness of all life on earth
5. Welcome people displaced by climate change
6. Urge our faith communities to explore ways to minimize fossil fuel use and greenhouse gas emissions
7. Commit ourselves to share resources and material that will help educate and inform our local and faith communities on climate change issues so that they can become agents of transformation.
8. Commit ourselves to engage with governments, business sectors and the wider civil society in shaping and implementing policies in the areas of energy and climate change.

---

<sup>31</sup> Behind the scenes was the planning committee, comprised of Dr. Kevin Tate, our resident scholar, Bob Skipp, Peter MacGillivray, Sr. Cecily Finucane RSM, Mary Eastham, Wibha Desai, Sam Te Tau, and Stephen Close. Bob in charge of communication; Peter organising lunch. Margaret Sinclair-Jones joined the group for the first time and prepared the folders for participants; Stephen Close collected driftwood for all participants which Peter inscribed with "Share and Care".

In 2015, we also participated in Palmerston North People's Climate March organized by Youth Action Group Manawatu. At our AGM later that year, Prof. Marjan van den Belt and her daughter, Kaia Costanza van den Belt were guest speakers. Joining Kaia were Hannah Higgison from Youth Action Group Manawatu (YAGM)

*Closer Collaboration with our Pasifika Brothers and Sisters*

As one of the 2015 Forum Statements reminded us of our responsibility to welcome people displaced by climate change, we vowed in 2016 to enter more deeply into dialogue with our Pasifika brothers and sisters. The forum: *Climate Change is Here! The Pacific Island Story* emerged from this commitment. For this endeavor, we collaborated with the Papaioea Pasifika Community Trust<sup>32</sup> and Pasifika students from Massey University. Organized by the Christian and Baha'i members of the Interfaith Group, this forum attracted some 60 people to learn what is happening in Pacific Island nations by listening to people who once lived there and now call the Manawatu home. Setting the stage, Dr. Pala Molisa, Victoria University lecturer from Vanuatu, detailed how the broken neo liberal economic system was responsible for climate change, the mass extinction of life within the oceans and the deepening inequality between rich and poor. This said, locals Brent Barrett, newly elected Green councillor for the City, and then eighteen-year-old Hannah Higgison, co-founder of Youth Action Group Manawatu, claimed that people from white middle-class New Zealand society can and must work with Pasifika people to implement policies that protect the environment. Activities like the People's Climate Change March, for example, inspire social action and long-term commitment. *Caritas, the Catholic Agency for Social Justice, Peace and Development* provided the *State of the Environment Report for Oceania: Hungry for Justice, Thirsty for Change*, released on 4 October 2016 to forum participants.

Particularly moving were stories by Massey Pasifika students and Lily Arahanga from the Baha'i community, who lived on the island of Kiribati. They made the terrifying effects of superstorms shockingly real. Local Pasifika leader, Ivor Kaisami from Fiji was MC for the day; beginning the afternoon workshop by describing his experiences over 23 years of living and working in Tuvalu, Kiribati Fiji and the Marshall Islands. The event was held at the Catholic Diocesan Centre.

Later that year Dr. Litea Meo-Sewabu was guest speaker at our annual AGM and guided us through the complex web of the cultural and spiritual heritage of the "People of the Ocean", their intergenerational wisdom and community resilience, and the knowledge, sensitivity and humility needed by any organization which seeks to engage with and assist community development in the Pacific region.

---

<sup>32</sup> The planning committee included local Pacific Island leaders: James Etuale, Ivor Kaisami, Sunlou Liuvaei and Dr. Litea Meo-Sewabu and Maruna Engu from the Papaioea Pasifika Community Trust.

Funding for this event was provided by the Catholic Charities Allocation Committee of the Diocese of Palmerston North and the Palmerston North City Environmental Trust (PNCET). Julia Panfylova, coordinator for PNCET, was so impressed with the students' presentations that she invited us to make a short film to debut at the Reel Earth Environmental Film Festival the following year. And so, we did.

On 20 May 2017 as part of the Reel Earth Environmental Film Festival, some 70 people gathered at Te Manawa for the film debut of "Making Waves: Stories of Courage and Hope". The video was produced by Mr. George Procter of Video Graphic Productions under the banner, '*Inspirational Pasifika Films*', through active consultation and co-operation amongst the three supporting organisations: Papaioea Pasifika Community Trust, the Palmerston North City Environmental Trust and the Interfaith Group.<sup>33</sup> The film featured six Pasifika Massey students from Tonga, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Fiji, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea sharing personal stories about the devastating effects of climate change for their homelands and their loved ones. Sunlou Liuvaie and Dr. Tracie Mafileo from Massey University narrated the film.

The film, "Making Waves: Stories of Courage and Hope", provided the focus for a forum to look for ways to support Pasifika communities at home and in Palmerston North as they face a very bewildering and uncertain future. In his keynote address, Pasifika environmental activist, Teanau Tuiono, addressed the connection between the island homelands and the diaspora communities living in New Zealand. He drew attention to the great disparity in the eligibility of inhabitants of different Pacific Island countries to come to New Zealand once their own lands become uninhabitable. Some have New Zealand passports by right, others may have to submit to the complex processes faced by other would be immigrants, and under current rules would be likely to be denied entry. Auckland is the Polynesian capital of the world and an important hub for Pasifika peoples around the region. He also stressed the need to encourage bold leadership in reducing carbon emissions noting that the intensive weather events like those experienced in Edgecombe in 2017 were signs that climate change had already arrived on New Zealand shores.

---

<sup>33</sup> Since 2016, Margaret Sinclair-Jones has been on the planning committee and was elected Treasurer in 2016. She designed the programmes for both the 2016 and 2017 Pasifika forums and personalised "thank you" cards as well. She has been our IT technician in the 2016 Forum and 2017 Women's Interfaith Forum. She has assumed responsibility for organising a database for the women's interfaith group. Margaret is from Glasgow and for the first 4 years of her life was brought up in an Orphanage which was home to 2000 children. At age 4, she was adopted into a musical family and her family encouraged her to compete in singing competitions in Gaelic (Scottish language). She won many prizes and sang unaccompanied. She married her Kiwi husband, Brian in 1984 and emigrated to New Zealand in 1989. They became members of St. David's Presbyterian Church. After Brian passed away in 2008, Margaret remained in Palmerston North where she contributes her many gifts and talents.

In response to the workshop question, “What do Pasifika people need from us — the community of Palmerston North?, two answers kept emerging. Firstly, make it possible for more Pasifika people to resettle in Palmerston North if they are obliged to leave their homelands. Secondly, our City needs to make the necessary life style changes to lower greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>34</sup>

### *The Dialogue of Life: Sharing our Joys and Sorrows*

The dialogue of life occurs where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows.<sup>35</sup> Edwards Pit Park has always had a special significance for the Interfaith Group since 2012. As previously mentioned, Jaspreet Singh and his colleagues planted approximately 4400 native plants at Palmerston North Pit Park in that year. We share the ecological vision of Marise Clark and the Pit Park People to serve the Earth, and thus are happy to support them in their efforts to transform the Edwards Pit Park into a thriving habitat for indigenous biodiversity and an enjoyable recreational space for people. Because it’s a wonderful place for picnics, the Interfaith Group has met there in 2014, 2016 and 2017 to share food and fellowship at the end of our calendar year.<sup>36</sup>

Pit Park has also become a kind of sacred place for the group where trees of remembrance have been planted to honour members who have passed away: Scott Eastham in 2013, Kevin Tate and John Flenley in 2018. They all shared a lifelong passion to care for the Earth as well as a commitment to interfaith dialogue.

#### *“A Mighty Totara Has Fallen”*

The Maori people have an expression to honour a great man who has contributed greatly to his community when he passes away. It is: “A Mighty Totara Has Fallen.” First in 2014 and then in 2018, members of the group gathered with families of those who had passed away to plant trees in their memory at Edwards Pit Park and to celebrate their lives. Names plates with special messages from each person were engraved either on a plaque placed in front of their tree, or on a totara log behind it. Engraved on Scott’s plate was the message: “Love and Light” with which he signed all correspondence; on Kevin’s, the powerful statement: “He believed good will and science could save the Earth from destructive climate change”; and on John’s, the

---

<sup>34</sup> PNCET nominated us for **TrustPower Community Award** in recognition of our community involvement via Making Wave Forum with Pasifika people.

<sup>35</sup> *Promoting Interfaith Relations in Aotearoa New Zealand*, 2009, op. cit. p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> In February 2018, we had a picnic at the Victoria Esplanade to celebrate World Interfaith Harmony Week and Trieste Te Awe Awe was our special guest.

profound message: "... Almost anyone can plant a tree and lead the fight against climate change." Bob Stewart also planted a tree in John Flenley's honour.<sup>37</sup>

Since in many faith traditions, the tree is believed to be the embodiment of life in all its realms: the point of union between heaven, earth and water, nothing could be more meaningful than this beautiful ritual to honour these three special people. This very special event was organized by Peter MacGillivray.

### *The Interfaith Women's Group and 2017 AGM*

During the planning of the 2017 women's interfaith event, "Interfaith Women Resist the Climate of Hatred and Fear: Sharing Different Faith Perspectives on Building Bridges of Trust, Friendship and Love," the women involved spoke of the need to keep the conversation going after the event itself. If our goal is to build bridges of trust and friendship amongst one another, then we must get together on a regular basis, have a coffee and share our joys and sorrows. After the August inaugural event, the interfaith sisters did meet a couple of times, but in 2018, we had only met once by the time of writing this history because of the complexity of other commitments. It is my hope that the launch of this Proceedings Volume provides the impetus for a reunion of the Interfaith sisters and further discussion of the future of this important initiative.

At our 2017 AGM, Joanne Wilson was our guest speaker. In her talk: "From Fear to Friendship: Healing our world in these days of anxiety, distress and confusion," Joanne used quotations from Baha'i teachings and other faith traditions to affirm the purpose of the interfaith movement which invites us to let go of fear and allow ourselves to befriend and be befriended by others who are also creations of God.

### *The Week of Prayer for World Peace*

Every year since our formation in 2011, the Palmerston North Interfaith Group has participated in the Week of Prayer for World Peace.<sup>38</sup> It is based on the conviction that the peace of the world must be prayed for by the faiths of the world", and this continues to be the basis of our work today.

---

<sup>37</sup> At John Flenley's funeral, native trees from the local branch of A Rocha, the Christian Conservation organisation which John ran, were given to all so that everyone could plant a tree in his memory and so lead the fight against climate change.

<sup>38</sup> A Christian initiative led to the founding of the Week of Prayer for World Peace in 1974, but it soon became an interfaith activity. There are three guiding principles: First, the different words we recite are said by neighbours in the same town and the same street every week, and by sharing together we simply bring under one roof what happens anyway under the same sky. Second, organisers share the conviction that there is only one humanity praying to one supreme consciousness, with whatever different opinions we may have on what that may be. Thirdly, we recognise that interfaith partnerships does not itself imply agreement. cf <http://www.weekofprayerforworldpeace.com/>

The first Week of Prayer for World Peace in which we participated with people all over the world was organized by Rev. Ken Wall at St. Andrews Anglican Church and Rev. Chris Carey-Smith at St. Mathews Anglican Church from 16-20 October 2011.

From 2011 until the present, Sr. Cecily Finucane, RSM, Bob Skipp, Steven Close, and Sr. Maureen O'Hanlon, OP have assumed leadership roles<sup>39</sup> in organizing the week-long prayer service. Both All Saints Church and the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit have been venues for community, ecumenical and interfaith prayer.<sup>40</sup>

In 2017, Rev. John Hornblow initiated the Week of Prayer for World Peace at All Saints Church and Jan Vaughan and Beth Greenwood from the Baha' i faith led prayers for the day, as did Cecily, Bob, Sr. Maureen and Mary.

### *Dialogue with New Zealand Interfaith Councils*

The National Forums take place every two years. Since 2012, the Palmerston North Interfaith Group has been represented at the following Forums:

- \* the 9th annual Interfaith Forum in Hamilton, 18-19 February 2012.<sup>41</sup>
- \* the National Youth Forum on Cultural Diversity held 17-20 August 2013 in Auckland sponsored by the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO and the Human Rights Commission.<sup>42</sup>
- \* the 2014, National Interfaith Forum in Dunedin. The theme was "Unity in Diversity".<sup>43</sup>
- \* In 2016, the National Interfaith Forum in Auckland. The theme was "Building Bridges: Hearts, Communities, Humanity."
- \* In 2018, the National Interfaith Forum that will take place in Wellington. The theme was: "We Are The World."

### *Thank you*

<sup>39</sup> Sr. Susie Logan, OP, was also part of the planning committee from 2012 to 2015.

<sup>40</sup> A leaflet has been produced by the New Zealand organising committee with prayers, readings and affirmations from many faiths to use each day. The theme of the leaflet is developed for worldwide distribution by the Week of Prayer for World Peace multi-faith committee based in Great Britain. Religious communities throughout New Zealand are encouraged to celebrate the Week both in their own observances and together with people of different faiths. CF <http://www.interfaith.org.nz/PDFs/WPWP%20flier%202017.pdf> Paddy Payne from the Baha'i faith co-ordinates the Week of Prayer for World Peace in New Zealand.

<sup>41</sup> Mary attended the Women's Forum; Peter, the Men's Forum, and Martin, the Youth Forum.

<sup>42</sup> Jaspreet Singh represented the group.

<sup>43</sup> Mary Eastham represented the group in the 2014, 2016 and 2018 forums.

Since 2012, the Catholic Charities Allocation Committee of the Diocese of Palmerston North has provided financial support for programmes organized by the Interfaith Group, which assist communities in their work with the marginalized, build healthy sustainable communities and provide resources to assist Catholic and community groups in their work of education. Our programmes dedicated to the dialogues of theological exchange, religious experience, and action endeavor to realize the important goals and priorities established by the Catholic Charities Allocation Committee. We thank you and all our wonderful partners in dialogue from the ecumenical and interfaith community in Palmerston North who so generously contribute their time and talents towards establishing a world of hope and harmony.

We live in a time of human emergency: a time of savage violence, degradation of the Earth, and erosion of civil liberties, human rights and the care of the most vulnerable in precisely those liberal democratic societies which traditionally cherished these values. But we also live in a time in which we are witnessing the emergence of a new humanity dedicated to healing, understanding, respect and compassion. The Interfaith Movement worldwide shares these values, so too the Palmerston North Interfaith Group.

It has been a great privilege to be part of this wonderful story of faith and friendship in Palmerston North. My most sincere thanks to Bob Skipp, for editorial revisions and providing many helpful comments.

Mary Eastham, 18 July 2018 Nelson Mandela International Day.