

# **New Zealand's First Interfaith Directory Launched**

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Despite the media image of people of different faiths being in continual conflict, New Zealanders from different religions are in regular and formal contact with each other, researchers in Victoria University's Religious Studies programme have found.

The first Directory of Interfaith and Ecumenical Activity in New Zealand will be launched at 4pm today (Monday 27 February) by Professor Paul Morris, Head of the University's Religious Studies programme, at the National Interfaith Forum being held in Parliament's Grand Hall today.

The Directory, compiled and edited by PhD student Jonathan Brookes, includes a record of interfaith groups, activities and events, a record of Christian ecumenical groups, activities and events and an index of contact details for New Zealand faith groups. The Directory was a collaborative project with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade, the Asia New Zealand Foundation and the Human Rights Commission's diversity action programme.

Professor Morris, who was part of the New Zealand delegation to the first ASEAN-Pacific Conference on Interfaith Co-operation for Peace held in Jakarta in December 2004, said the Directory would aid understanding and dialogue between people of different religious groups.

"As the recent controversy over the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad clearly showed, as this country becomes more religiously and culturally diverse, New Zealanders need to learn about the beliefs and practices of their fellow citizens of different faiths so we can live together harmoniously. This will only be possible if we develop educational strategies and interfaith networks that promote co-operation and dialogue. Interfaith activity promotes these contacts between different religions and publicly raises issues of concern to all faith communities.

"The Directory is the first scan of the current state of interfaith activities in New Zealand and what surprised us was the amount of discussion that was occurring. For example, we found examples of informal meetings occurring between a synagogue and mosque in the same city, and of regularly discussion between Christian groups and Muslim groups as well as dialogue between different groups within major religions. As well, this activity wasn't just occurring in the big cities, but was also common in places such as Hamilton and Palmerston North.

"Contrary to the popular image of religious conflict, New Zealanders from different faiths are reaching out to each other and attempting to understand each other's beliefs. This discussion is not only to be encouraged, but bodes well for the future of religious tolerance in this country."