

## **Friday evening forum opening: AIFC President's speech**

### **Suzanne Mahon**

Tena Koutou, Greetings, Kia orana, Taloha Ni, Fakalofa Lahi Atu, Malo e Lelei, Talofa Lava, Namaste, Nee how, Konichiwa, Salaam Alaykam, Shalom, Sutsri-agal, Allah'u'abha, and Sawatdee to our special guests from Thailand.

On behalf of the Auckland Inter-Faith Council I pay respects to this Chapel, to the ancestors of this house, to the wonderful people of this centre who have given us such a warm welcome tonight, and to all of you who are here. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you on behalf of the Auckland Inter-Faith Council.

I would especially like to acknowledge the presence here tonight of five Members of Parliament: Hon Luamanuvao Winnie Laban, Ms Melissa Lee, Dr Ashraf Choudhary, Dr Rajen Prasad and Mr William Sio.

We are also privileged to have Mr Joris de Bres, the Race Relations Commissioner, attending tonight. He is accompanied by Rohan Jaduram of the Commission, who many of you will know is the coordinator of the Religious Diversity Network. We warmly acknowledge the role that Joris and Rohan have played in creating a religious diversity network, creating spaces for people of different religions to come together, and for encouraging interfaith action. The Human Rights Commission has for several years now produced a monthly religious diversity newsletter to which faith communities and interfaith groups have contributed items about their activities.

We are also very happy to welcome Councillor Noeline Raffills who is representing the Auckland City Council, and she will shortly offer some remarks on behalf of the City Council. We cannot mention Auckland City Council without also in the same breath expressing our appreciation to Abigael Vogt, the City Council's Diversity Advisor, who has been so supportive of the Auckland Inter-Faith Council for almost all of the time we have existed. We are happy that Abigael and some of her colleagues have been able to join us here tonight.

Representing Mayor Bob Harvey, we are also very pleased that Mr Warahi Paki, JP and chair of Te Taumata Runanga of Waitakere City Council is here with his wife Linda.

We welcome Joanna Heslop of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, who is here with a delegation of Thai leaders. We won't name them all, but would particularly like to mention Dr Worawit Baru, Senator of Pattani; Mr Nattapong Sirichana, Deputy Governor of Naratiwas Province; and Police Major General Kriengsak Aroonsrisopon.

We are very glad to have here Senior Venerable Thich Phuoc An from the Quan Am Buddhist Monastery. Welcome.

And two others I'd like to specially mention in these greetings are Mr Michael Sheppard of World Vision and Mr Glyn Carpenter of Vision Network.

I would also like to take this opportunity to warmly acknowledge the presence of two young persons, Robin de Haan and Hyo Jung Kim from the Youth Interfaith Forum organising committee, both of whom have played a pivotal role in getting the youth forum up and running, and they've probably brought along some flyers about it that you may like to give to any youth you know who might be interested in attending on Sunday afternoon.

We have received apologies and best wishes for the forum from the following:

Hon Anand Satyanand, the Governor-General of New Zealand, who has sent a special message for tonight, which I will shortly read to you.

Rt Hon Helen Clark, MP for Mt Albert and former Prime Minister

Hon Dr Jonathan Coleman, Minister of Immigration

Hon Rodney Hide, Minister of Local Government

Hon Dr Pita Sharples, Minister of Maori Affairs, has conveyed his best wishes for a successful and enjoyable event

Darien Fenton, MP

Ross Robertson MP

Mr Peseta Sam Lotu-liga, MP for Maungakiekie, who is out of town tonight and disappointed not to be here, but hopes to come to some of tomorrow's programme.

The Chief Human Rights Commissioner, Ms Rosslyn Noonan, regrets that she has a previous engagement tonight, but is pleased that the Commission is well represented at the forum and passes on her very best wishes for a wonderful evening and a successful (6<sup>th</sup>) National Interfaith Forum.

Professor Elaine Wainwright is presently on sabbatical and sends her apologies. Dr Mary Caygill, acting head of the School of Theology at Auckland University also regrets not being able to come after all.

And Elder David Baxter of the Pacific Area Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, who is presently in Papua New Guinea and sends his apologies and good wishes for a successful weekend.

**The Governor General's** message is dated 27 February 2009 and it reads as follows:

Greetings, Kia Ora, Kia Orana, Fakalofa Lahi Atu, Taloha Ni.

It is with regret that I am unable to attend the sixth National Interfaith Forum due to other commitments.

Since its establishment in 2003, the Forum has grown in strength and stature and has played a key role in developing understanding and co-operation between all faiths in New Zealand. It was a particular pleasure for me to address the Forum in 2007 in Hamilton and again 2008 in Wellington.

New Zealand is a nation of diverse ethnic and cultural groups, with an equally diverse range of religious and faith communities. There are also many people who profess no faith at all.

As a New Zealander of Fiji-Indian descent and Catholic faith, I believe this ethnic, cultural and religious diversity has the ability to enrich our

nation. But I am also keenly aware that while religions can not only be instruments of peace and healing, they can also inspire violence and discrimination. Such negative manifestations can be particularly apparent when people feel threatened by events and circumstances beyond their control.

With the world facing the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, there is significant potential for heightened tensions between different faith communities. It will require groups such as the Forum to redouble efforts to foster understanding of those whose religious beliefs are different from our own.

As Governor-General of New Zealand I send my best regards to everyone attending the sixth National Interfaith Forum.

No reira, tena koutou, tena koutou, kia ora, kia kaha, tena koutou katoa.

**Hon Anand Satyanand, PCNZM, QSO**  
**Governor-General of New Zealand**

The overall goals for the forum are not only to bring people of different faiths together for dialogue and fellowship, but also to hear about interfaith activities that are taking place around the country and overseas, and to consider important questions of interfaith infrastructure. This will happen tomorrow. Tonight is a celebratory opening event and we're here to celebrate and get to know one another. Sunday is going to be another special experience: a multi-faith devotional service. The scriptures of the major religions of the world are treasure houses of profound insights to be discovered and applied over a lifetime. Engaging with the sacred words of these religions is a source of illumination and comfort for the soul. We hope you will have a wonderful spiritual feast over the course of the weekend, tasting the different flavours of hospitality of various Faith communities. We have already today at the National Women's Forum had the experience of being hosted at a Baha'i centre. And tonight of course we have the combined Hindu and Latter Day Saints hospitality, which will leave a uniquely memorable imprint in our hearts, I'm sure.

The essential purpose of faith and belief is to ennoble the inner being of the individual. All of the world's great civilizations have at their heart a

religious impulse. Social advancement, history tells us, arises from the ideals and shared beliefs that weld society together. Meaningful social change results as much from the development of qualities and attitudes that foster constructive patterns of human interaction as from the acquisition of technical capacities. True prosperity – a well-being founded on peace, cooperation, altruism, dignity, rectitude of conduct and justice – flows from the light of spiritual awareness and virtue as well as from material discovery and progress.

Through the teachings and moral guidance of religion, great segments of humanity have learned to discipline their baser propensities and to develop qualities that conduce to social order and cultural advancement. Such qualities as trustworthiness, compassion, forbearance, fidelity, generosity, humility, courage, and willingness to sacrifice for the common good have constituted the invisible yet essential foundation of progressive community life. Religion provides the bricks and mortar of society – the ethical precepts and vision that unite people into communities and that give tangible direction and meaning to individual and collective existence.

Religion may have been the apparent cause of much harm, warfare and violence in the past and unfortunately in the present. But religion is often the scapegoat for greedy motives - or the conflict is led by human beings who misunderstand the true spirit of their Faiths. All religions, separately and together have an incalculable, unceasing, interdependent power for good to affect the fate of humanity. Today the transition to a global society is underway. As it advances, it has the potential to transform every aspect of human existence. At the same time it pulls humanity in two different directions. The forces of integration tend toward greater interdependence and harmony, while the forces of disintegration create divisions along political, ethnic, racial and religious lines. Caught between these opposites, humanity often erupts into violence. Science, art, religion and politics have critical roles to play in resolving such conflicts and in managing the process of transition from a state of chaos to international order. Religion must search its teachings and spread their divine words regarding non-violence. And certainly lay down their weapons aimed at each other. Religion has shown through time that it is powerful enough to transform whole nations, peoples and philosophies, leaving advanced marvelous societies in its wake. An individual

connection with the Divine, and the communal power of the spiritual teachings of a religion, can generate internal compulsions powerful enough to produce a non-violent society.

We can no longer be content with a passive tolerance of each other's worldviews. What is required is an active search for those common values and moral principles which will lift up the condition of every woman, man and child, regardless of race, class, religion or political opinion. The characteristics of the civilized individual are that he or she is enlightened, is well-informed, high-minded, incorruptible, a person who promotes literacy and education, who encourages art and industry, and who has a great respect for learning and craftsmanship. The civilized individual is one of high morals – a person who has the energy and commitment to oppose the passions of the lower nature, who is one of good character, who is altruistic. In other words, concerned with the welfare of others as well as that of himself or herself. Imagine a world of “we” instead of “us” and “them”. Picture a place where all people can expect a warm welcome, acceptance and respect. This dream is a reality at this interfaith forum, which honours all of the world's sacred traditions, seeks common ground and appreciates unique ways of practising.

Interfaith dialogue is an urgent necessity because the world is currently fighting the demons of suspicion, ignorance and contempt for people of other cultures. Intolerance flies in the face of the sacredness of true religious purpose. Instead people should examine the common roots of religions and recognize that they all come from a source that prescribes good and encourages forgiveness and love. This is a time for people to reach out and live together in peace and harmony as we all belong to one large human family. The ultimate goal of dialogue is to reach a better understanding about the different and the new. This dialogue must be a means of eliminating hatred and bigotry. It should provide a means for us to explore questions like “Why should we study religion? How are religions different? How are religions similar? Can there be peace between religions? Why are there conflicts between the religions? Can the religions exist in a peaceful coexistence?”

This forum is a further step along that pathway of exploration, and the Auckland Inter-Faith Council is happy that so many of you are engaged in that journey of discovery and enrichment. Once again, we warmly and wholeheartedly thank you for being here this evening, and sincerely hope that the forum this weekend is a fulfilling experience for you at many levels.

I now have the very great pleasure of introducing Councillor Noeline Raffills, of Auckland City Council, who is a Councillor for the Avondale-Roskill Ward, and who I believe is also the Chairperson of the Auckland Art Gallery Board, and is on the executive of other Boards. She has a heritage of civic service, as her father, Robert Noel Kirkpatrick was a Newmarket Borough Councillor in the 1970s, and Mrs Raffills is the widow of Phil Raffills, who was also an Auckland City Councillor before his untimely passing some years ago. On behalf of the Auckland Inter-Faith Council and all of us present here this evening, Mrs Raffills, we are delighted you could join us, and look forward to hearing what you have to share. Thank you.

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