

Speech by Hon Pansy Wong, Minister of Ethnic Affairs, at the National Interfaith Forum, Auckland, 28 February 2009.

Living in Harmony

E Nga Mana, E Nga Reo, E Nga Hau E Wha, tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.
Warm greetings to you all.

It is my pleasure to be here today at the sixth National Interfaith Forum and I would like to thank Suzanne Mahon and the members of the Auckland Interfaith Council for your kind invitation.

A warm welcome to today's keynote speaker, Dr Maureen Sier, who has come all the way from Scotland to share with us the Scottish experience. Thank you very much for being here and welcome to New Zealand.

I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge all the members of the various regional faith councils and other distinguished guests. I am sure your participation and contribution will make this forum an overwhelming success.

I was hoping to take part in the women's interfaith forum yesterday but unfortunately my back to back electorate clinic has made that impossible.

Let me start by saying how impressed I am that members of the various religions, faiths and spirituality have been able to gather here today for this important forum - it is a wonderful example of mutual respect and acceptance that New Zealanders cherish.

I have visited this wonderful Fo Guang Shan Temple often and was impressed with the annual Buddha Birthday celebrations where there has been a well established practice of inviting various religious leaders to join in the prayers for world peace and compassion.

I believe on occasions like these our religious leaders demonstrate the willingness to lead the way together through spiritual guidance and also through an attitude to live in harmony.

After all, the ideals of peace, compassion and harmony transcend all religions and the fact that we are all gathered here today is a true recognition of this.

It is not possible to govern people's behaviour with laws alone and religion, faith and spirituality play a key role in guidance and leadership.

I'm proud that the Interfaith Forum is a platform for religious leaders to gather to exchange their learnings and respect of New Zealand's religions and I congratulate you all on showing that leadership.

The 2006 Census revealed that more than three million people in New Zealand - nearly three quarters of our population - identify themselves as being part of a religious group, with an increase in non-Christian worship among new migrants. The Census mirrors the growing multi-cultural community that we live in.

While some people would describe New Zealand as a secular society, it is important to remember that religion is an important part of the growing number of new migrants. This highlights the need for continuing dialogue among our country's religious leaders.

Under the Human Rights Act, freedom of religion is written into law and the endurance of this Interfaith Forum is testament to the respect New Zealanders can show to all religions.

It is very commendable that regional faith councils are here today to promote engagement and the building of bridges between diverse faith communities. Interfaith dialogue like today's forum helps us to understand and appreciate our diversity.

It is times like this that allow us to develop respect for our differences and celebrate the similarities that help us come together as a proud nation with shared identity as New Zealanders.

Of course, there is also a need to respect differences outside of religion. The Office of Ethnic Affairs is always working towards building capacity in the community to empower people and organisations to set their own priorities and to participate actively in wider New Zealand society.

We all know that New Zealand has become an ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse nation. Our cultural heritage draws on the traditions of many cultures and our identity as a nation is made from the many strands which we value equally.

As Minister for Ethnic Affairs, I would like to see ethnic communities as equal citizens of this country, to be able to participate fully in all aspects of New Zealand life, including parliamentary processes and making strategic decisions concerning our nation's future.

I would also like to see our diverse communities prosper so we can become cohesive and united as New Zealanders, with aspirations for the future.

The more diverse we become as a nation, the more important maintaining and promoting good race relations and community harmony becomes.

That's why I am heartened to see so many religious leaders here today, I know that each of you are doing your part to ensure that the positive lines of dialogue are kept open across our many faiths and cultures.

It goes without saying that mere tolerance for people's differences will fall short in bringing people of diverse backgrounds together. It is through engagement in substance, nurtured confidence in our people, enhanced understanding and respect among the different communities will a harmonious society will come.

I would like to thank all interfaith councils and their members both present and past for playing a very important role in promoting interfaith understanding and community harmony in our great nation.

I wish you all a fulfilling and successful sixth National Interfaith Forum.

Thank you once again for inviting me to join you here today.