



“Exploring Sacred Spaces”

A new initiative of the Auckland Inter-Faith Council

November 2017

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Introduction.

Auckland is one of the world's most culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse cities, with temples, mosques, mandirs, gurudwaras, and churches found throughout the city.

In the context of such diversity, how can we build a strong sense of community and inclusiveness in our neighbourhoods? What can be done to help immigrant communities feel accepted and integrated into the social fabric?

How can misunderstandings or prejudice against religious minorities be reduced or eliminated?

One way is to open the doors to places of worship and invite visitors to see and experience them first-hand. The Auckland Inter-Faith Council, a voluntary non-profit charitable organisation, has launched a programme that it intends to continue annually – organising a series of public visits to various faith venues throughout the city.

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The objectives of “Exploring Sacred Spaces” were to:

- *Give members of the public an easy and non-threatening opportunity to visit a faith venue unfamiliar to them,*
- *Learn something about that faith, and*
- *Have a chance to meet and ask questions to members of the host community.*

Overall, our vision was to create new networks between local faith communities, and trigger on-going interfaith dialogue. This report analyses the events and summarises its key achievements.

Summary of Events.

Event 1: Avondale Islamic Centre



Opening Ceremony: Avondale Islamic Centre, 4 November.

The week of visits began on Saturday 4 November, with an opening ceremony hosted by the Avondale Islamic Centre on Blockhouse Bay Road. Mr Ikhlaz Kashkari, President of the New Zealand Muslim Association (“NZMA”) acted as Master of Ceremonies and warmly greeted over 60 guests.

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The programme opened with prayers offered by representatives of five different faiths. There were speeches by Mr Rakesh Naidoo, Strategic Advisor-Race Relations, Michael Wood, MP for Mt Roskill and Parliamentary Under-Secretary to the Minister of Ethnic Communities, and Auckland Inter-Faith Council President Ruth Cleaver.

Imam Muhamed Shaakir, the Centre’s spiritual leader, presented an introduction to the basic tenets of Islam. The guests were then given a tour of the Centre and an opportunity to observe Muslims at prayer. Following the formal programme, the hosts graciously provided afternoon tea and an opportunity for people to mix and mingle. A pastor and members of a local church attended and have now arranged to begin ongoing dialogue between the two congregations.

Event 2: BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir

On Sunday afternoon, around 40 guests visited the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir (Hindu Temple) in Avondale, a spectacular structure. This group is part of a social-spiritual Hindu organisation with over 9,000 centres world-wide.

Friendly and well-informed young volunteers from the Temple gave a guided tour and offered a brief talk introducing Hindu philosophy.

A video showing how these Temples are built was shown, including the carving process which is extremely ornate. Afternoon tea was served and there was ample time for questions and discussion.



BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir: Avondale, 5 November.

Event 3: St Joseph's Catholic Church

Tuesday evening the 7 November around 40 people participated in the visit to St Joseph's Catholic Church in Takapuna. Father James Mulligan offered a welcoming mihi in Maori and English, to highlight the bi-cultural commitment of the Catholic Church in New Zealand.

One speaker explained the history and architecture of this church, which was completed after Vatican II and implements some of the modernisation in design that came as a result.

Father James shared some basics about the Catholic faith and worship services. The evening concluded with supper and a chance for the guests to discuss informally with volunteers from the church.

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St Joseph's Catholic Church: Takapuna, 8 November.

Event 4: Gurudwara Nanaksar Sikh Temple

Brief explanations about protocol in the Temple and the basics of Sikh belief were shared by selected speakers.

On Wednesday 8 November the visit was to the impressive Gurudwara Nanaksar Sikh Temple in Manurewa. When the guests arrived, they were led to the Diwan Hall where the usual evening worship service was underway. Prominent in the Hall was the Sikh scripture, a huge book known as Guru Granth Sahib, which sits under an ornate canopy (Palki). Musicians were singing and playing their instruments (tabla and harmonium).

The guests sat on the floor with members of the congregation and observed the short service consisting of chanted prayers.

Brief explanations about protocol in the Temple and the basics of Sikh belief were shared by selected speakers. Following the service all participants were treated to the ceremonial vegetarian meal, known as *langar*, prepared and served by Temple volunteers.



Gurudwara Nanaksar Sikh Temple: Manurewa, 8 November.

Event 5: Holy Trinity Cathedral

On the evening of Friday 10 November, the visit was to the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Parnell. This complex includes a beautiful old wooden chapel (St Mary's) which had been 'rolled over' from its original location across the street.

The large sanctuary is a mixture of Gothic and modern architecture and features Australasia's largest pipe organ, as well as a newly consecrated smaller chapel with glass walls looking out onto greenery.

Within one complex the Cathedral embraces many different aspects of New Zealand history, and the breath-taking stained-glass windows are a notable feature.

The huge centre window shows the Risen Christ, the Old Testament is depicted in Maori-inspired images along one side of the room and the New Testament is depicted in Pacific style windows on the other, giving the sanctuary the feel of a *whare*, or South Pacific meeting house. Reverend Ivica Gregurec welcomed the guests and a video about the construction programme was shown. A tour of the complex followed, and guests then enjoyed supper provided by volunteers.

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Holy Trinity (Anglican) Cathedral: Parnell, 10 November.

Event 6: Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Temple

This remarkable complex includes buildings designed in the style of ancient Chinese architecture.

On Saturday 11 November, the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Temple in Flatbush acted as the host. Built ten years ago by a group of Taiwanese Buddhists, it is the largest Buddhist temple in New Zealand. This remarkable complex includes buildings designed in the style of ancient Chinese architecture, gardens with statues and cherry blossoms and an active monastery with resident nuns.

The centre also offers a café and gift shop, and a gallery for local and international artwork currently displays calligraphy of the late Buddhist Master Hsing Yun, the founder of this faith group. All facilities are open daily to the public.

Several young volunteers gave a tour and explained some basics about their organisation, then a video showing the founder of the group doing calligraphy was shown. Following this, a special honour was given to the group in which the chief Abbess of the entire complex came and answered questions before inviting the remaining visitors to have lunch with her at the café.



Abbess Manshin and visitors at the Fo Guang Shan Temple: Flatbush, Saturday 11 November.

Event 7: Al-Mustafa Jamia Masjid

The final visit on Sunday afternoon 12 November was to the Al-Mustafa Jamia Masjid in Mangere. This beautiful mosque was built in the year 2000 and is one of the biggest mosques in New Zealand. Imam Wasim Malik invited guests to sit on the carpet in the main prayer hall.

The Imam provided an introduction to the basic teachings of Islam, and pointed out that the golden writing underneath the huge chandelier in the centre of the prayer hall quotes 99 holy names or attributes given to Allah.

On behalf of the Auckland Interfaith Council, Vice-President Jocelyn Armstrong thanked Imam Malik and officially brought the “Exploring Sacred Spaces” to a close. The group then enjoyed refreshments, enjoying the opportunity to mix and mingle and ask questions.

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Analysis & Reflection.



Al-Mustafa Jamia Masjid: Mangere, Sunday 12 November.

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Many visitors expressed their appreciation for the chance to get an introduction to the respective faiths and ways of worship.

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The events enjoyed a consistent stream of attendance from members of the public, with the average number of visitors to each event numbering 40.

Over the course of the week, it was noted that some participants came for only one event while others came once and then kept coming to subsequent events.

For those who attended many of the visits, new friendships were able to develop.

The overall feedback was enormously positive. Participants were very grateful for the opportunity to visit these places, and hosts genuinely enjoyed welcoming guests into their respective spiritual homes.



Gurudwara Nanaksar Sikh Temple: Manurewa, 8 November.

Many visitors expressed their enjoyment in seeing the beauty of the various venues and their appreciation for the chance to get an introduction to the respective faiths and ways of worship.

The schedule allowed people to stay on after the official tours and speak with members of the host organisations as well as fellow visitors.

Auckland Inter-Faith Council is looking at ways to continue and expand this project and invites expressions of interest from faith communities, civic organisations and other like-minded groups.

For more information regarding the initiative or Auckland Inter-Faith Council, please contact NZAIFC@gmail.com or visit our website at www.aucklandinterfaithcouncil.org.nz.

Photo over-page: *Al-Mustafa Jamia Masjid; Mangere, Sunday 12 November.*

