



Exploring Sacred Spaces 2018

In 2017 **Auckland Interfaith Council** (AIFC) initiated “Exploring Sacred Spaces” - a series of public visits to various faith venues over a two week period. The purpose of this initiative is to offer a friendly and non-threatening opportunity to visit faith communities now populating our city. During the visits the guests

tour the facility and a representative of the hosts provides some basic information about their beliefs and worship practices. The visitors experience first -hand the atmosphere and hospitality of each sacred place and have a chance to ask questions. A report of the successful 2017 visits, with colour photos, is available on our website (<http://www.aucklandinterfaithcouncil.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017-AIFC-Exploring-Sacred-Spaces-Report.compressed.pdf>) .

What was new this year is that AIFC arranged to hold the series of Exploring Sacred Spaces visits in conjunction with Auckland Council’s annual **Auckland Heritage Festival** . This year the Festival’s theme was “The Heritage of our People”, which tied in perfectly with the Sacred Spaces concept. The booklets and online promotion of the Festival allowed a much wider audience to learn about our planned visits. The response exceeded all expectations, and we welcomed close to 600 people over the course of the five visits. The visits were mostly held on weekend afternoons, and were free of charge and open to the public.



The first visit was to the *Al-Masjid Al-Jamie Mosque* on Vermont Street in Ponsonby. More than 70

people listened attentively as Aarif Rasheed, a lawyer and son of one of the Mosque's founders, explained the background and building of the Mosque. The foundation stone was laid in 1979 and it is the country's oldest mosque. After adding further extensions, it was completed in 1986. Aarif shared some principles of the Islamic faith and answered questions from the floor. As with all subsequent visits, the talk was followed by an afternoon tea graciously prepared by the host community.



The second sacred space visited was the Bharatiya Mandir, the Hindu Temple on Balmoral Road in Mt Albert. This beautiful building was completed in 1993 and is the first Hindu temple in New Zealand. This very active community recently celebrated their 25 year anniversary. What started as a dream has turned into a huge Hindu complex in the heart of Auckland, which includes a community garden and extends to another local building used for community groups and gatherings. About 100 people attended the visit.



The visit that attracted the most visitors – around 200 people!- was to the Auckland Hebrew Congregation, an orthodox Jewish Synagogue on Greys Avenue in central Auckland. Rabbi Nathaniel Friedler was delighted to see so much interest in Judaism and he gave a lively and interesting talk about Jewish beliefs and practices. In the main chapel the Rabbi removed one of the “Torahs” from its sacred place and unrolled it for all the visitors to view close-up. This is the sacred scroll written in Hebrew on animal skin (parchment) containing the Old Testament’s first five books, from which verses are read during worship services.

A highlight when it comes to community involvement was certainly the visit to the Onehunga churches, which took place on a Friday evening. What was originally planned as one visit to a Catholic church turned into an ecumenical event! About 100 people met at the Catholic Church of Our Lady of the Assumption and after the welcome and a prayer, the group walked a few blocks to the Co-operative Parish, then on to the Anglican St Peter’s Church before returning to the Catholic Church. The evening concluded at the Catholic Church with cultural performances from their Tongan, Fijian, and Samoan groups as well as a huge Pacific-style feast.



At each church the speaker had a different focus: the Presbyterian minister Rev Taimoanaifakafo Kaio (below) who leads the Co-operative Parish gave us information about the different historic church buildings in Onehunga and explained the local merging of the Presbyterian parish, the Methodist parish and the parish of the Church of Christ which took place in 1996. He shared about the various community activities the Parish is now involved in.



At St Peter's Anglican Church, the Rev John McAlpine filled in for Rev Petra Zaleski who had been involved in the organisation and preparation for the visit but wasn't able to be present. He focussed on the people who have formed the community. The first priest, Rev Arthur Guyon Purchas, who was a medical doctor before becoming a priest, was a man of many talents and even built the first St Peter's church, where he served as its vicar from 1847 to 1875. The first female mayor of Auckland (1893), Elizabeth Yates, was a parishioner of St Peter's.



We then walked back to Our Lady of the Assumption Catholic Church. Fr Andrew Atonio, the parish priest had asked the parishioner David Hagar to talk about the Royal New Zealand Fencibles. It was fascinating to hear about this part of Auckland history. These Fencibles were retired English soldiers of 48 years and younger who were brought over with their families to Auckland to form a non-violent defence force in the 1840's. In return, they were promised a cottage and one acre of land. In 1847 the first 29 Catholic Fencibles arrived in Onehunga with their families – the start of a Catholic parish. The Fencibles had special seats in the church and were obliged to attend Mass on Sundays in full uniform. If they didn't do so, they would lose their privileges.

The last visit of this programme of "Exploring Sacred Spaces" was to St John's Theological College in Meadowbank. About 90 people were welcomed in the historic Collegiate Chapel which was consecrated in 1847 and is recognised as the first church building in Auckland. Made of kauri and totara, this chapel is still used regularly by the College.

The Church historian Rev Dr Allan Davidson took us on a journey through Anglican history in New Zealand. Bishop George Augustus Selwyn, the first Anglican Bishop in New Zealand, named the College after his Alma Mater, St John's Cambridge. The achievements and challenges of Bishop Selwyn, the Missionary Society, Mission Bay with its Mission ships from and to Melanesia – and the good relationships between Pakeha and Maori during the early days of the mission up to more recent history were topics of the presentation. The tour included a visit to the old kitchen and dining room and concluded with refreshments in the former library.



Guests welcomed in the Collegiate Chapel (built in 1847), St John's Theological College