

Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Welcoming New Migrants – FOR NWO WEBSITE

As the communities of Otautahi become more ethnically diverse, it becomes more important to ensure that new migrants are welcomed and supported to settle well in the spirit of hospitality and goodwill as offered under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

In this article ***Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Welcoming New Migrants*** Rex Gibson considers this approach to welcoming and NWO asks was an opportunity lost to Greater Christchurch with the demise of the Migrant Centre in 2017?

Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Welcoming New Migrants

Modern historians tell us that the Treaty signed at Waitangi (February 6, 1840), and subsequently around the country, was initially focussed (in part) on Britain's responsibility to control its sometimes wayward citizens. Land-grabbing missionaries, traders, etc., were arriving and settling. Whalers, flax merchants, and others, were often taking advantage of the lack of sanctions on their behaviours from their countries of origin. All of these new arrivals needed, in the eyes of the hosts, some management in the process of settlement to ensure harmony. The hope was that the British government, via the Treaty, would provide it.

The migrant personnel may have changed, but the basic situation in the twenty-first century is the same. New migrants settle more successfully when assisted and managed in the process.

In 2010 Christchurch had no local agency which had accepted responsibility for the on-going settlement guidance of all new migrants. This was a very obvious need for those from non-English speaking backgrounds, or from bureaucratic cultures quite different from those in New Zealand. The city had a regular supply of United Nations assisted refugees and a growing set of East Asian communities in particular. To the surprise of most "locals" the 2006 Census had identified 160 different ethnicities in the city.

In April 2010 I was approached by a senior staff member of the Ministry of Social Development, and a local contracted service-delivery person, to see if I would take on the job of establishing a migrants' centre for the city. I had 15 years of close involvement with education programmes for migrants, refugees and international students behind me. In 2010 MSD was the government department responsible for "Settlement Support".

The reimbursement offered was pocket money but the design freedom allowed was attractive.

My first port of call was the excellent strategic plan previously developed by George Clark for the now defunct Refugee and Migrant Centre. The plan was thorough but its execution had not been. The Internal Affairs and Charities Commission websites provided templates that were adaptable for the new institution's founding documents.

The first public step was to pull together a board to govern this entity. I had always been conscious that in 1840 it was Maori who welcomed the British. I had recently read Atholl Anderson's "The Welcome of Strangers" which sets out the ethnohistory of southern Maori from 1650 to 1850. It highlighted the culture and responsibilities of welcoming new arrivals that permeated the tikanga of Ngai Tahu and their precursors. It was important to build on that to respect both the mana whenua tikanga and my own Ngai Tahu Whanui whakapapa.

My first port of call was to the office of Mark Solomon, then Kaiwhakahaere of Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu. We were not unknown to each other. I explained my logic to Mark. I believed it was vital that there was strong Tangata Whenua influence on the board for the guidance and governance of migrant settlement in order to facilitate their appreciation of the roles and rights of Mana Whenua.

Mark's response was immediate. "Would I do?" he asked. It took a 'nano-second' to reply in the affirmative. I then set about the processes of determining the correct protocols for designing a logo reflecting both Tangata Whenua role and the welcoming of new arrivals, plus a title for the centre in Te Reo. Two other people with Ngai Tahu whakapapa were included on the board and a gender-balanced blend of established and new migrant expertise was incorporated. It began operation on 6 August 2010.

The board, and the Centre, operated as a Treaty-based relationship recognising the indigenous status of tangata whenua. Every meeting and formal functions opened, and closed, with a karakia. A cultural advisor, selected by Mark, attended all meetings. Mihi Whakatau began each formal occasion; especially the welcomes for new migrant groups. The main groups involved from 2011 were Filipinos. There were numerous large scale welcomes to new migrants as tangata Tiriti. The city's local government bureaucrats had abdicated this responsibility but its governors would attend.

The Centre's role had experienced "mega-thrusts" on 4 September 2010 and 22 February as Ruamoko rumbled. Migrant groups and agencies which had previously seen themselves as "coping" came together at the Migrants Centre's base set up at Rehua Marae, just outside the seriously damaged city centre. Most agencies had either lost their premises, or these were "off limits" in the cordoned off "red zone". The Migrants Centre's staff oversaw the operations of the combined efforts of these 60+ agencies and ethnic community groups, under the title of the Migrant Interagency Network, for earthquake response efforts appropriate for them. The protocols of the Migrants Centre's tikanga were followed by this group. The setting of Rehua Marae was a powerful influence in messaging the Treaty relationship.

I remained as the Centre's manager until January 2015. My involvement then ceased. In that time we had developed and operated, with Network Waitangi Otautahi support, a comprehensive Treaty of Waitangi policy statement and begun encouraging migrant communities to engage in Treaty workshops. The framework meets most of my 2010 aspirations for a Treaty-based relationships. The constraints of grant funding for such charitable entities, often mean that, no matter how motivated, you can be constrained in your idealistic aspirations. However migrant education in the details of the Treaty, and at least appreciation of who are the first people of this land, can take small but fundamental steps if the organisation involved sees this as a fundamental premise for their work.

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3 November 2017