

Green light for national peace centre

A national centre for the study of peace and conflict studies is to be set in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Early in September a memorandum of understanding was reached with the University of Otago to establish the centre in Dunedin and to appoint a founding director.

The university's partner in this initiative is a trust formed just over two years ago by a small group of Anglicans. The trust was augmented later by a steering group drawn from peace activists and academics throughout New Zealand.

The hope is that Otago will collaborate with other universities, and that courses will be offered in other cities as well as in Dunedin.

An Anglican working group set up by General Synod last year is exploring the sharing of library resources at St John's College and a possible joint lectureship in religion and peace at St John's and Otago. Both these proposals have the blessing of General Synod Standing Committee and the St John's Board of Oversight.

Archbishop David Moxon says the three archbishops also "strongly and warmly affirm" the project, seeing it as an important contribution to this church's mission and vision.

The peace centre initially will focus on graduate research and teaching, but will accommodate undergraduate, doctoral and community programmes as more staff are appointed.

"This is a significant milestone for the peace project in Aotearoa-New Zealand," says Professor Margaret Bedggood, an original member of the trust.

"It recognises the crucial need for peace education in the tertiary sector, and will bring fresh thinking to local issues like domestic violence and the well-being of children."

Broader issues such as international peacekeeping, restorative justice and ethnic rights also will be covered.

The centre is to be modelled on a highly influential peace centre in Bradford (UK) but will be grounded in the context of these islands.

"A non-violent response to violence doesn't come naturally," says Professor Bedggood. "It has to be painstakingly learned and practiced. It's our hope that the new centre will provide opportunities to do just that."

The go-ahead for the centre follows a series of public meetings around the country which provided a seeding fund of \$1.25 million and a database of over 700 supporters.

"One of the key features of the centre," Margaret Bedggood says, "will be partnership with tangata whenua. Indigenous peace centres such as the Hokotehi Trust and Parihaka will take part in the development of the centre, together with the mana whenua, Ngai Tahu."

Anthony Dancer, Anglican Social Justice Commissioner, sees the centre as "one of the most significant developments in this country for some time - bridging academia, the church, and grassroots peace building in our communities.

"This comes when there is such a clear focus on eliminating or reducing violence in families, society and our world. The work of the centre will be crucial to our nation's engagement with this issue, particularly in light of its commitment to biculturalism."