

Atheists ignored by diversity statement

By Niko Kloeten

Non-religious people have been overlooked in the National Statement on Religious Diversity in New Zealand, says the leader of a prominent atheist group.

Kent Stevens, president of the Humanist Society of New Zealand, thinks that people without religion

are not given equal consideration when the topic of religion is raised, despite the growing number of non-religious people in this country.

"Over the years non-religious people have been persecuted, tortured and called heretics and infidels, so surely we should get the same assurances of safety as those who take part in organised

religion. It should say that everyone has the right to safety and security instead."

The 2006 census shows the number of atheists is growing rapidly.

"Over the years non-religious people have been persecuted, tortured and called heretics and infidels."

Nearly 1.3 million New Zealanders described themselves as having no religion, an increase of more than 250,000 people since 2001.

This was more than twice the number of Catholics, 20 times the number of Hindus and 36 times the number of Muslims.

Those with no religion made up 35 per cent of the census total.

But according to Stevens, the statement, released in November last year, does not make much mention of non-religious people at all.

He uses the example of article



FAVOURIED TREATMENT: The statement covers worshippers at churches like this Presbyterian church in Pukekohe East.

three, which says "Faith communities and their members have a right to security."

"I understand why they would do that, because they're afraid of mosques being vandalised and problems like that. But there's not a lot in there for people without religion."

He also says that while human rights declarations normally focus on individual rights, the National Statement on Religious Diversity focuses on groups.

He thinks it is an attempt to protect these religious communities from external criticism, par-

ticularly by non-religious people, and thinks it could undermine the rights of vulnerable people in these groups.

"If you start with a group they can attack individuals," he says.

Stevens says that while media organisations try not to offend religious groups, who may make big protests, no such consideration is given to non-religious people, who do not have the resources and collective will of the big churches.

But Carlyne Jurriaans, communications officer for the Human Rights Commission, says the statement is not the law

and should not be seen as such.

"It's not a legal document but a philosophical declaration. It has symbolic value," she says.

Jurriaans doesn't think people without religion are as hard done by as Stevens makes out.

She says coverage of non-religious viewpoints depends on the issue.

"In a general sense, journalists will cover issues from their perspective.

"A lot of journalists are not religious.

"But if the issue is religion then obviously they'll want to get religious viewpoints first."

Toeing the straight line

By Priscilla Duncan

On the two-year anniversary of civil unions in New Zealand, passions still run high within the gay and lesbian community over the worth of this new institution.

The civil union bill came into law on August 26, 2005, after a long and controversial journey through Parliament.

Since then almost 900 couples have tied the knot.

Labour MP Tim Barnett, who backed the bill, intended the law to give same-sex couples equivalent rights to heterosexual cou-

ples, but not everyone is satisfied.

For couples like Jenny Rowan and Jools Joslin, who have been together 20 years and share six children, the civil union law is still a bitter disappointment.

"There is a public perception in New Zealand now that lesbian and gay people have equal rights and that's simply not true," said 56-year-old Rowan.

Rowan and Joslin have been waiting years for same-sex marriage to be legalised and were involved in taking on the Crown in the High Court over their inability to marry in the 1996 Quilter case. They finally trav-

elled to Canada last year to have a legal marriage.

AUT University public policy lecturer Marilyn Waring also condemns the new institution.

The ex-National MP, who has been called the most prominent lesbian woman in the country by gay newspaper *Express*, gave a public lecture last month attacking civil unions for not giving gays and lesbians the dignity they deserve.

"Marriage is a means of conferring the highest form of social approval and everyone should have access to it," said Waring. "What we've created with civil unions in New Zealand is a precedent for half a human right and that's a dangerous thing. Equivalence does not mean equality."

But others from the gay and lesbian community support civil unions and would not opt for marriage if it were an option.

Rosemary Neave, who had a civil union last year with her partner Ngaire Brader, said she would not have chosen marriage partly because of its long and chequered history.

"I think it's a positive thing that civil unions are not associated with the long-standing, traditional, patriarchal institution of marriage," said Neave.

"With marriage, you're always battling against tradition. I quite like the potential of civil unions in that you can create a new institution with new values."



PHOTO: PRISCILLA DUNCAN

SPCA gets tough

By Aroha Treacher

A "zero tolerance" policy from the Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has seen a dramatic rise in animal prosecutions in the Auckland area.

Despite a slight drop in the total number of complaints investigated this year, animal prosecutions have increased by 400 per cent.

The increase in prosecutions is due to a tougher attitude from the SPCA when it comes to animal welfare.

Anyone who is caught breaching the Animal Welfare Act 1999 is deemed an offender. "We will prosecute," said SPCA inspector and hospital manager David Lloyd-Barker.

In the last 12 months there have been 14 prosecutions, with a 100 per cent success rate.

The "zero tolerance" attitude is having the biggest effect in Auckland, particularly central and south Auckland, says Lloyd-Barker.

"Seventy-five per cent [of all offending] is within Auckland and its surrounding regions."

In an effort to raise public awareness, the SPCA is publicising all successful prosecutions. "We bring to the public's

attention the seriousness of these offences," he said.

Each case is funded by the SPCA and the increase in prosecutions is a drain on SPCA finances.

The SPCA had a net loss of \$371,000 in the 2005/2006 financial year, despite an income of \$4 million, the first net loss in years.

Prosecution costs have added to the loss, but the SPCA has also received a lower level of legacy income over the past 12 months.

Legacy income is when a person leaves money for an organisation in their will.

Craig Montgomery, SPCA events and publicity co-ordinator, says each prosecution is costing anything from \$3000 upwards. "It is getting expensive."

Lloyd-Barker carries out the prosecutions himself, but the SPCA also receives free legal work from Queen's Counsel lawyers.

The majority of offences investigated are against dogs, but the organisation also deals with everything from goats and horses to crayfish.

In one case crayfish were being kept in water 20 times too toxic to live in and then being sold in a restaurant.

Animal Village facts

- 3306 complaints investigated
- 65 written warnings issued
- 4508 animals collected and delivered
- 455 emergencies attended