

Justice and peace could walk hand in hand

The year 2005 may well be looked on as a landmark by future law students interested in studying peace and conflict resolution.

This year, a small group took the first steps in establishing a New Zealand Peace and Conflict Resolution Centre, which aims to provide academically rigorous teaching and research from a university base.

Since an initial meeting earlier this year, momentum has built and by this month the steering group had received more than \$1 million in pledges for the proposed centre. The group is now working towards a target of starting teaching in 2008 - probably at graduate level initially and then offering under-graduate courses.

The peace-related study would be inter-disciplinary, encompassing areas such as law, political science, social sciences, science, medicine and theology. In the case of law, that could include thinking about international law, about where the world takes the United Nations, about the structure of the international community, about international human rights, about conflict resolution and restorative justice at a variety of levels (such as the family level, for example), about Bill of Rights issues, about Treaty of Waitangi issues and about domestic human rights issues - to name just a few examples.

Work on the project began in January with a meeting of three people - Dorothy Brown, Margaret Bedggood and Chris Barfoot.

This small group has been "growing the possibility" of establishing a New Zealand Peace and Conflict Resolution Centre, says Professor Bedggood, former Dean of Law at Waikato University.

The initial task has been gauging what support there is for this type of centre. There have been meetings in Auckland, attended by about 80 people; Wellington, which attracted some 70 people; and Hamilton, where about 40 attended; and another is planned for Christchurch on 31 October.

The idea is to have the centre at a university, but to have an independence through the establishment of a funding base that would be held in trust.

"The model we have now worked out is having a centre based at one university, and delivering courses at other universities," Professor Bedggood says. "We want this to be an academically rigorous and acceptable centre."

In talking with people this year, those on the steering group "are beginning to get the feeling that the time for this is right".

The issues of cultural diversity and cultural mediation are "particularly relevant in New Zealand at the moment. This is where a New Zealand centre could become a model for the rest of the world".

And then there are issues of violence against women, the debate on repeal of s59 of the Crimes Act, through to the international criminal court "and these things are all interconnected," she says.

The next step of the process, which the group plans to put in place by early November, is to establish a trust and set up a formal steering group.

"Without a vision of a dedicated, well-funded New Zealand Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, New Zealanders will be diminished and unlikely to play the role which they should and could be playing domestically and internationally," Professor Kevin Clements - a New Zealander who now heads the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies - said in his address to the Wellington meeting on 29 August.

"It's a question of personal, academic and political will."

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