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**Blog article by Chief Commissioner Dr Michael Wardlow**

## **Thought on International Peace Day 2016**

Peace does not belong to one side, one tradition or group. It is not owned by one section of our society. All people are entitled to equal respect and we are all diminished while fear persists in any section of our community. Enduring peace is long-coming to this place we call home.

In order to re-imagine a truly shared future, with wholeness at its core, we need to ensure that our future embraces the “other” and so we should seek common values, goals and the common good. We know that the lack of political agreement on how we create a shared future is too often evidenced on our streets where people are paying the cost for our corporate failure to make progress. In creating a united community we need to be able to rely on strong political leaders who demonstrate respect and tolerance for difference in both what they say as well as what they do. This needs, however, to be matched by courageous civil society responses.



It is imperative that we push forward urgently with strategies to change attitudes and remove prejudices; but the changes they make will take time to be effective and must be modelled through civic leadership at the highest levels. Peacebuilding is a journey not a destination and it is important to acknowledge that it is primarily a personal one.

Changing behaviour is a core challenge for all and it will also take leadership – and that means good example - from all the influencers in our society – the Executive, government departments, churches, the media, and all the institutions of civil society. We need to create a public consensus which promotes an acceptance and appreciation of the diversity of our society and challenges all expressions of prejudice and hostility towards people in our community based on negative stereotypes. Perhaps we could begin by examining what we say and do as individuals and groups and consider if we speak and act with a generosity of spirit towards “the other”. In short explain what I/we can do for you/them.

A start could be made by working to persuade people to show a greater acceptance of the legitimacy of difference within our society. We cannot value the right to free expression only in terms of our own identity and beliefs. Many are too eager to take offence at every expression of an identity which is different, or at odds with their own. Laws can help - but they don't always change attitudes. Part of peacebuilding is embracing difference and working to remove those enduring inequalities - the very existence of which highlight our failings to match our words with actions.

It is good to see people value and enjoy cultures and expressions of identity other than their own but, where we cannot, we should at least be prepared to accept their free expression. That is a principle which should be at the core of every free society, but one which is frequently found wanting, not least in our own community. This is a big ask, to embrace the other with generosity of spirit. The question is not should we do it, but rather what if we don't?



Read the Chief Commissioner's blog "*Here's the thing...*"

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