

Service to multicultural users: a bicultural perspective

by Judith Bright

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Background

New Zealand has become significantly multicultural in recent decades, and has the largest Polynesian population of any city in the world.[1] Not surprisingly, this is also mirrored in those using theological libraries in Auckland. However, working in a multicultural environment in an Auckland theological library, and especially one that belongs to the Anglican Church, there is a need to take into account the underlying Maori-Pakeha bicultural setting dating from 1841, into which all other cultures come.

Biculturalism

This is a uniquely New Zealand situation, which I know some of the Australian members have been exposed to before, but I need to give you a bit of background as to what is meant by biculturalism in a New Zealand context. There are differing views of the reality of biculturalism. Sir Paul Reeves, former Anglican Archbishop and former Governor-General of New Zealand probably summed it up reasonably well, when he said

We talk about biculturalism and there's a Pakeha understanding, and then there's a Maori understanding. The Pakeha understanding of biculturalism is being sensitive to Maori issues, and Maori understanding of biculturalism is sharing power where the decisions are made.[2]

Pakeha is a Maori word which has various translations but which the Church has defined as being "all people who are not Maori." Maori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand, known as tangata whenua, which can translate as people of the land. Thus it is Sir Paul's words – the sharing of power rather than the being sensitive to Maori issues, that has significantly influenced how the Kinder Library provides service to users of many cultures.

Treaty and tikanga

The 1841 Treaty of Waitangi was the basis for relationships between Maori and non-Maori in New Zealand and, arising out of that, the Anglican Church has applied the principles of partnership and bicultural development. This has become the basis on which the Anglican Church constitution was rewritten to allow for three cultural groups or tikanga - Maori, Pasefika and Pakeha - as having equal status and decision making within the Anglican Church.

You may well ask how the Pacific comes into this. The Anglican Church also has a partnership with the Diocese of Polynesia,

Judith Bright works in the Kinder Library at St John's Theological College, Auckland and was President of ANZTLA from 2001-2003

which has been part of the New Zealand Church since 1925. In 1990 with the change of constitution it became a full and equal partner.

Kinder Library

The Kinder Library, while no longer a part of St John's College, is the library for the College and for the whole Anglican Church, and therefore its primary clientele come from all tikanga of the Anglican Church, - Maori, Pasefika and Pakeha - and also from the Methodist Church's very multicultural makeup.

So who are our key users? There are the obvious three partners of the Anglican Church. First of all Maori. For most these days English would be a primary language, but they will regard te reo – their own language - as being able to convey things that English never will. Within our Pacific partnerships, first languages will be Tongan, Samoan, Fijian, and Hindi. The Pakeha include New Zealanders of many cultural backgrounds, from fifth generation of the 1840's English, Irish and Scots settlers through to relatively recent Asian and other immigrants. As well, we have traditionally, since 1849, had students from Melanesia – the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and sometimes Papua New Guinea.

Trinity Methodist Theological College, which is also a key user of the library, has a majority of its students from Pacific Island cultures.

Key concept

What does service to multicultural library clients mean to those of us working in the Kinder Library?

First of all, and most significantly, it means that right at the policy making level, all three tikanga must be involved. It means that we are obliged to do our best to provide a service which does not disadvantage any one of those groups. It means that we are often seen by some tikanga as not meeting those requirements.

It means giving each cultural difference full and equal importance in the life of the Church.

The library is governed by a Committee which has representatives of each part of the partnership. This ensures that at the policy

making level we try to take into account all library user needs.

Library staff backgrounds

Our experience in providing service to clients from a variety of cultural backgrounds is that the cultural background of a library staff member plays a significant role in their relating to library users.

Some examples. We had Koloti Ma'u, the librarian from Sia'atoutai Theological College in Tonga on our staff for six months. Koloti was Tongan. We have a lot of Tongan students. No matter what the student wanted, and no matter whether or not Koloti knew a lot about what the student wanted, those Tongan students would always either head straight to Koloti, or wait around until he was available to them.

We often quietly remarked about whether or not the student was getting the information they needed or not, but that was not the point. The point was that that library user felt comfortable being able to voice his request in Tongan, did not feel that he might make a mistake in front of a palangi that he perceived as possibly intimidating, and didn't feel that he might unwittingly breach a library protocol or way of doing things.

There was an added advantage: Koloti was also a Methodist Minister. Where we tended to tread carefully in trying to get overdue books returned – we were aware of the commonly known differences in possessions and ownership in some parts of the Pacific - Koloti simply waded in and told them all about their obligations to return things. When asked how he did it, he was reputed to have said that he told them "to return the books or else I'll break your fingers", but as the original conversations were in Tongan, it could have just been one of those myths. Whatever it was, it was effective.

Now we have Denise Taura, a very willing volunteer from Tahiti, whose husband is part of the Pacific student community. Although she isn't in the library for the same number of hours that Koloti was, we do notice a gravitation towards her by Pacific library users.

For several years, Linda Papuni was a member of the library staff. Linda is Maori: again there

was that unmistakable move by library users towards one that Maori students recognised as being able to meet them where they were at. The level of library training and skills was irrelevant to the user: it was the perceived ability to feel comfortable, to not have to explain oneself to non-Maori. In this case it was not a language issue - Linda was not a fluent Maori speaker – but a cultural issue. We also have a Librarian who is Chinese on the staff.

Recently, the Library Oversight Committee held a hui or gathering at which representatives from our three cultural groups had the opportunity to take part in strategic planning for the library. This is at decision making level, and we are required to take notice of their suggestions. Caucusing took place in cultural groups, so there was no pressure from only one group on others. Then all groups agreed (amazingly) on future directions and priorities.

One direction that we are seeking budget approval for in 2006 is a new position for a qualified and experienced librarian who identifies as Maori and speaks the Maori language. We believe that this appointment

easy, and requires considerable dialogue, time and understanding.

There are some suggestions within Maori librarianship that the Western model of organising information that we use is one that is not appropriate for Maori. Rowena Cullen, from the department of Library and Information Studies at Victoria University, Wellington, in a paper presented at the 62nd IFLA conference, writing on libraries and biculturalism says

"Working within western paradigms of knowledge, instruction, learning research and management, can we really hope to resolve the dichotomy which underlies the conflict between Maori and Western concepts of knowledge? How do we answer Maori students who challenge traditional classification structures and suggest that different ways of classifying Maori material may be found which fit better with the structure of Maori knowledge... rather than the nineteenth century knowledge structures of Dewey et al, which reflect a nineteenth century world order".[3]

One of the most challenging aspects of working in a multicultural environment is to move from the position/perspective of the majority (in our case Pakeha) and being seen to accommodate other viewpoints and perspectives, to one of developing an appropriate library service together, and empowering others. It is not easy, and requires considerable dialogue, time and understanding.

will go a long way towards supporting our commitment to a bicultural library, but it will also enable our Maori users to have their information needs supported in the best way possible, not only by someone who speaks Maori and has the cultural understandings, but who also has good skills in finding appropriate information.

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To date, I have not done enough work in this area to fully understand the implications of this for libraries that provide service to Maori or to other cultural groups. But it is an interesting and challenging idea.

In practical terms, some of the things we have done

Our introductory library pamphlet has been written in English, Maori and Tongan. It should be done in some other languages, but we haven't followed up on the necessary willing workers to do the translation for us. It also needs updating, and we are a bit behind on

that.

We have split our in-house library orientation session into two groups – those who are reasonably familiar with libraries and those who are not. This second group inevitably includes those for whom English is a second language. This enables people to voice questions (sometimes) that they wouldn't do in front of others who don't have the same concerns. It also lets them see that they are not the only ones who do not feel comfortable in a library. We are aware that a high proportion of our Maori and Pacific students are meeting tertiary study for the first time.

We have moved our Maori resources into a separate collection – something I have mixed feelings about, as in some ways it makes it harder to locate things, rather than easier. But it does assist in acknowledging that we recognise the need to take biculturalism seriously.

We actively pursue books and other resources which deal with theology in the context from which our students come. There are never enough of these published, and it is always pleasing when a significant piece of work is done as master's thesis or research essay. We actively seek other such research from other universities and theological colleges. One example here would be the purchase of the microfilm of all the theses done at the Pacific Theological College.

Room for improvement

There are many other areas in which there is room for improvement. While many of the staff, including me, have probably instinctively tuned into some cultural needs, we know that we have only made a start, and that there is a long way to go. For example, if someone is hovering near the front of the library but doesn't come to the desk, (and it is most often Pacific or Maori clients) we will approach them. Likewise, if they appear to be sitting in front of the catalogue and not actually finding anything.

We are still not adequately effective in the library orientation that we do do. It shows up later, in teaching part of a master's level research methods paper, when some students are still not sufficiently familiar with basic library

use. One of these issues I think is having compulsory information literacy courses, preferably built into assessment so that it can't be avoided.

Work is being done in New Zealand on creating an appropriate Maori subject headings thesaurus to enhance ways of locating materials in catalogues. There is the ever present issue of non-Maori writing about Maori, and issues of accuracy, and for the Pacific, a concern that research about Pacific issues should take place in the Pacific. There is limited publication in indigenous languages, and almost nothing in theology. There are issues to do with the appropriateness of some historical material being held in libraries instead of with the tribes it came from. There are issues to do with the formats of academic materials, and how in the future we might consider more materials in formats that better relates to people who come from an oral rather than print-based culture.

So we at the Kinder Library in Auckland feel that we have only just stepped onto the edge of what is possible in providing an information service which appropriately serves the needs of all our clients. I think it is a matter of "watch this space".

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auckland,_New_Zealand. Accessed 4 July 2005

[2] <http://anglican.webstation.net.nz/main/biculturalpolicy/> Accessed 29 June 2005

[3] <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla62/62-culr.htm> Accessed 18 April 2005