

Sydney Maoris go back to basics



Kingi Ihaka (Photo Gil Hanly)

Maoris living in Sydney, Australia are in for some culture shock following the arrival of Archdeacon Kingi Ihaka, the first resident Maori minister. Kingi has spent his first eight months finding out the people's needs and he's now ready for action.

He says the Maori people are hungry for the reo, but language teachers are scarce. He's also out to change their minds on the establishment of a marae. He favours a community centre, not just because of possible conflict over tribal affiliations, but also because the Maori people are not the tangata whenua of Australia.

And he's not so concerned about being unpopular with Maoris who've lived some years in Sydney.

Tu Tangata editor, Philip Whaanga went to Sydney to get a progress report from the Archdeacon.

TT Kingi, what is your job here in Sydney?

"Although I was sent here to represent the Anglican Church and work amongst the Maori people, I was licensed by the Archbishop of Sydney to be the chaplain to the Maori community, not just Anglicans.

"I feel very aroha for the Maori people living here, the bulk of whom would be under forty years of age, and the majority would be ill-equipped as far as maoritanga is concerned. A large number of people can't understand or don't speak their language, they're hungry for things Maori. I've come across people who say quite bluntly that they did not appreciate the value of Maori culture until they arrived here."

TT Are the Maoris who come to Sydney different from those back home?

"There's no doubt about it, they gen-

erally get employment here, the wages are better here for people who are prepared to work. The other important reason is if you want to get lost, away from your own people, come to Sydney, and I say that advisedly because the population of Sydney is bigger than all of New Zealand.

"There are 147 ethnic groups in Sydney, so it's really cosmopolitan in the truest sense of the word, one of its kind."

TT So what happens to Maoris who come to this multicultural city?

"Well their culture was not that important to them then, and these were people who claimed to be integrated until they came here. They then found they were far from being integrated. I mean how can they be integrated when they have lost their culture."

TT What is their reaction to the strong ethnic groups in Sydney? Do they blend in with the various ethnic groups or become Australian?

"That's a difficult one. I think there are quite a few Maoris with dual citizenship. They retain their citizenship of New Zealand and also acquire Australian citizenship. What the advantages are I'm not quite sure. I've made enquiries and can't see any sense in it. Perhaps there are financial advantages."

"I can't quite understand it, perhaps these people were lost back home before they left to come here. It's a strange thing, whilst most of these peo-

ple can't speak or understand Maori, when it comes to the church services, they demand that they be in Maori."

TT Do they want something without having the other, the signs and symbols without learning the language?

"Yes but they realise they must do the learning also. Last night I had a meeting with the group that has been organising the Sydney Maori Festival for the past eight years, the Aroha Co-operative. The questions they were asking me, I really felt aroha for them, and I suggested that after the festival we have a wananga to discuss them.

"I mean the people we are talking about are in their thirties and forties, mature adults, who for all intents and purposes appear to be ashamed of the fact that they know so little of their own heritage and culture, and their concern is for their children.

"One lady from Whangarei said to me last night, 'I'm not concerned about myself but I am concerned about my children.' I told her that in that case we can't do everything in such a short time, we should have a series of wanangas on topics that people are interested in. One thing they're extremely interested in is learning their own language. People have come to me saying, 'When are you going to start up maori classes?'"

TT Are there any maori language teachers here?

"There are one or two, but they are very restricted in the sense that they work for state departments. One lady, Patsey Williams, nee Wipaki from Tuhoe, sets aside so many hours per week for people who are interested in learning the maori language, but it's her own initiative. I've asked the Minister of Education back home if there's a chance of extending the correspondence school lessons in maori to those Maoris here in Australia.

"I've received a positive reply from his secretary saying they'll investigate the whole matter and let me know. I know if it's just a matter of cost that the Maoris here will be prepared to pay."

TT Why has it taken so long for these Maoris to do something about their language. Is it their children who've prompted the response?

"Yes, they want their children to be better than them in so far as their culture is concerned. The other thing is that for the past twenty years Maori people have been coming here, then going home, coming here and going home and I don't believe that's a good way of looking at things Maori in Australia. I think the only way to see properly is to come and live in Australia.

"I don't think we should impose, say kohanga reo, I don't believe it will work in Australia, I don't think those type of