

Come all *ye* faithful

As churches around the country prepare to observe Christmas, **Fleur Mealing** celebrates the myriad ways in which Kiwis express their faith - and showcases their houses of worship.

PHOTOGRAPHY by **ROB TRATHEN** and **EMILY CHALK**



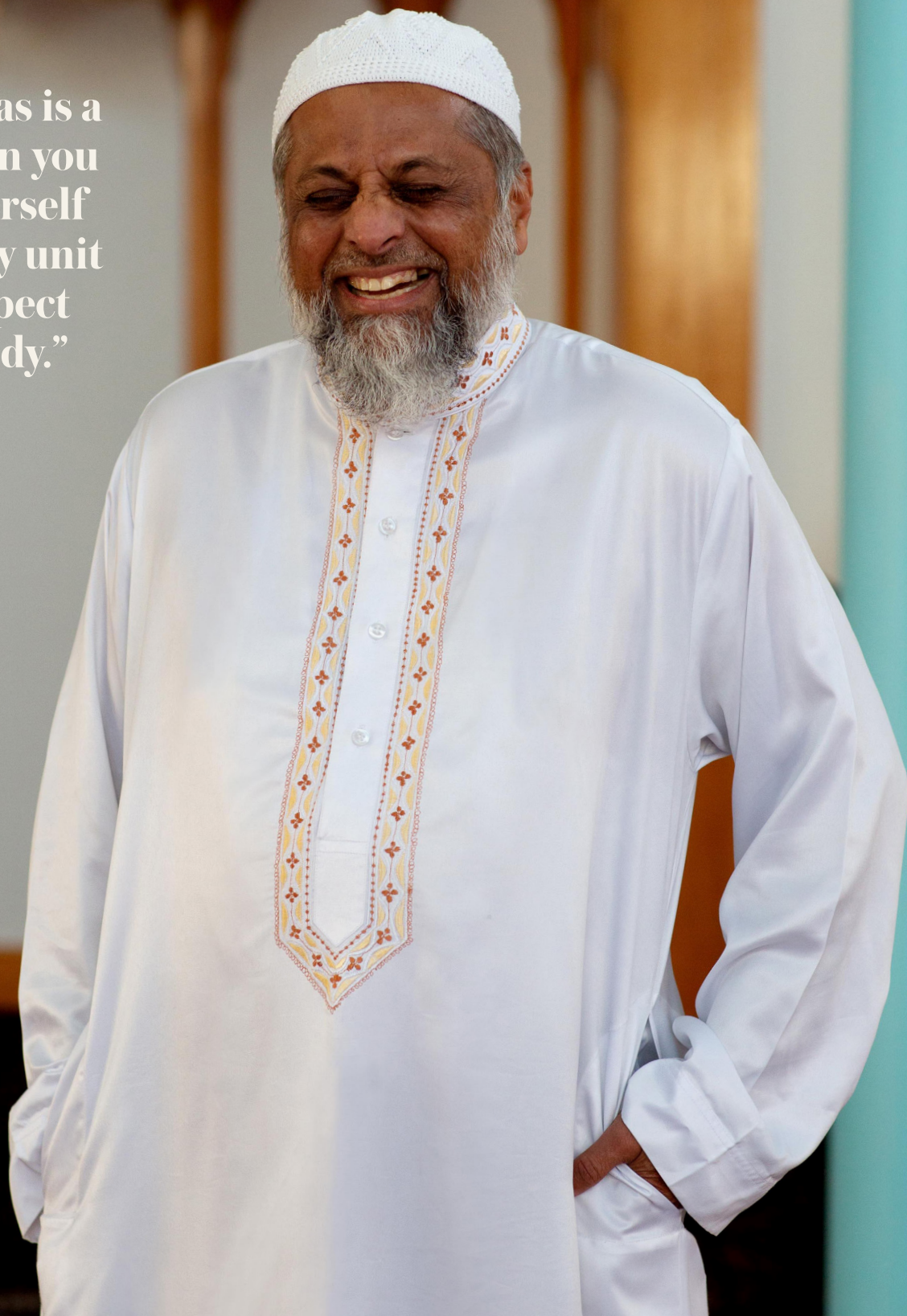
AL-MASJID AL JAMIE
MOSQUE

Firoz Patel and his family go to the beach on Christmas Day. With the sun shining down in the Southern Hemisphere it is hard to think of spending the day any other way. However, there is no giving of gifts or special dinner for Firoz and the New Zealand Muslim community he belongs to; for them, it is not their day to celebrate.

“For us it is like a family holiday, we get together as a family unit. We respect Christmas; Christmas is a Christian holiday that celebrates the birth of Jesus. It is an annual holiday of the country, so we abide by it,” he explains. “The Quran (Muslims’ holy book) respects both Jesus and Mary by sharing the stories of Jesus’ miraculous birth. Muslims believe that Jesus’ mother Mary is one of the best women of the universe.”

Firoz is a senior member of the Ponsonby (Al-Masjid Al Jamie) Mosque in Auckland, the first mosque of New Zealand, which is also the →

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furthest point from Mecca. It was built in the 1970s when property in the area was affordable; many Muslims who had immigrated to New Zealand around that time set up home in Ponsonby. Despite much of the Muslim community since moving to Mt Roskill and South Auckland, Firoz says the Ponsonby congregation is still large, with about 450-500 attending Friday prayers.

It is also the closest mosque to Auckland's city centre and they find that many tourists will visit, whether they are Muslim or not.

"Our mosque is like the United Nations; we have people from India, Fiji, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, France, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria... It's a place where people come together for prayers and when we stand up for prayer in front of almighty Allah you are all the same. You might be poor or rich, white or black, Allah just wants to know what's in your heart," says Firoz.

The Al-Masjid Al Jamie Mosque is not the only place of worship on this small suburban street. Directly across the road is the Sacred Heart Catholic Church. Firoz explains that despite their different faiths they have formed a strong relationship. The two places of worship meet twice a year to share a meal and observe the other's faith and culture. The neighbourly spirit is alive all year round, and at Christmas Firoz says the mosque offers their car park for Catholic parishioners attending mass over the holiday season.

Despite not observing Christmas Day themselves, Firoz says he and his fellow worshippers share the belief that holidays, regardless of what religion you follow, should be spent with the ones you love.

"At Christmas time so many of my Christian friends come together. We do the same, as this is the only time you can have your family members all together at one place," says Firoz. "It's a time when you bind yourself as a family unit and respect everybody." →

PA PETER TIPENE

CATHEDRAL OF ST PATRICK & ST JOSEPH

December 25 may be just one day of the year but for St Patrick's Cathedral it's such an important one that planning starts almost immediately after the last one has wrapped up.

The Dean of the Cathedral of St Patrick and St Joseph in central Auckland, Pa Peter Tipene, admits that the Cathedral does make "quite the fuss" when it comes to its Christmas décor. A large nativity scene is erected at the start of December, then Christmas trees and floral arrangements are brought in for the week prior to the big day.

Pa Peter estimates that over Christmas Day and Christmas Eve more than 8000 people attend one of the six Christmas masses held at St Patrick's. The cathedral, which seats 900, is often too small to hold the crowds that gather and the overflow spills out into the car park, where large screens are erected so everyone can take part.

In the 2013 census, Catholicism overtook Anglicanism as the biggest denomination of Christianity in New Zealand. Peter believes that the growing Catholic population is in part due to the multiculturalism of New Zealand. "It is reflected in our pews. I think here at the cathedral we have about 40 different nationalities who gather, and that's seen throughout most of Auckland too," he explains.

The congregation at St Patrick's has had a large influx of Filipino devotees, so much so that the cathedral has started its own Simbang Gabi, a Filipino Christmas tradition of nine dawn masses in the week leading up to Christmas. Being inclusive of a variety of cultures is something Pa Peter is big on. This year, he started to include Te Reo Maori in his sermons, much to the delight of the worshippers. He even had special vestments made for him by an aunt, based on the shape of a korowai (Maori cloak).

"When I wear those I get all the oohs and aahs – they say, "Pa, you look fabulous," and I say, "I know," laughs Peter.

While being involved in Christmas Eve and Christmas Day masses is special, it does mean priests' own family celebrations have to fit around them.

"My family tradition used to be lunch, but I'd always be late and just fall asleep at the table, so now we do dinner so I can nap first," jokes Peter.

"After the last Christmas mass, we lock the doors and say thank goodness that it's over!"

Pa Peter estimates more than 8000 people attend Christmas mass at St Patrick's.



VENERABLE ZHIXI

FO GUANG SHAN BUDDHIST TEMPLE NEW ZEALAND

On the outskirts of Auckland, away from the hustle and bustle of New Zealand's biggest city, sits a quiet oasis. The beautiful Fo Guang Shan temple, which opened in 2007, can be seen from a mile away.

With more than 1000 members, it is the largest Buddhist temple in New Zealand and while it may not be adorned with tinsel and there are no Christmas trees in sight, it is a picture of perfection. As you walk in towards the main shrine, you pass through an immaculately manicured garden. A totara tree stands proudly to the right as a token of the country this Buddhist community lives in and late-blooming cherry blossoms add a pop of pink. A sense of peace is immediately felt. "We don't need decorations here," says the Venerable Zhixi (pictured below right).

While the majority of New Zealanders will flock to their families to eat and be merry on Christmas Day, the Buddhist community will go about December 25 as normal. The Christian faith has specific celebration days, like Christmas Day, but every day is a celebration in the life of a Buddhist. They celebrate because they are thankful for simple things, such as the sun shining.

However the temple recognises that Christmas Day is one of the few days most people have off work and therefore see that it is important to stay open, even if it falls on a Monday when they are usually closed for maintenance. The staff uses the analogy that the temple is like a petrol station. People who feel drained often visit to relax and recharge again.

Over Christmas and Boxing Day, close to 2000 visitors of all faiths come and enjoy the tranquillity of Fo Guang Shan.

"We feel an achievement that we do something that is not for us, it is something for the community," says Nick Yoong, the temple's promotion and events officer. "The Venerable Master always says, 'Community first, self second.'"

Family is also an aspect of Christmas that the Buddhist community sees importance in. Everybody is treated as family in Buddhism, particularly in New Zealand where a sense of community is strong.

Venerable Zhixi adds, "To us everyone is important, everyone plays a different role. So recognising Christmas is not so much a crossover of Christianity and Buddhism but we are more one because we are all a community." →

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Religion

For the past 51 years, a simple red brick building on a tree-lined street in Auckland's city centre has been home to the Auckland Hebrew Congregation (AHC).

From the outside it looks unassuming but at the heart of the centre you will find a synagogue illuminated by a stunning handcrafted star chandelier.

Synagogue is a word that means three things. First and foremost it is a place of worship for the Jewish faith. Secondly, it is a place to socialise, and lastly, it is a place of learning.

Although the Jewish community in New Zealand (the southernmost Jewish community in the world) is still relatively small, it is a strong and inclusive one that has been around for 160 years. Senior Rabbi Nathanel Friedler, who leads the AHC, says, "We look after not just ourselves as a small community – we try not to be segregated but instead open our doors, homes and our hearts to every person in New Zealand and look after them."

That means that, where possible, members of his congregation strive to work in the place of their Christian colleagues on Christmas Day, in jobs where people are still required to work at that time.

"Christmas is not part of our religion but nevertheless it's our duty and obligation to support and make sure that Christmas can be celebrated in every household in New Zealand."

While Judaism does not observe Christmas traditions, it instead celebrates what is known as Hanukkah, an eight-day festival of light, which falls roughly around the same time.

Hanukkah commemorates the dedicating of the second temple in Jerusalem and, in Rabbi Friedler's words, "represents the freedom of religion".

Every day during the festival the community gathers to light another candle on the Hanukkah menorah and recite blessings.

Although the way we spend our holidays may differ, at the centre of it all remains the importance of family.

"Hanukkah is a time to spend with loved ones; we see it as one of our goals. I think this is the spirit of Christmas as well, making sure everyone is looked after, whether with gifts or with food, but ultimately it's the inner feeling that we are all connected and we should look after each other," explains Rabbi Friedler.

"We are all created in the image of God and in New Zealand we are very blessed to have a multi-cultural society. Every different religion, nation and person can express his own faith and beliefs so it is our obligation to support each other from different faiths to make sure that everyone can celebrate, whether its Christmas or Hanukkah." **AWW**

SENIOR RABBI
NATHANEL FRIEDLER

AUCKLAND
HEBREW
CONGREGATION



