

First guide to religion at work

Rights and rules are questioned as workplaces become more diverse. **Marika Hill** reports.

IS THERE a prayer room in your office? Can a Christian colleague put up an anti-abortion poster in the boardroom? Should a Buddhist expect vegetarian food from the canteen?

As workplaces grow more diverse, religion is increasingly making its presence felt - and with that comes the risk of lawsuits for discrimination.

To avoid cultural confusion, the Human Rights Commission has released the country's first guide to religion at work.

Race Relations Commissioner Joris de Bres said the document tackled issues arising from New Zealand's shifting demographics.

By 2016, 46 per cent of young New Zealanders will be of Asian, Maori and Pacific Island descent, according to the Ministry of Social Development.

"There's now quite a few people of different religions, and

can be exceptions if there is a health and safety issue at work. The *Sunday Star-Times* last week revealed Ethnic Affairs Minister Judith Collins had been sent a briefing paper which said ethnic groups were keen to push for cultural rights to be enshrined in legislation."

It said a desire for multicultural policy, including legislation to enshrine rights, was gaining currency within ethnic communities.

Clashes between religious rights and workplace rules are already happening. Last year, security company First Security was forced to apologise after an uproar over banning employees wearing turbans.

Victoria University religious studies professor Paul Morris said religious issues would increase in workplaces.

"Not only are there increasing

that raises some questions in the workplace," de Bres said. "It could be what you eat or whether there is a prayer room."

The Human Rights Commission

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sion received 55 complaints last year in relation to religious discrimination, of which 16 were employment related.

Islam and Christianity were the religions most commonly cited in the complaints. It is illegal to discriminate on the basis of religion, although there

SOME COMMON QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Questions of religion raised with the Human Rights Commission

Q: I am a Sikh. Can I wear my turban or headscarf at work?

A: This requires the agreement of your employer, but you can reasonably expect it to be agreed to.

Q: Can I put an anti-abortion poster up at the office?

A: Some companies have specific policies. If in doubt, discuss with your employer before displaying controversial material.

Q: Can I wear a cross necklace at work?

A: You must comply with company guidelines. If there are no rules, you should be able to wear the necklace, depending on safety concerns and prominence.

Q: My company has a prayer session every morning. Can I refuse to attend?

A: This needs to be agreed in your employment agreement when you're hired.

Q: I am a Seventh Day Adventist. Can I refuse to work Saturdays (holy day)?

A: This needs to be agreed in your employment agreement when you're hired.

Q: My religion forbids me handling pork or bacon. Can I refuse to handle these products?

A: Make your manager aware of this requirement when you are hired.

Q: Yes. Prayer cannot be compulsory.

Q: As an Orthodox Jew, I must have seven days off for mourning. Can I be off work for this period?

A: It depends on your employer's leave provision. You may need to request annual leave or leave without pay.

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There are real issues that do arise in the New Zealand workplace. For many employers, they just don't know the answers.

With a little bit of education and foresight we shouldn't have Human Rights Commission complaints or tribunal issues.

The aim in the report was to basically be sensible.

He disputed extra legislation was needed. "It's a two-way exchange between employer and employee, and it's about being reasonable. That's why we were more interested in a guide than changing legislation."

De Bres and Morris agreed New Zealand had a good tradition of accepting religious differences.

Business NZ chief executive Phil O'Reilly said it came down to common sense. "Is there a place for religious worship in the workplace? Potentially."

He said it was OK within reason for an employee to take a few minutes off to pray in a lunch break or down-time.

The best approach was for workers to talk with their boss early on to avoid conflict later.

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