



## Interview with Dr. Kevin Clements, Director, Toda Peace Institute

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### **The attack on a Mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand in March of this year sent shockwaves around the world.**

Many expressed astonishment that such a tragedy could occur in peace-loving New Zealand. Most of the fifty-one victims who lost their lives in the attack were followers of Islam who had immigrated to New Zealand in search of a peaceful life.

This incident made us search our souls to see if we harbored any underlying feelings of anti-immigrant discrimination or prejudice, or if we had been silent bystanders while immigrants were being discriminated against.

Our youthful prime minister Jacinda Ardern took immediate action to strengthen our gun laws and called upon the people of New Zealand to unite instead of seeking violent revenge.

Students at Otago University, where I teach, created “A SAFE PLACE” poster in Arabic and English. This was an invitation to everyone to think about the importance of developing safe and peaceful places where everyone could celebrate their differences and commonalities.

Along similar lines my wife, Valerie, and I conducted a workshop aimed at helping kindergarten teachers treat children of all ethnicities and beliefs with respect so that teachers at all levels of the education system could avoid bias and prejudice. In all this work it is important to avoid being passive bystanders when discrimination is occurring. I had to put this into practice, here in Dunedin, last year, when some violent young men in a car were verbally harassing an Islamic woman, I quietly stepped between them to protect her.



*Dr. Kevin Clements*

In all these different ways, we in New Zealand are beginning to build a culture of peace and a society in which even the most minor form of discrimination is not tolerated.

### **The attack raised many questions about the role of social media, too.**

Another shocking aspect of the March 15th attack was that the perpetrator live-streamed a video of himself shooting his victims.

Violent, extremist information is rampant on social



media, and many young people are influenced by it. We need to help them learn to question such media instead of just accepting it uncritically— to stop and think carefully about it and interrogate it against their own values, ethics, and beliefs.

The media often create negative images of others. This is how discrimination begins. But when we look at people as individuals worthy of deep respect, we can see their own uniqueness and how this enriches our own lives.

**Dr. Elise Boulding, who was a mentor for you in your academic career, was an advocate of the principle of a culture of peace.**

Dr. Boulding believed that the role of women is very important in building peace, because women know that their security lies in the quality of their relationships with others. Developing and maintaining peaceful relations with others is the way to guaranteeing everyone’s safety and security. Security in the true sense, whether in the home, in relationships with friends, or in the workplace, is only possible through our connections with others. Understanding this and putting it into practice is critical to building a culture of peace.

Because this generation of young people do not have direct or indirect knowledge of the devastating nature of war, they labor under the delusion that reliance on military force and other forms of “hard power” is the way to protect their security.

Elise described a culture of peace as a culture of listening. Enabling people in conflict to listen to each other and to resolve their differences through dialogue requires an environment in which both sides feel secure enough to express themselves freely and frankly.

As one of Elise’s successors, I am constantly striving to create ripe conditions for conversation and dialogue so that people can express themselves openly in safe spaces.

**What do we need to do to build peace?**

Above all, we must learn to trust one another. This begins with a radical respect for all who pass our way. People can sense if we fear or mistrust them. By the same token, they also intuit love and respect as well. Creating a culture of peace is done by changing fear and hate into love, intolerance into compassion, and pessimism into hope. Focusing on these qualities will result in a transformation of all our interpersonal, social and political relationships.

I have engaged in inspiring dialogues with SGI President Ikeda, which have been published. I am deeply sympathetic to his faith and compassion for humanity that underlies his peace activism.

My father was also a peace activist for his entire life. Just before he died, my daughter asked him the secret to living a happy life. His response was that we need love, courage, and hope—and especially courage. It takes courage just to live out your life, he said, courage to foster others, and courage to stand up in opposition to power when it is moving in the wrong direction.

Looking at the history of the Soka Gakkai, President Makiguchi and President Toda were able to stand up to Japan’s militaristic government because they had the courage to remain true to their beliefs.

Dr. Boulding said that to build a culture of peace, we must imagine the kind of world we wish to create—a world where all people are equal, a world without wars or weapons. To make that a reality, the people must take action rooted in an awareness of being global citizens. Each individual who adopts a culture of peace as their way of life is playing a leading role in building peace. ■