



# Learning from Democracy's Journey

"Learning from Democracy's Journey" was the theme of the third dialogue on "Making democracy real" held at Asia Plateau, the IofC conference and training centre, Panchgani, India, 10-14 January.

accountability, the absence of which provoked the cries for change in the first place?"

142 people from 34 countries met to study and ponder these far-reaching questions. No-one imagined

come Than Than Nu, daughter of the country's last democratic prime minister ousted by the military regime in 1962, now leading the Democratic Party, and Al-Haj U Aye Lwin, chief convenor of the Islamic Centre.

The South Sudan delegation was unable to travel to India because of the outbreak of political violence at home. Meanwhile IofC International has stated its readiness to continue supporting the peace efforts in that country (See: [www.iofc.org/reconciliation-south-sudan](http://www.iofc.org/reconciliation-south-sudan)). Members of the South Sudanese diaspora who attended the dialogue, including some living in Australia, are working to build reconciliation starting in their overseas communities.

A highlight of the four-day dialogue was the Remembrance walk in the grounds of Asia Plateau, to remember the many innocent victims of war and violence, "a symbol of the dialogue's collective resolve to unite the world in harmony". The large group sang together as they walked.

During the walk Rajmohan Gandhi, the founder of Asia Plateau, invited Pakistani writer Salman Rashid, who the previous night had shared a story of tragedy and forgiveness, to plant a tree which would stand as a tangible symbol of hope and commitment towards reconciliation between India and Pakistan and in the world at large. Then he invited MDR participants to add soil and water to the plant in dedication to a cause, organisation or individual.

Many came forward with hope for peace and reconciliation in war torn countries, amongst them South Sudan, Syria, Lebanon, Central African Republic and Somalia.

Visit the website [www.makingdemocracyreal.org](http://www.makingdemocracyreal.org) for more detailed information. A full report is in preparation.



Participants at the Making Democracy Real Dialogue walk in remembrance of innocent victims of violence around the world (photo: Mike Brown)

"After oppression, struggle. After struggle, victory. After victory, disappointment or even disillusionment...", "the invitation began. "In recent years, too many countries have experienced this sequence of toil, thrill, and tears. What went wrong? Can we get it right? Are there common lessons?..."

- » If a struggle for democracy brings opponents together, why does triumph so often bring disintegration?
- » Is it possible to keep competing egos out of debates on competing agendas, and enable bitterly divided groups to dialogue?
- » What will prevent the battle-scarred from becoming scandal-tainted?...
- » What can we learn from one another about protecting and lifting the weak and vulnerable?
- » can our governing institutions be supplied with integrity in leadership, transparency, and

they could be easily or quickly resolved. A senior African participant, Luc Gnacadja, former head of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, said in an interview about Asia Plateau and the IC Centre for Governance:

"The programme (at Asia Plateau) has the power to transform people, which can therefore transform their communities and even their nation... I look forward to asking other people to come to this centre. When it began in 1968 there was only one tree. Now look at the thousands of trees here. So the context, the landscape and the teaching are one. I think it makes sense.... Governance is almost the foundation of transformation for communities and nations..."

### Set-backs

Many participants were from countries that have suffered struggles and set-backs on the road towards democracy. From Myanmar had

## The spark of inner governance

One of the 12 Australians at the “Making Democracy Real” Dialogue was Melbourne teacher **Margaret Hepworth**, who describes her experience:

“Go to India... “ It was a voice that spoke to me in that early morning ethereal state between sleeping and waking. Coincidental meetings kept pushing me towards India, and in January I found myself sitting in the Asia Plateau auditorium, surrounded by a buzzing international crowd.

Making democracy real is no mean goal! Panels of Dialogue Initiators provoked us to think more deeply about the practicalities of ethical leadership, marginalisation, the role of youth, new technologies.

There is a difference between the theory of democracy and the way it has been put into practice. One brave speaker noted that, when it came to environmental degradation, “We were saying we were being democratic but in actual fact we were acting dictatorially... Nature does not rush. We should not rush when it comes to thinking about how and when to extract resources.”

### Two themes

For me, two themes kept recurring. The first: “I see the solution in education.” The second concerned the role of women: “When you empower women, you empower a nation. A true democracy cannot be a Himocracy. Equality of the sexes is required for a nation to successfully move forward.”

An Ethics in Governance workshop allowed further teasing out of the learnings of “MDR” - life balance, inner

governance, anti-corruption... The learning was adaptable for the varied nations whence we had come.

The issue of corruption made me really think. We learnt of a Clean Perception Index. “Is there corruption permissiveness in your country?” And then it got personal! “Are you corrupted? Are you corruptible?” Proud thoughts ran through my head. I’ve never taken a bribe under the table! But suddenly the questions altered in context. “Would you evade paying for public transport if you could get away with it? Would you try to pay less tax if you could get away with it?” And on. Could they see me sinking lower in my chair? I prayed they wouldn’t ask us each directly to own up to misdemeanours of our past. Inner Governance...hmmmm... I’d better work on that one.

### Connectedness

In India I have learnt more about the connectedness of all things. Down in the village of Panchgani my friends and I took some time out answering an urgent appeal - shopping! “We are helping the locals,” we justified our materialistic splurge. Suddenly a woman chased after me, waving money in my face. “You gave me too much,” she said. “Oh, thank you. No, please keep it,” I graciously replied. But this local villager persisted, insisting I take back the over-payment. And there it is, right there, as this woman places the notes in the palm of my hand, in this most simple of honest gestures, the spark of inner governance transferring from one hand to another, from one mind to another.

## For peacebuilders:

**Caux Scholars Program 2014**  
*Initiatives of Change Conference*  
*Centre, Caux, Switzerland, 20 July-14 August 2014*

The Caux Scholars Program (CSP) is a selective one-month summer academic institute that equips leaders between the ages of 21 and 35 from around the world with perspectives and skills needed to make a significant contribution to global peacebuilding.

It gives students a unique opportunity to meet politicians, diplomats, business people, trade unionists, and other leaders from around the world, many with firsthand experience of conflict and peacebuilding. In addition, the group spends a day in Geneva visiting non-governmental agencies and United Nations.

During the month, scholars participate in international conferences and put their learning into practice by offering workshops, making presentations, and assisting with international groups visiting Caux.

**Participation:** Limited to 20 students. Program Fees: US \$3400 (covers tuition, meals, lodging)

**Application deadline:** February 28, 2014. More information at: [www.us.iofc.org/caux-scholars-program-iofc/](http://www.us.iofc.org/caux-scholars-program-iofc/)

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## South Sudanese women in South Australian Peace Circles



With rising tension in South Sudan and the outbreak of inter tribal violence in December, two Creators of Peace Circles were held in Adelaide at the request of women from the South Sudanese diaspora.

The first South Sudanese woman to be ordained in the Uniting Church, SA, had asked for these programmes to assist her in her work - building bridges

*Adelaide Creators of Peace: Australia and South Sudan. Back row l-r: Jean, Susan, Magadalane, Rajina, Ajok, Mary, Helen. Front row l-r: Nyalueth, Rose, Lyn.*





Over the Australia Day weekend a Life Matters Workshop was conducted at Armagh. 22 people from 13 national backgrounds and four major faith traditions participated. Some of the team of helpers had earlier participated in Life Matters Courses.

James McIvor, senior manager of the Department of Human Services in Outer Gippsland, gave a keynote speech on knowing who we are and discovering our direction in life.

Juggling balls and opera singing were features of a high-class entertainment night. Also on the program were panel presentations, story-sharing, creative workshops and sessions exploring change and forgiveness.

Dr Maithri Goonetilleke, a doctor leading a team combating the AIDS epidemic in Swaziland, spoke about the importance of aligning ourselves and surrendering to a Divine sense of purpose. His lived-out commitment was a challenge to us all.

Towards the end of the session, following a time of inner reflection, some participants spoke about their own decisions and initiatives.

“At 11.56pm last Saturday night I decided to forgive my enemy (of ten years). And I feel like I’ve been born again.”

#### To clear hearts

“The Life Matters experience helped me realise how reflection is a great way for people to clear their hearts and thoughts. In the past I was involved with some criminal activities with drugs. My sharing group advised me on ways of saying sorry. I look forward to writing letters of apology in my quest for serenity.”

“Hearing the stories of people from so many backgrounds and challenges (at the workshop) sent the message to ‘just get on with it’. I have been following the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre for a while on Facebook but will get more actively involved and go to an information

session to see where I can help out.”

“As a person very involved with youth, it became clearer how crucial my role is in the lives of the young people. However I was struggling with the relationship with my younger brother. I was able to find the courage to contact him and make a new beginning.”

“It was a weekend filled with self-reflection, introspection and discussion and I was constantly surrounded by like-minded people. This led me to begin considering my spirituality which I had previously ignored. I’ve made five decisions which I will commit to and the most important is to stay spiritually connected. My last few days have started with a quiet time – and I can already feel the improvement!”

The real Life Matters begins when we get back to our homes, universities and work-places. So watch this space for further developments!

*Rob Wood*

between the various South Sudanese state and ethnic groups now living in Adelaide. One group told how they had been praying for two years to find ways towards reconciliation and connection between them. “Perhaps the Peace Circles will show us how to be peace builders in our community”.

#### Not just victims

As news trickled through of fresh fighting in South Sudan each of the women taking part experienced the fear and anxiety of lack of news from family members, or the sadness of

hearing of family deaths. The Circles brought us closer together as we experienced the pain of women who carry the scars of trauma but who are also determined to be not just victims but survivors who have willing hearts for peace and justice with compassion and hope.

“Our eyes are open – the Peace Circle has opened my heart, my vision. For ten years I did nothing but now I will do something for my family, my community,” one said. “As I care for others, I will care for my country.”

“Peace is freedom” another said as we tried to unwrap the complexities of what the word Peace really means. “It means talking with the other even if it is hard or you are scared – it means respecting everyone.”

Plans are underway for more Peace Circles for this diaspora community in 2014 and for further workshops which could help develop skills in mediation and practical peace building.

*Helen Mills*

## Bob Lawler: what you saw was what you got



The late Bob Lawler

Bob Lawler, who died in December, and his wife of 71 years, Thora, raised a family of eight - if you don't count various fosterings and times of caring for other children. They were of the local district and built community naturally.

Bob had been a signalman in the Australian Army in World War II, serving in North Africa, Greece, Crete and the Middle East. As a child of the great depression he had scant opportunity for formal education to round out his sharp mind. First he was a self-taught builder, when he and his younger brother, Dick, became known as the "twice brothers" because they had to do everything twice before they got it right. In 1962 he started the Brisbane Hire Service, a family and friends company of which he was Managing Director. The business still operates.

In the late 1960s Bob encountered MRA (now IofC). As a practical man he found great value in the idea that you could listen for clear direction from God or the inner voice.

He had a natural integrity in that what you saw of him was what you got. Agendas could be quite painfully raised but never were they hidden.

The concepts of a complete honesty and love, however, led him to operate differently and tackle issues of division in the family and integrity in his industry in an effective way. He had an ability not to wallow in hurt and a way of seeking forgiveness when he had hurt others.

Ron Lawler

## Sydneysiders reflect on forgiveness

The DVD "Beyond Forgiving" tells the powerful story of reconciliation between a white Christian South African woman and a black atheist who during the fight against Apartheid gave the command that led to her daughter's death.

It provoked deep responses in a group of 50 people in Sydney who viewed it over two weekends. How do you forgive, given the awful irreversibility of a lost life?

A few said later in private conversation that they could not have forgiven. Some identified the inner spiritual journey which has to be walked alone, away from meetings and conferences, the process of letting go or surrender, "letting go and letting God". It was suggested that forgiveness requires setting

boundaries - you cannot forgive those who you allow to continue trespassing into your life. Others saw the reconciliation in the context of South African history. It was observed that the two people each found they had demonised the other.

At the second meeting discussion also explored applications to other nations, in particular Australia, and the need to pursue our own unfinished national journey of truth and reconciliation, including addressing massacres that took place across Australia.

In the words of African-American Maya Angelou: "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be un-lived, but if faced with courage need not be lived again."

Graeme Cordiner

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## The Spiritual Vision of Frank Buchman

by Philip Boobbyer (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013)

I am now reading this un-put-downable book which explains the thinking of the man who "discovered" [his word] the Oxford Group/MRA/IofC approach. Some quotes:

*Philosophy and faith:* "Buchman wanted to create an environment where people from different traditions could listen to God without the threat of proselytism."

"[He said] the Oxford Group was not itself a faith but a 'fire through all the faiths' and that it never took people 'from faith to faith'."

"He 'never tried to convert me...he just had faith in the best of me'."

"Buchman's readiness to live with paradoxes."

*Working with people:* "His optimism was tempered by a strong dose of realism in dealing with people."

"Another aspect of Buchman's

approach to personal work was his directness. 'Some of you have never graduated from the school of collision. You never collide'."

*Buchman's approach to public affairs...* "involved encouraging the finest instincts in individuals rather than campaigning on particular policy issues."

*The practice of the Quiet Time:* "Buchman brought his concerns to God and then left space within a prayerful atmosphere for creative thinking."

"Luminous thoughts in a large background of regular prayer."

Order from your local library or buy through [grosvenor.books@au.iofc.org](mailto:grosvenor.books@au.iofc.org) or the Book Depository on line.

Rosemary Thwaites

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