



## The call that is transformational

In February Mohan Bhagwandas from Melbourne was in Colombia for a meeting of IofC's International Council. Before and after their 'board' meeting, the 11 Council members were joined the "Encuentro of the Americas" (Meeting of the Americas) with 65 people from South and North America; and they travelled in twos and threes connecting with IofC teams in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Colombia and Mexico. Mohan found himself impressed by "the boundless energy" of the Brazilians, "even when the thermometer gets to 48". One quiet morning overlooking in Rio de Janeiro, he connected with a different energy:

I spent 20 minutes alone at the feet of the statue of Christ the Redeemer, as he looks out at 14 million people of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil.

I had tried to go up the mountain the previous day but the crowds were huge, so I came back the next morning at 7.30 am and was the first to go up the mountain, with my taxi driver.

Standing there feeling small like an ant, next to this giant concrete and stone statue, it actually felt very alive, very human. Then these words came to my mind: "Come unto Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

These were very powerful words for me, as I looked down at the multi-million dollar houses of the rich and the "favelas" (urban slums) of the

poor, from where I was standing. As I thought of my own life, I was reminded of the temptation of Christ – and of my own temptation to retreat from the true purpose of my life. There I stood so humbled, almost nothing.

I had waited a life-time for this day, 6 February 2014. Never thought that this dream can come true and that I could arrive at the top of the mountain and be alone with Christ the Redeemer.

A cool breeze wafted on my face; the most spectacular view before me. It was magic, it was emotional, it was transformational.

I recalled that we are all called to rise above our life as it is and to heed the call to do extraordinary things.



Mohan at the foot of Christ the Redeemer

I don't think I would be here working for healing and transformation in the world without that call.

This call gets dulled by our very own jargon and desire to find a rationale for what we do. In reality, I was reminded by this imposing figure that there is only one rationale – it is our inner calling.

Thank you Christ the Redeemer!

### About the International Council:

Initiatives of Change Australia is one of 44 national autonomous bodies that together form Initiatives of Change (IofC) International, an UN-recognised non-governmental organization registered in Switzerland. It is led by the 11 member International Council, elected by a Global Assembly of IofC representatives on a four-year rotational basis.

Their meeting in Colombia reviewed initiatives and programmes around the world, reflected on the results of a "Network Assessment" involving 350 respondents from 102 different teams, and defined three current priorities for their leadership of the international network:

- » Nurture the spiritual well-being of the movement;
- » Facilitate networking and capacity-building;

» Provide strategic direction and focus.

Their decisions build on a Strategic Plan 2013-2015 (available at [www.iofc.org/strategic-plan](http://www.iofc.org/strategic-plan)) and the Common Actions agreed to at the Global Assembly in 2012. Any questions can be directed to Mohan Bhagwandas [mohanb@optusnet.com.au](mailto:mohanb@optusnet.com.au)

# Creators of Peace Circles in Sydney University



CoP volunteer Joyce Fraser dialogues with a participant at Sydney's Afri-Fest. Credit: Shoshana Faire



Barbara Perry, State Member of Parliament for Auburn [left], receives Benay Aykin, Yvonne Collier, Ngan Le, Joyce Fraser, Asma Farooqui, and Trish Mc Donald-Harrison. Credit: Shafaq Jaffery

For the first time as part of a university programme, post-graduate students and academic staff of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at Sydney University, participated in a Creators of Peace Circle. It was held in early March in the Posters of Peace Gallery at the Centre where we were surrounded by the faces of well-known peace-makers and posters of major peace events.

Eight women and one man participated, from Afghanistan, Kenya, Nepal, Philippines, Taiwan and Australia. Shoshana Faire and Patricia Garcia facilitated the circle, which was at the invitation of Dr Wendy Lambourne, the Centre's Deputy Director.

This was a very different experience from what these participants have experienced so far in their university

peace studies, as their feedback indicated:

"Much more personal and real."

"We had the opportunity to resolve our own issues and look at practising inner peace."

"We experienced how to develop deep trust and connection."

"The circle brought together the most extraordinary group I have encountered in a long time. Their stories either made you want to cheer, gasp in awe or cry."

"My whole life, I've been told I'm a bad listener and, as a journalist, that's a very bad thing to be. But at this peace circle we had fun exercises to practise better listening and we learned why that was so important. The secure atmosphere allowed me to see and admit to what I was doing

that made me such an ineffective listener. It really opened my eyes! I will bring the lessons and inspiration from those precious two days with me for the rest of my life. I am hoping now to not just be a better journalist but to be a better daughter, sister, partner or friend to everyone around me."

"For me personally many things that I read about – cyclones, wars, political suppression, forced marriage, indoctrination at school, walking miles barefoot to school – came alive as people's personal life stories unfolded. Experiencing the real person in each other was at the core."

*By Shoshana Faire, International Coordinator, Creators of Peace*

## Circles thinking outside the square

The movement of Creators of Peace is growing in several Australian cities, as well as in 41 countries overseas. A number of reports:

*Shoshana Faire and Tanya Fox, Sydney:* Monthly regional gatherings are taking place in North, South, East and West Sydney for those who have been in a CoP Circle. Different "action groups" have formed to work on communications and on new opportunities for these Circles to form. A team of six women manned a Creators of Peace stall with publicity material at the AfriCultures Festival (see photo top left).

*Ngan Le, Sydney:* Creators of Peace

supported International Women's Day Event in the NSW Parliament House convened by the Pakistan Australia Association (see photo top right). The event brought various groups together with State Members of Parliament, in order to raise awareness of domestic violence against both women and men, and to call for joint action to prevent such violence in all communities.

*Margaret Hepworth, Melbourne:* In March 35 women met at the Armagh centre for a follow-up and information session with a number saying they would like to join a Peace Circle and others wanting to learn to facilitate them. Some felt the circles might

help build bridges in Melbourne communities where there are ethnic and cultural tensions.

*Helen Mills, Adelaide:* An IofC video, *Beyond Forgiving*, was shown at a follow-up meeting of women who had completed Creators of Peace Circles, several of them from the South Sudanese refugee community. The video, which documents a powerful story of reconciliation from South Africa, provoked thoughtful discussion with its questions, such as: "How does one move from victimhood to survivor to wounded healer?"

Visier welcomes a South Sudanese refugee.  
Credit: Alastair Pritchard

## An Invitation: Welcome to my place



In 1996 I came with my wife and three young children to Australia from Nagaland, a violence-torn region of North-East India and North-West Burma. As a boy I lived in the jungle for three years with my family, along with thousands of people internally-displaced because of the fighting. We starved, living under trees, eating snakes and monkeys.

We were so grateful to our Australian friends from Initiatives of Change who helped us to settle down, first at the Armagh, the IofC centre in Melbourne, then later when we were able to put money down for our own home. Aboriginal elder Reg Blow welcomed us with a smoking ceremony. And an elder of the Wurundjeri people gave us a letter inviting us “to stay in Australia as long as you like”. We were greatly honoured.

At the same time we deeply missed home. Loneliness and facing the trauma of growing up in conflict were hard to bear. I had nightmares for seven years.

When we moved into our new home we were welcomed by Barbara, a friendly neighbour who brought food and helped us unload. The same night a brick was thrown through our front

window by someone objecting to our race. So which Australia do I choose? Barbara or the brick thrower? We chose both, because both are realities.

After gaining a further degree I worked for ten years with the National Council of Churches as an education and advocacy officer on behalf of refugees and displaced persons. But in 2013 I had a clear direction from God that it was time to move on. Only a few months later World Vision came up with this idea of “Welcome to My Place”. I knew I was the right person to take on the challenge. I was selected by World Vision as Project Officer.

Welcome to My Place aims to cultivate generous, open-hearted hospitality towards refugees and asylum seekers among Australian churches, Christians and community groups.

The current debate on asylum seekers and refugees is far from welcoming. In fact it has divided the nation. For boat people, anger and shock at the treatment they receive are compounded by their own stories of trauma fleeing conflicts and wars in their countries of origin, living in refugee camps and detention centres, and risking their lives in boats to reach Australia. These stories and

experiences have created the need for Welcome to My Place.

By inviting asylum seekers and refugees to dinner, particularly during Refugee Week (15-21 June), we hope to shift current attitudes and create understanding through shared relationships and experiences. It is a response to Jesus’ saying: “For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home.”

Initiatives of Change became actively engaged with Welcome to My Place through assisting me in training sessions. So far three IofC volunteers – my wife, Pari, in Melbourne, Jean Brown in Adelaide and Trish McDonald-Harrison in Sydney – have joined as resource people to facilitate training for church leaders in cross-cultural information and how to organise Welcome to My Place dinners. Their contribution is greatly appreciated by my colleagues at World Vision.

For details, see: [www.welcometomyplace.org.au](http://www.welcometomyplace.org.au).

*by Visier Sanyü, Project Officer,  
World Vision*

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## Four men and a boat

A Newsbriefs reader drew attention to an article by Carolyn Webb in *The Age*, 21 March, describing how Tri Nguyen is walking from Melbourne to Canberra towing a symbolic small wooden boat which he will present to Parliament.

Nguyen remembers the kindness shown to him and his family when they arrived in Melbourne in 1982, after fleeing for their lives

by boat from Vietnam and horrific experiences of detention in Malaysia. “We were traumatised and had a really rough journey but were just immersed in love and hospitality.” A group from a suburban Melbourne church helped bring his mother and two younger brothers to Australia eight years later.

Mr Nguyen says we need “to change the national conversation

about asylum seekers”, which is too negative. “The idea is that we are at our best when we show compassion and work for justice for those who are oppressed,” Mr Nguyen says. “That’s the Australia that’s at its best. I hope in 30 years’ time, we have refugees wanting to say thank you rather than us wanting to say sorry.”

# 'I was hit in the face with the realisation...'



Kirsty Argento

**Kirsty Argento, an undergraduate student of international relations at RMIT, was one of the 22 taking part in the Life Matters Workshop during January in Melbourne (see Newsbriefs, February 2014). She describes her discoveries:**

When I stumbled across Initiatives of Change on the internet, I couldn't believe what I saw.

For a long time, whilst studying International Relations, I kept thinking that we are not truly addressing the root causes of conflict or how best to rebuild nations after war. Sure, we looked at specific triggers that lead to conflict such as famines, oppression, religious and ethnic divides, illegal trade and corruption. But we never addressed the fact that, at the bottom of all this, it was the way humans behave -- making wrong decisions based on fear, anger, pain and greed -- that has led us down paths of violence and destruction.

So when I came into contact with IofC I was relieved to find a place where these ideas were not only welcomed but an attempt was being made to address these basic needs in action for many years.

I knew then that I wanted to do an internship within this organisation, so that I could learn how to incorporate my educational and spiritual sides together, to help achieve these ideas about transforming individuals into more peaceful beings.

This brings me to the Life Matters Workshop and how it changed my life. I knew the world needed to change through each individual's own transformation. But I had no idea

where or how to start on myself. Over the four days with Life Matters I was hit in the face with the realisation that everything you need to change comes from within, and, as long as you have the courage to take on that responsibility, you can do it. The Workshop gave everyone many tools (to name just a few): how to listen to inner guidance and to trust it, how to rebuild broken relationships, how to heal the past, the importance of story sharing and communicating, and finding a life direction that gives back to society.

At a reunion six weeks after the Workshop, it was inspiring to see that many people had made important steps forward in living the Life Matters vision. One man had decided to change his degree and to study

Social Work instead. Another had decided to re-take up his passion for singing and, through lessons in the last six weeks, is finally perfecting his technique. Another man is beginning to get involved with Diaspora Lanka (an NGO working from Australia to restore one area of Sri Lanka after the war). Two women have been courageous enough to rebuild failing relationships through healing past painful experiences. And I have taken up mentoring a Congolese teenager for the next three months.

Whilst change is not an easy path, we participants are grateful we have been made aware of our power to transform our lives to achieve something positive in the world.

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## Senate passes resolution for more support of South Sudan

**For the past two years or more members of the South Sudanese diaspora – those who had to flee their country because of war, often at a young age – have been meeting regularly at Armagh, the IofC Australia-Pacific centre in Melbourne.**

Using IofC's principle that "change starts with each one of us", they have worked through dialogue to build trust among their communities in Melbourne and in South Sudan where many of them have families and continuing involvements.

Identifying themselves as the South Sudan Australia Peace Initiative, they have drawn together community leaders of various ethnic groups, some of whom are in conflict in their homeland, in an effort to speak with one voice in the face of the current

fighting. And they have interacted with a number of political and civic leaders, the media and others.

As a result of these meetings, Nyok Gor, co-founder of the group, reports that Senator Christine Milne, Leader of the Greens, moved a motion in the Senate during March, calling for the Australian government to give stronger support and more resources for the UN "to bring peace and stability to South Sudan" and to "provide immediate humanitarian assistance to those at most serious risk". It also calls for government support to resource "projects in Australia that address divisions in the South Sudanese Australian community and promote harmony and unity". See <http://goo.gl/tMfmyr>

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