

Who is my neighbour?

Being good neighbours is the bedrock of successful communities. Jim Coulter reflects on his experiences of neighbouring in a changing world.

It was the question that prompted the 'good Samaritan story'. While it may not be the theme that will dominate the coming election period it may be the 'biggie' of the next decade. 'Who is my neighbour?' in the World War 2 period was a relatively uncomplicated question with 98% of Australia's population being of Anglo-Celtic background.

Today's Australia, now home to a people who have come from some 160 nations, is both more challenging and more relevant. Could we be a nation that is a hope-giving demonstration of how people from different religions, cultures and colours can enjoy living together?

This is more likely to happen if we are real about the need to change. First in a more fundamental facing of how badly we got it wrong in our neighbouring with those who had long been in Australia when we first arrived. And secondly, how our neighbours in the Pacific and to our North regard us. The links, be they of aid or minerals, are mainly material.

Perhaps this is a time for each of us to go a bit deeper with our own neighbours. My wife and I live in one of the so-called 'leafy suburbs' of Melbourne. Sam, who sells us our fruit and vegies, does not. When he decided to visit Lebanon, home of his parents, for the first time, he had certain fears. He was taking his wife, Melinda, their children and his mother at a time when the headlines were alarming. When I told him we would pray for them he took me by both arms and with an intense look in his dark brown eyes said: 'You actually mean that?'

On their return we had them to our home for a meal. Not without a slight hiccup. We vaguely thought that chicken was a good international dish. But it was only shortly before they came that we realised it was not 'halal', so a hasty and slightly more expensive switch to fish was made! It was a great success and it was not long after we were invited to their home for a delicious meal of many courses.



Neighbours talking

PHOTO: TIM BARR

Sam, we found, with his brothers from the market, ran a youth group to provide positive alternatives to gangs for the Lebanese boys of the Western suburbs. He was on an interfaith committee which included a rabbi, a Monsignor and a bishop. At a more recent meal with Sam and Melinda we showed them the DVD, *The Imam and the Pastor*. Sam excitedly interrupted the screening. First to proclaim: 'This is it; they've got it right!' and then: 'I want a copy. How much?' Already he has given it to his teenage daughters to show at their school which is involved with interfaith programmes with other faith-based schools.

Perhaps it will be all our 'Sam and Melindas' who will be our passport to our international neighbours.

Resilience workshop

An Initiatives of Change team of eight plus were guests at the Australian International Academy in Melbourne on 14th and 15th May to give a 'Discover the Other' workshop on 'Resilience' to Year 9 students. The Academy is Australia's oldest and Melbourne's

largest Islamic school.

'Resilience' is a wonderful word: the ability for something to be bent, compressed or stressed, and to return to its original form. Our lives are inevitably all of these things at different times, so how do we be true to our original form: that which we were made to be?

The workshops focused on just this. Day 1 concentrated on 'looking in' – what are my values, my peers values, the world's values? What happens when my values aren't the same as yours? What happens when there is a negative consequence to standing up for my values? The students confronted these questions through puppetry, talking, acting and games.

Day 2 was spent 'looking out'. The students saw *The Imam and the Pastor*, an inspirational documentary set in Nigeria. Through two people's relationship, it shows true values in action, building peace between Muslims and Christians. Following this, genuine listening and relationships were key areas addressed. Listening exercises were remarkably successful, with difficulty ending conversations at the end of the session!

The students were great participants and the school wonderful hosts. The team certainly enjoyed the challenge and joy of facilitating the program. The second day concluded with some action plans to work toward before the follow-up workshop in July. Some of them include: bring a Jew to school, step out of my comfort zone and change the world! Fabulous goals to work towards: we look forward to seeing their progress when we return.

Fiona Sinclair



Participants in the workshop

PHOTO: ROB WOOD



David Vincent

Hope for the future through the pain of the past

The following is an interview between Bek Dutton and David Vincent, one of the founders of 'Sudanese Youth for Reconciliation and Hope'.

'I never thought this would happen – young people from Southern and Northern Sudan sitting down at the same table and sharing about the past.'



What was the situation like when you left Sudan?

The situation in my country was at its worst until peace was signed between the North and South. However, the Darfur is getting worse daily. We will not enjoy peace until every corner of Sudan is calm and there is no more death or sound of guns.

Did your family come with you to Australia?

No. Even today I don't have a firm connection with my family due to the civil war in Sudan. It has been 20 years since I saw my mother or even communicated with her.

When you were growing up, how did you view people from the North of Sudan?

My entire generation grew up knowing that people from the North are our enemies and that the best thing to do is to fight back. The more we Southerners fought back the more lives were lost. Properties were destroyed. About 2 million lives were lost and thousands of people are displaced, living in the neighboring countries. This war has caused tremendous damage in our hearts.

Do you still feel that people from the North of Sudan are your enemies?

No, since then I have become a new person.

What changed you?

In 2005 I did a 'Life Matters' course at the Initiatives of Change centre in Melbourne. During that course a miracle happened to me. I came to understand that without [facing] our past experience, however bitter, we would never find the solution to the present. It is through the past that we are able to establish an understanding that opens many doors.

Have you had to forgive your enemies?

Yes, I have been able to forgive all my enemies who contributed to my suffering. I learnt that to forgive is a process, and that it is a process to be able to free your heart. Forgiving my enemies enabled me to meet with the people that caused me such pain.

Do you think that forgiveness is a key part of moving forward?

Forgiveness was the starting point for me; I would not have come this far if I had not emptied my heart [of all the bitterness]. Forgiveness is like a pillar in

the house, it is a foundation for moving forward. I found I was so much more relaxed after I let go of what was bothering me.

Tell me about the Sudanese Youth for Reconciliation and Hope?

I never thought this would happen – young people from Southern and Northern Sudan sitting down at the same table and sharing about the past. Now we have devoted young people from both the North and the South who are working together to put things right in our country. We are all inexperienced in conflict resolution but we have a strong conviction that we are meant to do it. Passing down the bad seed to every generation has to stop.

What do you see for the future of Sudan?

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement that was signed earlier last year needs support to be able to last. We need to create a trusting platform where every Sudanese can be free to speak out and be able to let go of the past. At times I get frustrated when things do not go as expected. However, I still trust in God, who led me to meet Initiatives of Change, to lead us to where we can find some help.

The *'Whispering of our Hearts'*

'My belief is that lasting change happens quickest through healing, apology and forgiveness between people.'

The following talk was given by Ron Lawler when he participated in the Initiatives of Change Conference Australia as a Neighbour in Melbourne, earlier this year.

Richard Windeyer was the lawyer who unsuccessfully defended the murderers of many Aboriginal people at the trial relating to the 1838 Myall Creek massacre in NSW. It was a rare event that it came to trial at all. Six years after the trial he wrote a paper which mounted a powerful attack on Aboriginal rights.

Yet, Windeyer expressed in that paper that he was troubled by, as he put it, 'how is it our minds are not satisfied? What means this whispering in the bottom of our hearts?'

Clearly then, such feelings about justice for Aboriginal people are neither a recent creation nor a creation of the political left. Aboriginal people remain at the margins of our society and disadvantaged for the most part on all indicators of housing, health, education, employment and what we call the 'justice' system.

My belief is that lasting change happens quickest through healing, apology and forgiveness between people. We then have the power of engagement as trusting equals who can put into practice the idea of partnership which we talk about so much in government circles.

How do I come to this view? In the 1960s a neighbour introduced my family to an Aboriginal family who had moved into our street – a rare event in those days. Her actions changed my life's direction – though I was hardly a teenager. The parents of that family became founders of the Aboriginal movement in Brisbane. I heard and saw their struggles. I became politically and socially active as a result.

While working with Initiatives of Change in India in 1974 this sense of engagement with Aboriginal people became a calling. It began with my own healing. One day I vividly recalled hurtful

childhood experiences involving one of my brothers. The memory still brought tears to my eyes. Then I felt an overwhelming 'whisper in my heart' about where I had wronged him. Though I needed to forgive him, I realised for the first time that the baggage of resentment that I carried towards him was equally wrong. I wrote to apologise and felt so much freer after that.

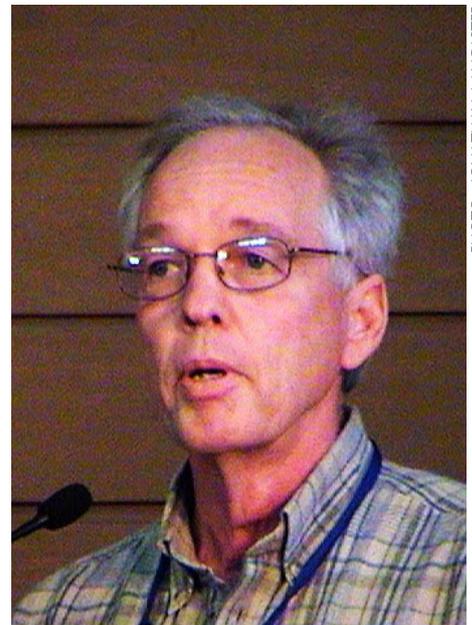
A few days later I saw a photo of a senior Aboriginal lady who had been one of those children forcibly removed and never returned to her family. Her face reflected a depth of suffering yet a rich, triumphant aspect. It was as if someone

'What have you done to my people – the Aboriginal people?'

was talking to me, saying, 'What have you done to my people – the Aboriginal people?' Previously it was always someone else's fault – the government or previous generations. Then I heard, 'If you are obedient to what I am telling you, you will be used to rebuild the relationship between Aboriginal and other Australians just as between you and your brother.'

A highlight of my last 14 years in South Western NSW has been the establishment of *Tirkandi Inaburra* ('learning to dream' in the Wiradjuri language). Set on bushland away from town, this cultural and development centre for 12–15 year old Aboriginal boys runs programs based on developing their resilience.

What proportion of the inmates of juvenile justice centres in NSW are Aboriginal? Fifty-one per cent. How



Ron Lawler

many of those 'graduate' to adult prison? Eighty-five per cent. Why not prevent them from getting into the juvenile justice system in the first place? It will save much pain and a lot of public money. That is the purpose behind the program.

Many people played key roles in planning and lobbying for the \$5 million required to build it and over \$2 million per year to run it. My own contribution over many years came from seeking that inspiration from the inner voice for the way ahead. Often these were simple thoughts about who to engage and include from all communities, the private sector and government agencies. This was indispensable to my bureaucratic role as a planner.

24 have completed the program in this first year. So it is early days. All except one have re-engaged happily with their school thanks to a greater sense of self respect, cultural learning and pride, and greatly improved literacy and numeracy. The challenge is – how can their families and their home schools continue the change?

One boy wrote a poem about his new life. He refers to his teachers in his life before Tirkandi: 'When you gave up on me I gave up on you'; but concluded with 'I will respect even those who don't respect me'. That is the high ground.

I am constantly amazed at how God has used all sorts of people whom I would not have chosen to be critical players. We can all do something if we heed the whispering in our hearts. Perhaps today we will find further steps that we can take.

Book talk

A fascinating little booklet written by Jean Brown with pithy cartoons designed by Nigel Heywood has just been produced.

In *A Serious Guide to Remaking the World*, Jean has used four headings slightly different from those which Frank Buchman, initiator of MRA/Initiatives of Change used many years ago when summing up the answers needed to change our world:

- Starting with yourself
- Engaging others
- Creating answers
- Giving Hope to Humanity

Written in a racy style, including many experiences and examples, this will be a very useful booklet which outlines what Initiatives of Change is all about and how anyone can start.



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Imam Ashafa Recovers After Accident

Imam Muhammad Ashafa (the Imam featured in the film *The Imam and the Pastor*) and his wife Fatima have now returned to Nigeria from the UK where the Imam had to undergo surgery following a serious car accident in Nigeria in March. Imam Ashafa has made an excellent recovery after the operation on his neck and spine in early April. While he may suffer some continuing weakness, it is a blessing that he has already regained a great measure of strength.

Geoffrey Craig in London writes: 'This whole episode has been an amazing saga of God's provision in terms of the transport, medical and living costs, involving an anonymous well-wisher from the Middle East who paid the major part of the expenses; the Nigerian Muslim community in UK, and other British and American supporters of the work of the Imam and the Pastor. As Imam Ashafa progressed in his recovery he was able to take part in significant meetings at the UK Initiatives of Change centre in London. At a farewell occasion he expressed his gratitude for all the support he and his wife have received since the accident.'

What is the Human Cost of Peace?

– A Public Forum in NSW

The next in the series of dialogues in the Hills District of Sydney is a public forum organised by the Hills Interfaith Dialogue Group and the Baulkham Hills Council 'Building Bridges Connecting People Committee'. Entitled 'What is the Human Cost of

Peace?', the event will feature the film *The Imam and the Pastor* and speakers from the Melbourne-based Sudanese Youth for Reconciliation and Hope. For more information contact Banu Ranganadhan on (02) 9639 2495.

Thinking Ahead

Mary Whiteside is a concerned citizen who, earlier this year, wrote a letter to the leaders of the political parties in the Federal Government, urging them to take action in regards to the effects of Global Warming.

Drought, one effect of global warming is obvious to us all. What is not obvious is that fast-enough work is being done to curb the proliferation of CO₂ in the atmosphere.

The use of compact fluorescent light bulbs will help. My KWH usage has dropped 1/3 compared with this month last year.

Houses in cold Scotland use solar power. What about councils requiring all new houses in sunny Australia to have solar panels?

In January I sent a letter to the leaders of all political parties in the Federal Government signed by over 140 people

requesting mainly that all available resources be put into developing alternative energies other than nuclear before handing out tax cuts.

All parties responded, setting out their policies on global warming but none mentioned tax. What are our priorities?

Do we need to think each day, 'What will I do today that my grandchildren will thank me for, or curse me for, in 50 years time?'

We need to be kept fully informed on the reasons for change, steps to be taken to implement change and encouragement to be kept fully involved.

Aussies in Caux

Two Australians going to the summer conferences in Caux, the international conference centre for Initiatives of Change, are Visier and Pari Sanyü. Originally from Nagaland but now living in Melbourne, Visier will be participating in the 'Global Indigenous Dialogue' and will be the first Australian to deliver a Caux Lecture (one will take place each week of the conference season). Pari, one of the pioneers to facilitate 'Creators of Peace' Peace Circles in Australia, has been asked to participate in the 'Tools for Change' conference. She will facilitate a Peace Circle and train others to become facilitators as a tool to use within communities around the world. Contributions towards the Sanyü's travel costs will be gratefully received.