

15th Life Matters Course for Young Adults



PHOTO: JONATHAN LANCASTER

**Solomon Islands
 Vision for an
 honest nation**

In the Solomon Islands, national Elections are set for 5 April. The Winds of Change (IofC) team have launched their Clean Election Campaign to help establish honesty in the election process throughout the country.

They report, "All the four teams that went out to the Provinces have arrived back, and there's one team that went out to West Guadalcanal Constituency on Sunday. Central Province team will be leaving tomorrow (Wednesday). So far the teams already covered 9 out of the 50 constituencies. We have radio spots in different languages every day. Weekly programs, every Monday and Wednesday evenings on our national radio (SIBC), cover the whole country."

Their Clean Election Campaign pamphlet states on the front, "If we want to change our nation we must change ourselves." Boldly it points to the corruption that has afflicted all levels of national life - often under pressure from international resource traders - and challenges every Solomon Islander to help get rid of it. "Our Votes are not for sale. They are part of our God-given power to put right what is wrong and rebuild our country in choosing good and honest leaders."

Voters' pledge

Under the heading "HOPE FOR THE NATION - you can't live crooked and think straight" the pamphlet gives a vision for all electors.

- Let us choose men and women of integrity who are trustworthy and straight thinkers
- Let us support and encourage them when they stand for what is right
- Let us no longer accept selfish and corrupt leaders
- Let us work together - every Solomon Islander - with our national leaders, to be involved in solving issues that affect the whole nation

Voters are invited to sign the following pledge: "I pledge that I will: Reject all bribes; Reject any false promises; Not sell my vote; Vote for an honest leader; Not be involved in any corrupt activity before, during or after the election; Use my full conscience to decide my vote; Listen to God to help me decide my vote."

David Mills

Getting the ball over the net

Eorann Lean from the UK tells the story of her participation in the just-concluded Life Matters course, held at Armagh, the Australia-Pacific centre for Initiatives of Change:

On 3 February 22 of us arrived in Melbourne for the *Life Matters* course. We included 11 nationalities, from Australians who had effectively just crossed the road, to people from Cambodia and Vietnam. I won the prize for the longest distance travelled, having made the 24-hour journey from England. I arrived a few days early to get over my jet lag and was immediately welcomed into the Armagh family. As more people appeared at the door the large house got noisier and happier. Finally on the Friday night we were all in attendance, yet it was always possible to find a quiet place to be on your own.

We had gathered for a chance to reflect on our lives and learn important life skills. The course covers both personal and global issues. Personal topics like 'identity', 'forgiveness', and 'inner direction' were addressed by panels of speakers and then discussed in smaller sharing groups. The global skills we learned - including community-building, leadership and decision making - were key in helping us see how we might achieve many goals we set ourselves throughout the course.

We split into four teams. Family feeling soon grew between us as we completed our service (washing up, clearing the kitchen) with the same people. This closeness meant that we were able to share our thoughts and feelings openly with each other, knowing that we would receive support and utter confidentiality.

For the international members there was a second two-week part of the course. This included a team building workshop with James McIvor, a specialist in career planning and management. He gave skills on identifying how different people work and how to meet these people's needs in a team - as well as understanding our own needs. As the group was smaller, we were able to move around more easily so the second course included more outside visits. After we met Venerable Phuoc Tan, Abbot of the largest Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Melbourne, one course helper commented: "I thought that he would talk about Buddhism but instead he told us a little about the work of his congregation in the local community, and he took a great

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15th Life Matters course for young adults

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interest in us, his visitors. We can read about Buddhism any time, but this was an exciting opportunity to meet a very special man. That's the sort of thing that happens at *Life Matters*".

Polly Flanagan, Director of the Leadership program at Melbourne Grammar School, invited five of the *Life Matters* course to speak to 30 Year 12 leaders at their weekly meeting at the school. Thiroth Heng's, Dado Hidayatulloh's and Oanh Vo Thi Hoang's contributions are printed below. Christina Mitini and Wesley Rubea, both from Solomon Islands, shared their experiences working on the *Clean Election Campaign*. Afterwards the Principal and the Head of the Senior School invited our group for coffee, discussions and a look around the campus. They said how valuable it was for the school to hear how change could happen from 'the bottom up'.

Life Matters is not all work. We had a lot of fun with Latin dancing lessons, creative evenings and sports - though we also learned a good deal from them! Many of us were challenged to do something new, whether performing in front of others or playing more sports in a week than I have in the last year.

I found a creative evening particularly testing as it has been a few years since I have had to write and perform my own works - but I thoroughly enjoyed myself and found new confidence in my creative abilities.

The wonderful thing about Armagh is that a huge family is created and everyone is involved. This means that there is no need to be afraid because you are supported, accepted and encouraged every step of the way. Our volleyball matches were a great example of this.

Friendships which supported

There was a lovely mix of "professionals" and "scared of the ball" amateurs - and, of course there were the select few who soon became star players although they had never stepped on a court before. Personally, I flailed my arms and hoped they would hit the ball. But, with the encouragement of my teams and some friendly name calling, I ended up with a serve that went over the net - most of the time.

The same was true in the way I looked at my life. At first it was difficult to answer questions about my dreams that, as an 18-year old gap student, I hadn't really thought about seriously. Then,

through the support and experience of others, I was able to find ideas - even if, like my serve, they may not always go over the net. I have been able to mend relationships with friends and family, and reconcile with problems from the past. The friendships which supported me also supported the other participants.

Obviously during all of this I grew very close to many of the others at the course. There is a general invitation from all, that if you turn up in their country they will look after you, which I'm looking forward to taking up.

However the challenge is not over for us, now that we have left the Armagh house. We now have to apply our goals and changes to our lives back at home. Even though I have put this off by a few months by travelling round Australia, I'm terrified and excited to continue as I have started.

We also have another wonderful responsibility; an anonymous donor has given each of us \$500 to be used for an initiative of our own in which we will put into action what we have learnt through the course about change-making and community-building. This has already given us something to concentrate on and aim for, and will continue to do so.

What others said...

I learnt from others but the highlight was a deeper understanding of myself. Learning to challenge my lifestyle with the absolute values is a very daily affair and it begins every morning. The decisions I made at the course, I feel, will have long-lived effects for me and my family...

Kevipulie Iralu - graduate, Nagaland (India) / Australia

Living in a close community taught me to broaden my mind, and think about and accept things I would previously not have thought twice about - other religions, ideas from nations far more volatile than my own, and ways of worshipping God.

Having faith means action. I believe that God cares most about his people and that people - their hearts - are what my life should be about.

Fiona Sinclair - nurse, NSW, studying tropical diseases.

Courses on law, English, mathematics, science, all benefit your knowledge of the world. But none of them are useful unless you realise why your life matters.

Most of my life I have been confused about why I felt so many setbacks in my actions and words. The course helped me overcome those setbacks. I found virtues and qualities in myself that I never thought I had.

One virtue I lacked, and that prevented me from moving on in my life and relationships, was real honesty. Once I realised what honesty really meant, it felt like a big negative force was lifted off me. I was able to tell my parents about my past habit of taking drugs. I also managed to return a basketball I had stolen from one of the big stadiums in Melbourne. I believe that honesty is one of the great keys to a positive and regretless life, as well as the secret to building righteous communities. The course let me see a variety of people

from different cultures trying to change for the good.

Andre Gorgievski - basketball coach and manager and warehouse worker

As an older member it was inspiring to share with younger participants from so many cultural backgrounds.

Lesley Bryant - Gold Coast, Queensland.

I was given the opportunity to explore ways and thoughts of life that were far from my personal agenda, as a teenager growing up in this modern society in Australia. I walked into Armagh shy and feeling displaced from my comfort zone. I thought the issues that the people of MRA tackled were beyond my abilities because of the enormous impact and far reach.

But soon the atmosphere in this amazing place nourished change within myself. The fact that I was able to meet such a diverse group of people from all corners of the globe had a significant impact on my experience allowing me to understand them for who they are inside.

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"Identity"

Mosese Waqa is a Volunteer Coordinator with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), Melbourne, and a Steering Committee Member of the Citizens Constitutional Forum, Fiji. He spoke to the course in a panel on "Identity":

My paternal grandmother was Samoan, and paternal grandfather Fijian like both of my mum's parents. I have spent more than half of my life in Fiji, about a third in Australia, and the rest of the time traveling between countries. And if you look at my genetic combinations, the chances are that some of you would be more closely related to me than you think.

Life in its various elements and influences comes together in a person in a unique way and never repeats that permutation again. Hence every person is unique, beautiful and worthy of consideration.

Identity has little to do with "having" and more to do with "being". For identity to be reliable, giving lasting meaning and

purpose to life, it has to be original and to transcend time and place. It has to be reliable for all life's situations.

How "deep" is my identity? Is it worth living? Is it worth dying for?

Soon after the overthrow of the then democratically elected government in Fiji in May 2000, I was doing relief work for ADRA (Adventist Development & Relief Agency), helping those forcefully displaced from their homes by the core supporters of the coup. In moving around the countryside helping displaced people with shelter, food and other basic items, I was confronted with a situation where a group of armed young men forced me at gunpoint to change my mind.

I had two choices: (1) If I look upon death as bringing an end to my life, life

that I am fully identified with - my identity, then I must do all I can to prevent that death. (2) On the other hand, if life is more than just "having" a life, and it's about more than just me, a living principle that brings convergence, meaning, purpose for all aspects of my life, then I shouldn't fear those who are capable of physically "taking" my life, because no one is capable of that, unless I give them my consent. What does it profit a person if he/she wins the whole world but loses his/her own identity?

In a split-second reflection, I made a conscious decision that it was worth dying for and was at peace in leaving the consequences of that choice to God. I believe if I had chosen to conform to my captors' wishes, I would have experienced death within me even before death through the barrel of a gun. Death of the inner core of my life which held everything for me. My identity. That would have been the most painful death.

Cambodia-Vietnam Dialogue: Letting go the hatred

Heng Thiroth (Cambodia) . . .

Cambodia's neighbours are Vietnam, Thailand and Laos. As a result of wars in the past and some current issues, the people in our region have developed a deep hatred and suspicion of each other. This mistrust is 'handed down'. I blamed the Vietnamese for much of the suffering of Cambodia.

Two years ago at the IofC Asia Pacific Youth Conference in Malaysia, I met young Vietnamese who were very keen to make friends and build bridges of trust for the sake of the future. Although it was hard, I decided to let go of my hatred of their nation. Now we are developing a Cambodian-Vietnamese dialogue. It gives us the chance to make cross-border visits to each others' countries every few months and to meet together to exchange ideas and experiences. As we have become more and more open with each other, we have begun to believe that our two countries and our region can have a future that is different from our past.

At a meeting with Year 12 leaders at Melbourne Grammar School, Vo Oanh from Vietnam and Heng Thiroth from Cambodia shared their experience

Vo Oanh (Vietnam) . . .

We have taken the chance to get to know each other's countries, and to visit places of historical and cultural interest. We meet with representatives of the Cambodian community living in Vietnam and with the Vietnamese living in Cambodia who often face the greatest challenges, being a minority.

It is going to take some time to develop a relationship that works well. The other day Thiroth said he was sorry if his explanation of the historical problems had hurt me. I was touched by this and told him that on the contrary I was very thankful to him for taking time to make sure I really understood the situation.

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This change allowed me to open the doors to build better ties with people, starting with those closest to me.

I also found direction, which was lacking in my life, finding ways to change my old habits and behaviour that I now know weren't helpful, even antisocial, especially if you want to make a difference in this world.

Victor Nguyen, student, Melbourne

Last year I left home to join the *Action For Life* program in India and then the *Life Matters* Course in Australia.

Living in these communities, I have

rediscovered the importance of friendship. Having felt betrayed by friends when I was 16, I have lived thinking: "I don't need the friends I meet every day to be happy". Now I know how sharing time with those everyday friends is helpful and powerful. When I go back to university next week, I will not just come, sit in the classroom and leave at the end of the lecture, I will meet the other students and I will make friends.

In India, I wrote a letter to my younger sister. I asked her forgiveness for having let jealousy toward her grow in my heart.

My words touched her deeply and she expects to notice a change when I go back home.

Delphine Morice, postgraduate student in mathematics, France

What I got out from the course as the youngest member was that it really strengthened my beliefs. I felt that what was true in my heart was now all the truer.

Kevisato Sanyü, student, Melbourne

There will be more contributions from Life Matters participants in the April issue of Newsbriefs.



Ian Heywood (L) and Dado Hidayatulloh speaking on the last - and "public" - evening of the Life Matters course in Melbourne.

Indonesian apology

When I arrived in Australia I was scared to say that I was from Indonesia. I imagined that somebody would get angry and hit me because their son or daughter was killed in the Bali bombing a couple of years ago.

Everyone knows that most of the victims who died were Christian and came from Australia. Some were Chinese and some were Buddhist. Hinduism is the majority religion in Bali. Amrozi, Imam Samudra and friends who blasted the bomb are Muslim, but not their hearts. Their hearts have been influenced by evil and so they did that.

I as a Muslim would like to apologise to all Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists

because of what these people did. We know that they were in the wrong way. As an Indonesian person I would like to say sorry to all the victims and their families, and the world, because we were not able to secure our country from terrorism.

From the *Life Matters* Course I got a good spirit and the feeling of togetherness and I have a desire to involve all the community in Indonesia, my team in Initiatives of Change especially, to work together and change the bad image, culture and customs of my country. I hope we can hold hands and build this beautiful world through healing the past.

Dado Hidayatulloh, student, Jakarta

...and an Australian response

I was challenged to rethink what it means to have meaningful relationships with people from other cultures, religions and ethnicities. The challenge was to change from accessing what others say through the prism of my own rather self-righteous values, to viewing what is shared through the eyes and experiences of the sharer. I needed to try to understand what is meaningful and precious to the other by listening carefully to their story, and then coming to value it myself

(not as a part of my values or culture which in most instances are different).

During the sessions an Indonesian participant felt moved to apologise to all Australians, and to all Christians, Hindus and Buddhists, for the actions of some of his countrymen during the Bali bombings. The courage this young man showed in order to be honest to his feelings and true to his Islamic faith, so that real relationships could be established, prompted me to respond.

I shared that although as a westerner I believe in free speech, and value it for myself, it is important that before I insist on the right to exercise it I should ensure that in so doing I will not be offensive to the values that another person holds as precious. Otherwise I will have potentially damaged a healthy relationship for the wrong reason.

At this point I apologised to Muslims for the offence caused by the printing of cartoons in the Western Press which were derogatory to their Islamic faith.

Ian Heywood, farmer, NSW

Book Talk

Hope Never Dies - the Grandy Story, a new book by Virginia Wigan, tells the story of Swiss couple Marcel and Theri Grandy and their work in Cyprus.

"The Grandys have lived their lives in the best spirit of the Swiss humanitarian tradition. Through their long-term commitment to Initiatives of Change (Moral Re-Armament) they have demonstrated the importance of private and civil society initiatives in the difficult context of the eastern Mediterranean." *Cornelio Sommaruga, President of International Association of Initiatives of Change; 1987-99 President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)*

While Cyprus was celebrating independence in 1960, my gambling and drinking meant divorce was imminent in our marriage. Suddenly, uninvited, Marcel and Theri entered our

lives. They led us from dark despair into the bright light of love and responsibility, first towards ourselves and then towards our country. It is worthwhile reading this book. Some more miracles may happen." *Spyros Stephou, former EOKA fighter and retired Deputy Director of Customs, Cyprus.*

Hope Never Dies is available at \$30 from Grosvenor Books (03) 9822 1218.

Muslim/Christian dialogue - Head for the 'Hills'

In 2003 Muslim/Christian community dialogues in Sydney were initiated by Bishop Kevin Manning of the Parramatta Catholic Diocese, Keysar Trad, Founder of the Islamic Friendships Association of Australia, and David Mills from Initiatives of Change. Local committees were formed to organise these dialogues. One of them, the Hills Muslim/Christian Dialogue Group, have continued to meet

Website commentaries

Reactions to the Danish cartoon affair "seem to come from two completely different worlds. Can the gap between those worlds be bridged?" writes Hennie de Pous from the Netherlands. Read her commentary and others on the Initiatives of Change international website: www.iofc.org,

together over the last 18 months and have developed deeper friendships.

They are now arranging another such dialogue at the Imam Hasan Centre, Annangrove, the Muslim Prayer Centre that was built amidst controversy and opposition from some in the non-Muslim community.

This occasion will be on Wednesday 22 March. The theme will be "The greatness of Jesus for Muslims and Christians", and it will be chaired by Macquarie Radio's Gareth McCray.