

## Brisbane perspectives

# Regional partnerships of trust

As the Government seeks to deepen Australia's relationship with her Asian and Pacific neighbours, the theme of the MRA-Initiatives of Change conference in Brisbane, *Together - Making a Difference*, will help to identify how this can happen. The conference, 1-5 July at Emmanuel College, University of Queensland, will include speakers from around the region as well as Australia.

Developing partnerships of trust and sustainable relationships is one of the main aims of the conference. Honesty about historic divisions could do much to help the future stability of the region. Major relationships such as those between China and Japan, Taiwan and the Chinese Mainland, Vietnam and Cambodia, and serious internal issues in many countries, are of international concern including to Australia. Equally, for Australia to be a real friend and partner to our regional neighbours it is more than just military or material aid that is appreciated. The openness to be honest about our history – particularly with our indigenous people – and the readiness to restore for past wrongs is a key element in building trust and sincerity with other nations.

Australia needs to think – and be motivated – beyond economic self-interest alone. An economic basis to international friendship is probably unsustainable if that is all it is. So the conference will aim to focus on the social and moral basis to our relationships in the

region. The promotion of spiritual values common to different cultures and faith traditions – values that produce qualities of leadership, assist reconciliation and fight corruption – this is a challenge for everyone. It is at the root of partnerships based on trust and appreciation that can create security and genuine friendship.

### Planning weekend

Over the Anzac Day weekend 20 people from the five mainland states and ACT met in Melbourne with conference co-ordinator Lesley Bryant to work on the detailed conference programme and hear progress reports. Already over 100 people are planning to attend. Overseas participation is expected from Cambodia, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Taiwan, Vietnam.

Main sessions will be open to the public. The session on Sunday 3rd afternoon *Creating Partnerships across cultures and beliefs* will be a special opportunity for Brisbane residents to visit the conference.

## National Day of Healing

Organisers of National Sorry Day on May 26 have decided to call this year's events around the country a National Day of Healing," writes Michael Gordon in *The Age* (28 April). "The aim is to give fresh momentum and a broader focus to a grass-roots reconciliation movement."

The paper was reporting on the media launch of the new name by former PM Malcolm Fraser, Doris Pilkington Garimara, author of *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence*, and AFL Aboriginal footballer Michael Long.

"We are getting good support from the AMA, the National Council of Churches

and other bodies," writes national secretary John Bond. "Many universities are arranging events. Already 30 Members and Senators, from Coalition and Opposition, have told us they will attend the launch in the Great Hall of Parliament on 25 May, as will many diplomats. Speakers will include Prof Fiona Stanley, Australian of the Year in 2003, and Mike de Gagne, an Indigenous Canadian who is Executive Director of his country's Aboriginal Healing Foundation. Senator Aden Ridgeway will chair.

"If you wish to play a part in the events in your city, you will find them on our website: [www.journeyofhealing.com](http://www.journeyofhealing.com)."

An entertainment programme for the conference is being developed by a younger team. Optional Workshops are planned on subjects such as Family life, Community-building and Art. Each day will start with opportunities for peaceful reflection and sharing of insights and experiences in groups.

The theme of dealing with corruption will benefit from the presence of Brian Lightowler, author of *Corruption - Who Cares?* and one of the conference initiators. When Queensland was a focus of corruption investigations in the 1980s Lightowler and a citizens group launched an initiative "Our decision for a corruption-free Queensland". This later inspired a series of Clean Election Campaigns in Taiwan and led to similar campaigns in Brazil and Kenya. The leader of the Taiwan Clean Election Campaigns, Liu Ren-jou, will attend the conference.

As well as speakers already announced (see earlier *Newsbriefs*), the Chief Commissioner of New Zealand's Families Commission, Dr Rajen Prasad, will speak on "Why families are important: essential factors in making them strong." Chris Sarra, 2004 Queensland of the Year when he was Principal of Cherbourg State School, and Matthew Wale, courageous founder of the Peace Office in Solomon Islands, are also among the speakers.

A fund is being raised (target: \$30,000) to help with the travel and accommodation expenses of those from overseas who lack the means. Some generous gifts have already been made, so far totalling \$9,000

David Mills and Peter Thwaites

To Register: Tel. (07) 3378 0357  
Email: [brisbane.conference@mra.org.au](mailto:brisbane.conference@mra.org.au)  
Forms available at website:  
[www.mra.org.au](http://www.mra.org.au)

## "As I am, so is my nation"

An 8-page colour report of the conference *As I am, so is my nation*, held 20-24 October 2004 in Apia, Samoa, has just arrived from the printers. Available from MRA-IC centres.

Readers are reminded of the special magic of the Pacific as they read statements by Samoa's Prime Minister, religious leaders, and citizens working out how to live with "Clean hearts, clean hands".

*Under 40s meeting, Kenya*

# **What does it mean to be part of Initiatives of Change?**

*Based on a paper prepared by CHRIS LANCASTER for the Under 40s gathering in Nairobi, February 2005:*

**M**RA and IofC have always been notoriously difficult to describe. Who – and what – are we? NGO? Fellowship? Spiritual community? Activists? Religious organisation? Community?

In earlier days much of MRA's language and "theory" was Christian theology, expressed in a way which attracted people who had given up on the church. More recently IofC has become a multi-faith movement, which has necessarily meant finding new ways to express the experience which has always been at its heart. These basic principles are not, in themselves, anything too unique – just as the Christian theology of the Oxford Group was not too different from mainstream Christianity. What characterised Buchman's team was the way they lived – THAT was different.

So can we define what it is about the way we aim to live which identifies and unites us? In order to retain a "moral

edge" we need to set the bar high for ourselves, individually and collectively; otherwise we are just doing mainstream good work, which is fine but hardly the best we can offer. At the same time we need to continue to be inclusive, which is possible by recognising a distinction between the people we *welcome and include*, and who we and IofC are: just as although a temple or mosque or church may be open to all, there is no suggestion that the beliefs of that faith community should be adjusted to accommodate all who might visit there.

Although IofC has always insisted on not having any "membership", do we lack the confidence to state and require (without in any way passing judgement on people) that in order to identify fully with IofC there are specific commitments for each of us to make? How might we express the particular individual and corporate disciplines which this would involve? These are important questions

for us in the Under 40s generation, since our training and experience within IofC have been at a time when its worldwide outreach has involved many different forms, emphases and goals.

If we do not have a transparent definition of who we are – perhaps of what it means to be a "member" rather than an "adherent" – then we are left not with no definition but rather with a spectrum of individual views on these matters. The result is that people talk of feeling like second-class citizens in IofC – that they are not fully accepted when they can see no clear reason why they shouldn't slot in with all these nice people! As one person stated at a Global Consultation recently, "If we are not transparent, we are exclusive."

We also define ourselves through our vision. If there is one outcome which I long for from this gathering, it is for new visions around which people in IofC (on both sides of 40) can unite. We need visions not only for IofC, but for the world, because we are not here to sustain IofC but to serve the world. If the vision is big enough, it will demand that we live with the moral edge, faith, discipline, commitment, and community which is the very best that we can offer to those around us.

## **A new sense of personal responsibility**

*LAURA VERTIGAN attended the Under 40s gathering and evaluates the experience:*

**W**hen I first heard the idea of a gathering of younger generations in Kenya I bounced around the room in excitement. When I got an unexpected \$1900 tax return I was booking my tickets within the week. I did have my doubts about "representing" Australia; because I'm not exactly a "model" of good behaviour and commitment! So I put the tickets on hold. Fortunately, with encouragement from friends, I realised that commitment doesn't have to be about being perfect – in fact if I wait until I'm perfect I'll never commit to anything!

I have had the best times of my life, met the most amazing people, learned the most about myself, and received the most spiritual healing through my times with Initiatives of Change (IofC). I took my first baby steps of faith, as well as gigantic, (seemingly) death-defying leaps of faith and discovered a world beyond the imaginings of a depressed teenager from Albany. I discovered real joy and peace,

connection with the Spirit, and genuine friendships. Unfortunately I am also familiar with post-conference/course blues; difficulties with follow-up; the inevitable pain of inviting others' pain into your heart; and attempting to balance on a precarious seesaw of unconditionally loving oneself and striving for perfection. Not to mention the problems of mental illness which my family faces and which are always close to my heart, and the seeming insolubility of many world problems.

### **Blown away**

So I entered the gathering both excited and expecting to be let down and was surprised to find that I was far from being the only one! Contrary to my cynical expectations, however, the gathering blew me away: genuine, honest, and far-thinking people who I could really learn from, and who made me laugh entirely too much!

The Open Space principles of facilita-

tion (whatever happens is the only thing that could, whoever comes are the right people, when it starts and finishes is the right time etc.) became a theme throughout the gathering. I have never seen people take responsibility so quickly and painlessly for both discussing the issues we felt needed to be discussed, and taking actions which we felt needed to be taken! (Within the first hour of open space we had arranged a program for the first two days that everyone was happy with and nobody was "pushed" into anything!!)

There were some things we didn't discuss, some problems we couldn't solve. However, the most memorable aspect for me was a strong sense of calm about the process, and not needing to have all the answers. I began to feel calmer about the things that I can't change, and subsequently more able and willing to get on and change the things I can.

I left with a renewed sense of personal responsibility for Australia and the world; care for this IofC network; and anticipation for its changing shape in the future.

Uganda meeting 13-17 April 2005

## Women creators of peace



Photo: Trish Harrison

*Overcoming logistical and financial obstacles, 200 women met at an international conference in Uganda entitled: "Standing up and speaking out for peace in a clean Africa – women accountable for the future now". Conference patron was Uganda's First Lady Janet Museveni. PARI SANYÜ writes on her return to Melbourne from Kampala:*

The conference concluded in a wonderful spirit. For the most part, we have been incommunicado due to the fact that our conference venue was quite isolated with poor communications.

We were situated on the edge of the mighty and magnificent Lake Victoria having packed to capacity all beds at "The Ranch". There were 90 of us from 26 countries. In addition a large Ugandan delegation was housed at nearby Lweza bringing the number up to 150. And with the daily commuters from Kampala, the numbers were just under 200! This was actually a last minute choice of venue – the original one not having met the stringent security requirements of the First Lady's office. However, it provided a peaceful retreat for the conference.

African countries represented were Uganda, Sudan, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Kenya, S Africa, DR Congo, Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Burundi, and Somalia.

### **Journeying together**

It was my first time in Africa. What struck me from the very first evening was the sense of journeying together amongst all the participants, especially the sense of discovery between the different African nations – Ghanaians discovering the history and pain of their sisters in Rwanda, Nigerians learning for the first time about the situation in Sudan regarding slavery of women. There were tears of solidarity and understanding and many new bonds of friendship forged.

The main language used was English, with simultaneous translation into

French, and some translation into Ugandan (Luganda) for some sessions.

But right from the start, it was the language of mind, heart and spirit that intertwined marvellously through all the sessions. The First Lady of Uganda, Janet Museveni gave the opening address – the importance of tackling problems in the environment that allow conflict to thrive: "How can communities be peaceful when people are going hungry?" (Hands-on workshops on Reconciliation, HIV/AIDS, Environmental Issues, and Income Generating Projects ran through the conference). She strongly urged women to reclaim their relevance as mothers and nurturers in their own families. With tears in her eyes she acknowledged Jackie Huggins, Co-chair of Reconciliation Australia, and told of how she had personally prayed for the Aborigines.

For the Australian team, it was an especially emotional time. Trish McDonald-Harrison expressed her deep pain and remorse at what her forbears had done to Jackie's people and publicly apologised to Jackie. Jackie responded from her heart: "I forgive you... I hope we can become honourable ancestors as we walk the road together so none of us can repeat the sins of the past."

A rather amusing interlude was when all seven of us stood together for a photo with the First Lady. The poor photographer kept insisting: "No, No, only Australians", trying to get the African (Carla), the Asian (Pari) and, shock horror, Jackie (the Aboriginal) out of the frame!! It felt really powerful, all

of us in all our different skins – white through black – standing shoulder to shoulder, Australians together.

Members of parliament, diplomats, ex-rebels and militia; grassroots workers; teachers, administrators, social workers, NGOs. This is just a sample of the women who were there.

I must mention Maama Dorothy Tingu who is the hub of the Ugandan Initiatives of Change team. She is a simple, passionate woman of enormous charisma. Her bare feet speak to me of one who has worked the land, and yet she can walk in to the office of the First Lady with confidence and in friendship.

An MP from the Democratic Republic of Congo created a bit of a stir on arrival when she insisted that proper protocol be observed, questioning why the Congolese ambassador to Uganda had not been informed of her arrival... Two days later, she addressed the conference, having discarded the political speech she had prepared and spoke ruefully and apologetically of the fuss she had made, "I came here as a politician, but I understand that I am here as a human being and a woman, to speak from the heart."

There were many, many stories of personal change, responsibility and reconciliation. There were many miracles in the way needs were met "in spite of" gaps in organization and physical / financial arrangements. In fact, the term "in spite of" became a bit of a catch phrase especially for the organizing team who worked so hard to make the conference the success it was.

### **Child of colonialism**

On a personal level, I was struck once again by the magnitude of colonialism through the stories and situations that were present at the conference. I am a child of colonialism, and have spent much of my life decolonizing and restructuring my own mind. I see that it is the responsibility not just of the enlightened colonizer to apologize and move on, but of the oppressed to creatively break through the destructive and dehumanizing cycles that follow in its wake. In partnership, reclaiming our humanity.

*Pari Sanyü will be presenting an in-depth report at Armagh, Melbourne on 28 May evening. Christina DeAngelis and Carla Tongun will speak on 22 May in Adelaide and Trish McDonald-Harrison will give a report in Sydney (Lakemba) on 29 May afternoon. A Conference Report is in preparation.*

First Sunday in June

## Open Homes Open Hearts Day

*In early 2002 an idea was launched by a World lofC meeting in India: an annual day where people wherever they live can think about reaching out to someone they do not know so well, maybe across cultural barriers – such as inviting them home for a cup of tea.*

I see this as a quiet action, not necessarily a newspaper headline. The idea just reminds you to take a step towards someone else.

Last year Open Homes, Open Hearts Day (OHOH) prompted me to initiate a street party. This was a thought I had had months before and had not summoned up the courage to attempt. But as June approached, I saw the connection and felt the final push to try. Determined not to organise it alone, I knocked on a neighbour's front door, but no-one was home. As I turned away, a young pregnant woman who I had never seen before called across the road, telling me they

were away at the moment. I explained about the street party idea, and she at once said that she would like to be on the team. We soon formed a multicultural group of eight, made some plans, designed a leaflet and did a letter box drop.

The night before the big day, I felt worried: Would anyone turn up? Although tired, I was tempted to run around with leaflets again as a reminder, but something stopped me - I had not consulted my team! When I asked them, one offered to draw a big red sign and pin it to a tree instead.

That afternoon 35 enthusiastic neighbours of all ages gathered on the

nature strip with plates of food and drinks. We met a couple with triplets who had been struggling at home, a woman who had moved into the street six weeks earlier, another family with seven children, and others. Some stayed for an hour after the advertised end.

A few weeks later, my next-door neighbour suggested that we go across the road together to welcome the new baby. She shared some of her own deep struggles as we admired the tiny boy.

This year, another of the original "team" has invited all eight to their home for lunch for the first time.

I am not signing this article because I feel the actions each of us take for OHOH can be private. Those we reach out to do not necessarily have to know that our initiative was prompted by a campaign because it also comes from a desire in our heart. But WE know that OHOH encouraged us.

*Anonymous, New South Wales*

## Following the dentist's advice

*From an article in the Salvation Army magazine Warcy, 26 March 2005, by TOM GILLESPIE, Narrabeen NSW:*

Growing up in Scotland, I believed intellectually that there was a God but never experienced a relationship with him. It wasn't until I was 23 that a couple of things combined to bring me to this experience.

The first was the influence of my older brother. He was studying at Glasgow University where he'd met the Oxford Group. They believed in the four standards of Jesus – absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love – and when he came home from uni he told me about these things. The other influence was my dentist. One day he told me something of his relationship with God and how it had saved his marriage.

He said, "You can listen to the voice within and God will tell you what to do in every single situation." That conversation changed my life and from then on I made a conscious effort to listen for God's voice and follow him.

Obedying God's direction in my life meant quite a significant change. At the time I was working in, and was heir to, a Scotch whisky business. It was a good job and financially very secure.

But I began to see things a little differently. In those days there were drunken men on every street corner and I realised that I was, in part, responsible for their situation.

So I resigned. My uncle, who was the owner of the business, and my mother, his sister, were both quite shaken by my decision because it meant financial loss.

I was unemployed for about a year but eventually got a job in a shipyard as a checker, which meant checking all the materials that went in and out of the yards, from the nuts and bolts to the coal.

In this job I also tried to listen to God's voice in everything I was doing. I remember one incident particularly. I was in my office and I saw two men, through my window, arguing, blaming each other for the fact that material had been delivered to the wrong place.

When I heard this I slid away from the window because I realised the mistake had been my fault and I knew if I was to obey God then I had to be completely honest.

So I went out into the yard and in front of a large group of men admitted my

mistake. The men were quite amazed.

In my 71 years as a Christian I've had my ups and downs. But God has never given up on me. He still speaks to me every day and I find praying the Lord's prayer, which I say during the night when I am awake, is a tremendous source of strength.

### Book Talk

"The Morning Quiet Time has been a gateway to a new life for me. It has enabled me to deepen my faith, find a purpose and face with equanimity assaults of cancer. Inspirational readings like the letters of St Paul and the Psalms have sometimes enriched and triggered off the times of quiet. Philip Boobbyer and John Faber have done us a great service by reviving this gem of the 1930's."

So writes Russi Lala, an eminent writer himself and associated for many years with the work of MRA-Initiatives of Change in India.

*The Morning Quiet Time* by Jack Winslow (62pp) is available from Grosvenor Books, PO Box 53, Burwood Victoria 3125 or from (03) 98221218, at a cost of \$9 postfree.

*Joyce Fraser*