

Kenya 3-13 February 2005

'Under 40s' take on the search



Photo: Laura Vertigan

An international group in their 20s and 30s met in the Kenyan highlands in February to consider the future work of Initiatives of Change (IofC).

Their 14-page report (posted on net.iofc.org) tells how the "Under 40s" meeting came about, describes the methods of consultation used like "Open Space technology", and enumerates a host of broad conclusions - foremost of which is that the growth of community must precede, and be the basis for, strategic actions. The other main theme running through the report is the will of a younger generation to offer increasing leadership at all levels in the work of IofC: in its current programs, in new initiatives, and in its coordinating structures, including nominations to the International Council.

Nigel Heywood and Laura Vertigan from Australia were among the 41 from 26 countries who gathered. Nigel, who was part of the Coordinating Committee, comments on the event:

The 10-day U40s gathering was a miracle. It was a time of honest searching for what we are passionate about and where we want to take responsibility.

The quality of character, faith and leadership gathered would make anyone who wanted to change the world rub their hands together with glee. Now we had to decide where we would ride this strange and slippery animal called Initiatives of Change. When it was finished, my mind was left whirling with questions and answers.

Step inward

The first part of the gathering was spent getting to know each other and the second half generating ideas. We boiled our issues down to: leadership development, sharing resources, financing the work, management and organisation, communications, and vision.

This shows that what is strongly on the

minds of the younger generation is how to come to grips with the organisational side of this community, though we also discussed things like "where is God in this work?" We looked into the "how" more than the "why", searching for IofC's needs rather than outreach focus. This step inward brought forth some good sharing and, at the end of the quiet day, while the bigger issues remained unresolved many had found steps forward for themselves within IofC.

In a multi-faith community from 26 countries our reasons for gathering varied. We were clear that we had come to find our part in this ongoing community based on the common ideas of IofC. Some had come to make sure that their new teams were represented. Others had come to link teams and strengthen regional work. One person came to make sure that what they found valuable in IofC was not lost.

We listened to each other and shared what was on our hearts. We glimpsed the

spirit that comes in these communal times of searching. We began to look at where all of us can go from this point. What was not being discussed on the spiritual level began to be lived out in the ten days of the conference, and this was a model of what we are trying to do globally.

We went deep personally but in terms of going deep as a community on the major issues, we did not get to the contentious heart. This was due to time and wanting to reach some conclusions.

Community before action

The invitation letter to the U40s was calling for "those who want to pass on what IofC is all about, through a life rooted in service, sacrifice, and total surrender to God's will." The last three parts of this statement seem to be a good working definition of what IofC life is about. The challenge for the U40s is to make this real for ourselves and then in our communities. Some are returning to thriving communities, some to struggling teams and some to an empty house. We all felt that the need for community should take priority before action and that it would be from this that passion for the work would come.

We also feel the need to define IofC more in words and structure. It has been said, "If you want to go wider you must go deeper." IofC has gone wider welcoming all who seek a faith but now we need to go deeper. In a multi-faith community that aims to "morally and spiritually re-arm" there are strong ties on moral issues but it is a struggle to go deeper spiritually. I found meaning in IofC by being given the space and tools to search for God. I need a solid exploration of my own beliefs to strengthen them and enable me to play a fuller part in this community. This requires a keener consciousness and greater vulnerability from me to be honest amongst my friends of other faiths.

The big challenge is how we make the U40s community united across the geographical and psychological distances. How quickly the passion of such a gathering is lost in the rush of life or in isolation. I wish that every person in the U40s network (and over 40s) has a group (or at least one other) who loves them, challenges them and helps them refine their spiritual life. This requires a commitment of time to forming the depth of relationships needed.

Sacrifice

Chris Lancaster, one of the planning group for the "U40s" Gathering, was unable to attend but contributed two reflections, one on Vision and the following one on Sacrifice:

The first letter about this gathering, sent a year ago to over a hundred people, invited young people who "want to pass on what IofC is all about, through a life rooted in service, sacrifice, and total surrender to God's will."

We hear this word "sacrifice" used in many different ways – often to mean "giving up something". So people "sacrifice" their time, or their money, or even their lives as martyrs for a religion or cause.

In IofC too, and MRA before it, people have often thought in terms of sacrificing one's life for God's purposes. For some it has meant putting aside cherished plans for study and careers. For others it has meant spending a lot of time far from their homelands and their families and friends. For many it has involved living with little financial security. All of these sacrifices have provided an example of faith and of faithfulness to a divine purpose.

To make sacred

But how else might we understand the idea of sacrifice? The word's derivation, from Latin, means literally "to make holy, to make sacred". Notice how this changes our perspective. We are called not so much to give up what means most to us, but to make it sacred, to transform it. So we sacrifice our time by using it for the highest purpose, not squandering it on worthless things. We sacrifice our money – certainly, this might mean parting with it! And we sacrifice our lives for the service of others.

We are not called to lay aside who we most deeply are, in order to devote our time and energy to something which is supposedly more worthy. Rather, we are called to "sacrifice" who we most deeply are – by embracing it and living it out for the good of the world around us. If you are a politician, then sacrifice that position: through what it gives to society. If you are a teacher, then sacrifice that position: in the way that it affirms the life and worth of every child. If you are an artist, then sacrifice it: in the way that your art touches the deepest truths of what it is to be human.

Once we move away from the notion

of giving something up, we are freed to realise that none of these things – our time, our resources and our very lives – were ever ours to "give up" in the first place. The only things we can and must give up are those that prevent us from faithfully sacrificing all of who we are: our fears, desires, prejudices and

insecurities.

Gandhi said, "Total sacrifice is the price that must be paid for the only freedom that is worth having." Perhaps we can see it not as a price, but rather an opportunity.

Question: What part of my life can I transform by making it sacred?

Total culture shock

In February Erik Parsons from Melbourne went to join his fiancée and her family in Chisinau, Moldova. He writes:

As a friend put it, "Total. "The culture shock is total." And I had thought it only happened to other people! I'm different here, in the blue-eyed minority, so get curious looks in the streets. My Romanian is progressing slowly, but I'm able to shop alone in the markets.

The last rations of powder snow were delightful but the "glod" (mud) was overwhelming! We walk a lot here, so our boots were covered in it! Fortunately, spring is on its way.

Moldova is a place of contradictions, a land of rugged beauty, rich with potential yet burdened with poverty and an unlucky history of regional power-plays from her larger neighbours. It gives a deeper meaning to the phrase "the lucky country".

The people here are friendly but wary having been thrust headlong, without adequate preparation, into the utterly alien "dog eat dog" reality of the "free market"

after a years of community trust and stability under the Soviet system. What a shock for selfishness to seem expected, rather than reviled, for the expected norm to do an about turn ...

The ripple effects of this culture-shift were felt, literally, when our newly purchased Eastern European espresso machine exploded, covered the kitchen in coffee granules and burnt my back. I suspect the device hadn't undergone rigorous safety testing.

After speaking with business people here who have had to adjust, I am certain the image of the USSR presented in the West was biased to our own interests and prejudices, despite the practical and ideological faults of Communism.

Surprisingly, the lost community spirit sounds more like the IofC fellowship than a Siberian death camp! Perhaps we still have lessons to learn from these people, and their vanquished system.

Faces in the street

Sean Lam Ho-man from Hong Kong, China, is a postgraduate student of Environmental Science at University of NSW. He participated in the February 2005 Life Matters Course and evaluates his experience:

The nine-day *Life Matters* course held this summer in Melbourne granted me a life long spiritual journey.

I have gained a more clear perspective about my future. Dissatisfaction with my life and society was the main reason why I joined this course. I was full of confusion and regret since I didn't want to take the responsibility myself. "Be the change you want to see" is the solution I experienced during the course. Through sharing, quiet time and diverse learning activities, I realised I am so blessed; I was provoked by the course to utilise my gifts to help the needs of others.

The most confronting experience was serving meals to homeless people. It was

a chilly evening; I was stunned when I saw around a hundred people waiting for the food standing outside the Flinders Street Station which is the one of busiest areas in Melbourne. I tried to talk to them, especially the young people; however, they seemed to escape from my eye contact. Understanding everyone must have their own painful experiences which they might not want to share with a stranger like me, I decided to comfort their instant needs instead. That night, I stayed quiet and tried to remember all their faces. They embedded in my mind and become the energy for me to be continuously helping others' needs and be the change I want to see.

Funding the “Creators of Peace”

The “Creators of Peace” network, which began in 1991 as an initiative of Tanzanian MP Anna Abdullah Msekwa, is holding an international conference and program in Uganda and surrounding countries for three weeks in April. Women are coming from countries in Africa where there has been enormous loss of life and trauma such as Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The urgency for peace building is captured in the conference theme, “Standing up and speaking out for peace in a clean Africa. Women accountable for the future – now”.

Eight Australians are travelling to Uganda – some to attend the conference from 13-17 April and a few for the whole three weeks’ outreach. They include Aboriginal Co-Chair of *Reconciliation Australia* Jackie Huggins from Queensland, Trish Harrison from Sydney, and Melburnian, Pari Sanyü. Amongst those from Adelaide are Christina DeAngelis, who has a two year Rotary Scholarship in peace studies, Sudanese community leader Carla Tongun, and Jean Brown, one of the conference organisers.

Aboriginal art

Funding for these Australians has come from many sources, including two grants to cover fares and fundraising occasions in Perth, Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne. Two dinners in a Sudanese restaurant in Adelaide netted over \$3000, while in Melbourne a concert and an evening on “A transformed Identity through Aboriginal Art” with author Margo Birnberg raised some \$2550. Individual initiatives included a Sydney woman who invited her friends to hear from Trish Harrison and raised over \$300. A couple wrote in a card “we had set aside this gift to go to a group working towards making a difference in our world”. It came from the husband’s first week’s salary following a return to work after illness.

Some of the money raised will also be used to assist Indonesian, Naga and African delegates to attend.

Liz Weeks and John Mills

Sydney conversation

**Building
blocks
of peace**

patience

Forgiveness



Photo: Trish Harrison

In March a group from across Sydney met to discuss how to build a more peaceful and harmonious society. David MacLaurin writes:

Focussing our minds on the essence of “peace”, our hosts, Ken and Trish Harrison, drew out some insightful observations. Words such as “compassion”, “patience”, “cooperation” and “forgiveness” brought a sense that peace was not the absence of conflict, but was an actualisation of some of mankind’s innermost qualities.

Four people from the community shared their different experiences of peace building in their homes or across the globe.

The first speaker, Peter Thwaites, has dedicated his life to the concept that to achieve harmony in the world we need to stand up for what is right. Peter challenged us by asking: “If peace is not a quiet and easy life, or failing to resist the wrong intentions of others – what is it?” He pointed out that to achieve peace in the world on a national scale, a society would have to collectively resist the forces of corruption and misuse of power, using the recent Ukrainian and Russian experience as example. “A free or democratic society is one where the needs and wishes of each individual is respected to a maximum degree. It is also one where responsibility is shared to a maximum degree. All this helps build peaceful relationships and trust in a community,” he said.

Clara Cheong, next to take the lectern, shared her first hand experiences as a member of a team who had actively engendered peace and communication in the world on the *Action for Life* program. (This was a nine-month Initiatives of

Change mobile interfaith, intergenerational community, experiencing 13 countries across Asia.) Through sharing personal stories and insights we saw through Clara’s eyes that peace in the world is in fact not an outer concept, but a deeply personal one: “Be the change you want to see in the world”.

Patience the starting point

Abdalla Eissa, an eloquent speaker and active member of the Islamic Society of Manly-Warringah, pointed out that “Patience” is written 73 times in the Qur’an. Patience is in fact the most important starting point for individuals if we are to achieve peace in this world. As a leader of an often misrepresented minority in our Sydney community, he usefully noted that there was no such thing as a “Muslim terrorist”, as to be a true Muslim was to seek peace. Abdalla quoted from the Qur’an saying that “The strong person is not the one who ‘knocks’ his adversary, but the one who keeps his temper”.

The final speaker was Joyce Fraser, a tireless community builder from Marrickville. By sharing some of her personal family experiences she helped us to see that the essence of building peace in our community comes from dealing effectively with our closest relationships. I was personally deeply moved by her statement that “Forgiveness is the opportunity to claim the right not to be hurt anymore”.

The evening concluded with intense discussion and sharing around the tables.

Not so far after all

Finn Harald and Alison Wetterfors from Falun, Sweden, helped to staff the February Life Matters course and visited MRA-IC teams around the country. They write their comments in the Visitors Book:

To arrive in Australia from Europe is to meet a new set of perspectives. The sun at noon is in the North, and Europe is on the fringe of the world map. 25° temperatures replace Stockholm's minus 20°.

Preparation for our journey was reading Mike Brown's *No Longer Down Under* and Jim Coulter's *Met Along the Way*. They give flesh and blood to the Australasian and Pacific region and its importance for the future.

We are grateful for the Australians who have come year after year to give their best to the world conferences in Caux, Switzerland. That is why we responded to a long-standing invitation to come and see for ourselves, to live into the problems, hopes and visions of this "giant land", the only one that encompasses a continent within its national borders.

The visit to the War Memorial in

Canberra was a shaking reminder of how Europe repeatedly has dragged the rest of the world into our own problems. One of the sessions at this year's conference in Caux is entitled *A Heart and a Soul for Europe*. It will take a lot to revive our spiritual heritage.

On our eight weeks land odyssey from Perth via Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra, Newcastle and Townsville to Sydney, we saw how people seek to work together in spite of Australia's distances. A modern, urban outlook on the world parallel with an age-old yet living sense of the past 40,000 years. Assisting at the *Life Matters* course we met some of the generation of Australia and South East Asia who are ready to take on the future.

There has been a series of visits of European royalty during our weeks here. We too have been royally welcomed. And we know that Europe and Australia are not so far apart after all.

Doreen Walters honoured

Doreen Walters, full-time voluntary worker with IofC, has received a "Multicultural Community Service Award" from the West Australian Government.

Six awards for 2005 were presented by the Hon Bob Kucera, WA Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Interests, at a dinner attended by 200 people.

The award states in part:

"Doreen Walters is recognised for her commitment to the ideals of multiculturalism and reconciliation. She has spent a lifetime building friendships with Indigenous and other groups to the benefit of the wider community.

"Her most recent achievement was in leading an inter-faith group of Christians and Muslims to identify their shared values and commonalities.

"Ms Walters was involved in the early days of the Aboriginal Advancement Council, has assisted in running various reconciliation learning circles and was the co-founder of the Northern Suburbs Reconciliation Group. The leading Nyoongar elder of this group gave her the

title, Wadjella Elder.

"Ms Walters's life is testament to her deeply held convictions on human rights and equality and the fight against racism." *Lindsay Cartwright*

Book Talk

Do you have some treasures sitting in your book shelves? You don't want to throw them out but you want them used?

We are planning to have a second hand book stall of MRA-IC books at the Brisbane conference. We would like any books in good condition you have enjoyed and valued. We will sell them for a small amount.

Any over we will offer overseas guests to take back to those countries who have very little resources. Otherwise they will go to a charity.

Please contact Fiona on 03 9822 1218 between 9.30 am and 4 pm, or Joyce Fraser in Sydney, 02 9559 2301.

We will have a car going up on 1 June from Sydney.

Brisbane Early Birds

Interest mounts in the Brisbane conference, now just three months away (see reports in previous *Newsbriefs*).

Brisbane Councillor Judy Magub will represent Lord Mayor Campbell Newman in welcoming people at the opening dinner. Speakers at plenary sessions will now include Niketu Iralu, active in efforts to end two generations of ethnic violence in north-east India; and Liu Ren-Jou, initiator of the Clean Election Campaigns in Taiwan.

Please note Early Bird applications need to be in by 6 May.

Brian Lightowler

Caux 2005

Two days after the Brisbane conference ends, the Initiatives of Change world conference centre at Caux, Switzerland, will open its doors for the 2005 series with the overall theme: *Narrowing the gap between ideals and practice*. Conferences this year are:

- 7-13 July 2005.** *Service, Responsibility, Leadership – Values to bridge social and generational gaps.* Planned and led by young professionals and students, many from Eastern Europe.
- 16-24 July 2005.** *A Heart and a Soul for Europe.* "Black and white, immigrant and native, Jew, Christian and Muslim, secularist and believer – all have a part..."
- 27 July-3 August 2005.** *An intergenerational experience of community living.* Initiated by Norwegian families. "How can broken relationships be healed?"
- 5-11 August 2005.** *Good Governance for advancing Human Security.* "...calamities ... so often result from bad stewardship of human, economic and natural resources and from unjust regimes..."
- 13-19 August 2005.** *A world in crisis - learning from one another how to be peacemakers.* "... the deeper change that is necessary to build real peace ..."

The full program is available from MRA-Initiatives of Change centres. Caux conference secretariat: confsec@caux.ch Website: www.caux.ch