



Brisbane, hub of Australia's fastest growing region and jumping off point to the Pacific and South-East Asia, will be the venue for an Australian and Regional MRA-IC conference entitled "Together ... Making a Difference". It will be held at the University of Queensland, July 1-5 this year. Conference organisers expect the event will bring together large numbers of people from across Australia and this region of the world. Already we hear of people planning to come from India, Indonesia, Korea, New Zealand, the Solomon Islands and Taiwan.

Lesley Bryant, conference coordinator, and Brian Lightowler write:

As the tsunami roared in on that terrible Boxing Day morning, hundreds of thousands were confronted in a terrifying moment with the question "How to stay alive?" and "How to save others?" Those of us who were not there are affected differently by the tsunami. We take life for granted. "How to stay alive?" is not the question we ask. For us Boxing Day 2004 heightens the relevance of a different, age-old question: "What are you living for?"

We cannot know the feelings of those who have lost everyone and everything, the grief they suffer, nor the questions they wrestle with. Yet as a nation and as individuals we can respond, and have responded, with generosity and compassion.

The response needs not only to be speedy and generous but long-term and consistent. The Jakarta summit in January indicated that countries and governments are reckoning to be in the business of relief and reconstruction for the long haul. As we work together we may see the growth of a deeper, more heart-felt relationship between Australia and the region. Could this sense of unity in the face of immense disaster be a catalyst shaping a new future for our region? It is possible. It could happen if

enough people realistically ask themselves "What am I living for?" and respond to God's call and commit themselves to unselfishness, forgiveness and care.

We are on the cusp of major developments in our region. There is the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomons (RAMSI), the commitment of Australian Federal Police and administrators to assist the Papua-New Guinea government, and now the long-term support and cooperation with Indonesia

post-tsunami. Our conference can demonstrate that there a vital link between these major overseas commitments and what happens here in Australia. We are no longer the remote island continent. Our readiness to build partnerships within Australia across differences of religion and culture and to heighten integrity in the widest sense and marginalise corruption will resonate in the region.

With this in mind, the conference will focus on experience. Speakers from Australia, the Pacific and Asia will tell of initiatives to resolve the problems their communities face, and the new aims and attitudes in people which have led to these initiatives. The conference will be interactive and everyone will have a chance to participate. Themes will include:

- *keys to community and nation building*
- *creating partnerships across cultures and beliefs to heal a divided world*
- *building trust and integrity, and overcoming corruption*
- *families and young people - heartache and hope*

This conference follows on from the MRA-IC conference at Collaroy, Sydney in 2003. As result of that conference, many Solomon Islanders are engaged in a "Clean Election Campaign" to defeat corruption in their forthcoming national elections. And Muslim students in Indonesia are working to build understanding with non-Muslims.

Copies of the report of the 2003 Collaroy conference are available from all MRA-IC centres. They could be useful in introducing people to the concept of the Brisbane conference.

We live in a region of immense cultural and religious diversity:

- ~ some nations are huge, some are tiny;
- ~ some are established democracies, some are emerging from authoritarian rule;
- ~ some economies are dynamic and growing, some are struggling.

Yet technology, wealth and power don't seem to satisfy, or solve our toughest problems. Human nature remains the challenge, whether it's finger-pointing in the family home, the blame-game in parliament or threats and counter-threats internationally. We often feel powerless to effect change where we see it is needed.

Situations can, however, be transformed through honest conversations and the birth of a new spirit in people. Out of the diversity of our region, can we not learn a way of working together which will enable the whole region to thrive, and offer a new approach to a divided world?

(from the conference invitation)

Farmer's dialogue in Thailand

Phil Jefferys, from Manilla, NSW, attended a Farmers Dialogue in Thailand last November which brought together over a hundred agriculturalists from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, India, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Canada, Australia, and Europe, as well as the host country. Phil writes:

"All of us who visited Thailand in November find ourselves especially affected by news of the tsunami. Our thoughts and prayers are with all those involved. Our farmers' dialogue was in the context of another, ongoing, tragedy - the 30,000 who die every day from, mostly preventable, malnutrition and disease.

The following is taken from the official report. The full version can be obtained from Phil Jefferys, "Rosedale", Manilla, NSW 2346, Australia. Tel 02 6785 1945 Email pmjeff@bigpond.com.au

We met at Chiang Mai University in Northern Thailand, a refreshing country where leaders express confidence in, and a vision for, their farmers as food producers. Universal issues arise when farmers meet, no matter which country they come from. A common priority is obtaining an adequate return for their produce in the market place. How the climate in all parts of the world is changing, with differing effects, is also of great concern.

The title of the dialogue, "Changing Direction to Secure Farmers Livelihoods World-Wide" reflects the global outreach of farming. It comes from a document produced by the United States Corn Growers' Association, representing farmers who are offering a sustainable market structure robust enough to stand the stress and strain of the 21st century.

This Farmers' Dialogue was launched on the note of global issues affecting agriculture and the importance of learning from each other. Thailand has opened up to free trade and aims to become the world's kitchen. It is already feeling the effects of cheaper food products being imported from China where input costs are lower.

Sustainable farming

The agricultural faculty that hosted the dialogue has very close links with farmers and an understanding of the issues they face, resulting in research projects that directly benefit the farming community. During the dialogue we heard of many developments: Chomchuan Boonrahong of the Institute of Sustainable Farming Communities reported that nearly 1000 families in the north are now applying the principle of sustainable farming and selling their produce through farmers' markets.

As we learned more about each other a picture emerged of people from many different backgrounds and histories

united by a common love of farming, ways of the countryside and concern for the consumers. This raised the hope that when our purpose is adequate our divisions can be overcome. Farmers respond to the task and responsibility to feed everyone on our planet in a sustainable and permanent way. Keo Salath from Cambodia summed the atmosphere up well when he said,



Prawit Tantawee, Manager, Lanna Products, has found ways of using the waste from mustard seed oil production in various products, including pig and cattle feed. This reduces the flies and smell from pig-manure - very useful for pigs kept in urban areas.

searching for the right English, but with clear conviction, "This should be called the Farmers' Transformation Dialogue because it has everything - new ways of farming, ideology and how to live together."

"I thought we were the only farmers with that problem?" This is the most common remark made when farmers from different countries meet and exchange experiences. The fact that many of our problems are similar may point to similar solutions. Perhaps the item at the top of the list is the farmers' battle to get an honourable price for their products.

After all we saw and discussed, the following points remain as areas of concern:

a) To structure markets and farmers' groups to ensure an honourable return for



Chiang Mai University - the conference venue

all in the food chain.

b) To face up to changing weather patterns and falling water tables and take decisive action.

c) To find ways to make farming attractive to the younger generation.

d) To retain the farmers' freedom in a world of agribusiness, supermarkets and official regulations.

e) To focus on the task of feeding everyone which can be a uniting purpose in a very divided world.

Part of the effectiveness of the occasion is illustrated by the actions delegates were planning to take when they returned home. The three Africans are hoping to hold a series of day events near Kampala; Shailendra Mahato is planning to arrange a Farmers' Dialogue in the autumn of 2005 in his state of Jharkand in the North East of India; others will be arranging exchange visits, some of these between places of agricultural education.

Throughout the time in Thailand we saw initiatives that had been started by individuals or groups and we had evidence from other parts of the world of similar actions. This strengthened the conviction that what each of us does can help create the future we most long for.

In summing up at the end of the Dialogue, our host, Assoc. Prof Puntipa Pongpiachan commented on the experiences of those involved in Initiatives of Change and said "I am very impressed by the speeches given by farmers who have shared their experiences. I can confidently say that this dialogue has enlightened our thinking, leading to new solutions. The voice of a young Cambodian lady who asked for more Thai-Cambodian dialogue to improve the understanding between our two nations is a very good example of what has been started. I hope government officers together with politicians from both sides will use this opportunity too find solutions. This idea can lead to a solution to the conflict in Southern Thailand."

Feverish days in Phnom Penh

Mike Brown visited Cambodia in December on his way back from meetings with the International Council of Initiatives of Change in Eastern Europe. He writes:

I went to Phnom Penh to encourage the young Initiatives of Change team there, and to meet with older friends whom I didn't get to see when we came to Siem Reap for the Asia Pacific Youth Conference in July (*Newsbriefs* no. 206). It's been a long-held hope that we might get these two groups working more together. To some extent it began to happen through the APYC. But the relationship still has been somewhat formal.

But my hopes for the trip took a blow with a sudden bout of flu which started on the flight out from London. I managed the first day meetings, including a lunch with Pannasastra University students and a brief call on an old friend and member of the Constitutional Council, Son Soubert, who generously agreed to host a dinner for some of the young team and the "seniors" to meet on Friday night. But then I was pretty much wiped out for a couple of days on my back, including one really feverish sleepless night when I argued whether it had been right to come at all and prayed to keep my spirit and mind steady. My generous hosts, Delia & Lawrence Gray who work with World Vision, got me to a doctor. I realised I could only do a few essentials and had to give away more ambitious notions.

Blackmail

From my bed I phoned around various friends hoping to get them for the dinner at Soubert's. Not all were available but several were able to come to "assess what's happened so far and to set some ideas for the future". Clearly this was the one real reason for going. I just set the discussion going and sank back in my chair, sniffing and letting it all happen. One guest, Sopeak was in his "training facilitator" prime, asking deeper and deeper questions until each one of the young people had spilled out their experiences of change in detail, what they mean by "sharing" and what they do in "quiet times", what difference it had made to their attitudes to Cambodia, their Saturday night "food programs" (cooking and distributing food for street people). They also talked about the growing dialogue and healing with Vietnam and the visits that some had made there. The dialogue took off in Khmer with some of

the "seniors" swapping stories of handling various attempts to bribe or bully them (including an attempt to blackmail the Deputy Election Commissioner). We never quite got to the quiet time or planning the future. But I think it established a respect and understanding which wasn't there to that extent before.

Part way through the dinner we were joined by Catherine Morris, a conflict resolution trainer from Canada who knew the IofC team there. She was thrilled and eager to link the young Cambodians into her peace networks. Amazingly she gave us the contact details of Mikaela Grönqvist from Finland who had just arrived on a two-year posting in the EU funding office and whom she had bumped into at a reception the night before – both had ending up talking about IofC. ("Mia", as we know her, was in Cambodia earlier this year after spending some months serving at Asia Plateau, the IofC centre in India.) Mia joined a lunch



with the young team the very next day and was right at home.

By the last day the antibiotics had started to kick in, so I could keep my date with Dr Kol Pheng, now Senior Minister of Education, Youth and Sport. The Pannasastra University which he founded back in 1999 now has three highly accredited English Language campuses in fine new multistoried buildings (as Minister he had to resign as President of University). It turned out that his Secretary of State, Pok Than, knew me



The streets of Phnom Penh

from 1992 when I used to visit the Cambodian community centre in Long Beach, SA. Dr Kol was delighted to hear about the exchanges beginning between Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia, the 2004 APYC in Siem Reap, and he was aware of the Initiatives of Change group in Pannasastra.

I then went to lunch with 20 of the young crowd. There's a lot of camaraderie and social contact among the young ones. I asked them each to say what has been most significant since APYC? There are visible steps of change and growth, starting with the girl who returned the USD15 to the Chinese shop keeper, wrongly given as change, and got a wonderful response.

All in all I had the feeling that, as St Paul put it, "God's strength is made perfect in my weakness". And as the plane wheeled out over paddy fields this morning, I thought that MRA-IofC has the potential in Cambodia for some really significant development, if we can assist and facilitate where needed, trusting God in our weakness. Few countries, in my view, have such a mix of:

- young vigorous teams with plenty of action and a process of going deeper in change through their fortnightly meetings, with a committed core of leadership.
- "senior" mentors who understand at least something of the heart and meaning of IofC/MRA and who are being touched and challenged.
- significant political contacts across all parties.
- supportive partners in both local and international NGOs.
- a sharp sense of national needs all rooted in moral issues – corruption, the "flesh-trade", the need to heal raw national and personal wounds, family issues.
- and with all this, a country small enough in its core of movers and shakers to make a difference.

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Tragedy offers chance to build trust

Bahrul Ilmi is a student and one of the leaders of the Initiatives of Change group in Jakarta. He writes:

I'd like to inform you the progress of our Aceh emergency relief work, where we've been working to give temporary shelters (tents), food, electricity and water. The team here is also thinking of holding a program for the children after the tsunami. They have gone through such terrible experiences. Most of them lost their dad and mom suddenly. I feel really sad about it.

This program is initiated by AMAN (Asian Moslem Action Network) led by Mr Shobur from Thailand and Mr Habib Chirzin from the Indonesian National Commission on Human Rights, in cooperation with CORDAID (Catholic Organisation for Relief and Development). I feel so very grateful of CORDAID's help that makes the relief work happen. Mr. Habib Chirzin invited our Initiatives of Change team to join the program. It is such a blessing because we are keen to help our brothers and sisters there in Aceh, but we have no resources at all since most of our members are students, including me. This program is a joint cooperation program of CORDAID, AMAN, YCCI (Youth Coordination Center International), the State Islamic University of Jakarta and Initiatives of Change Indonesia.

I feel really sad and sorry that the tsunami disaster has caused thousands of people to die in some countries. But in this I feel that maybe God has a plan to re-unite the world that has been torn into pieces because of the Iraq war and terrorism. Now, all people from different countries, beliefs and backgrounds have come together had in hand to help the victims. I dream that this spirit may last forever so that there will be no more children who lose their parents because of people's hatred toward each other.

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So pondering these challenges as I looked out the window, I wondered who could really give the leadership needed to develop the potential of these various elements?

John Bond works with MRA-Initiatives of Change in Canberra, and is Secretary of the Australian National Sorry Day Committee. The following extracts are from his letter to the Canberra Times, published 5 January 2005.

The outstanding feature of Australia's response to the tsunami tragedy has been the involvement of the Australian community, evident as local governments, churches, mosques, sports teams, NGOs have raised money for the victims. This could permanently improve relations between Australia and our neighbours. At present we cling to our ties with other Western countries. That is understandable since our culture is largely Western, but it does not make for good relations with our neighbourhood.

The Australian community response suggests that this problem can be overcome. Asian and Western cultures differ in their strengths and weaknesses. If each side highlights its strengths and ignores its weaknesses, this promotes arrogance. If we recognise our weaknesses as well as our strengths, this can build co-operation.

One strength of Western culture is our

Giving something back

Bob Bedwell comes from London, and has just retired after many years working as a health visitor in London's health services. In the sixties he emigrated to Western Australia. One day the cast of the MRA musical, *Wake Up, Matilda* made a presentation in Boans department store, where Bob was working. He got talking with them afterwards. Before long he had left Boans and was part of the musical. After some years, Bob decided to return to London and train as a male nurse.

Recently Bob sent 1,000 pounds towards MRA-Initiatives of Change's work in Australia. "I was mightily looked after in Australia, when I was at the teething stage of faith," he wrote. "I have some savings, and now my pension is coming in. So I would like to give back something, little though it is in comparison with what I gained spiritually."

technical prowess whereas, on the whole, Asian democracies are better at sharing political responsibility among the differing groups which comprise their country.

In most Asian countries, disparate groups have learnt to get along. Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians usually live peaceably with each other. At times conflict breaks out, sometimes becoming entrenched for years, as we have seen in Sri Lanka and Aceh. In Sri Lanka, since the tsunami, there has been co-operation between the opposing sides. Maybe the international presence in Aceh could help develop a similar spirit.

The rebuilding phase will also call for skills which are a strength of Western culture. Let us welcome Indonesians to Australia to learn development skills. Let us send hundreds of skilled technicians to Indonesia to establish training programs.

Out of this tragedy, we could change Asia's perception of Australia. Instead of an outsider to be tolerated, we could become seen as a trusted partner, whose skills and resources can contribute much to the advance of the whole region.

Book talk

Michael Thwaites's new book *Unfinished Journey: collected poems 1932 - 2004* is a treat.

Matthew Abraham of the ABC says "These poems should be in every Australian home."

The book is easy to take on a bus or train. One can read a poem a day for entertainment, to refresh the mind and spirit, or to move one to deeper thought. The well-known poems from his other collections are here, and new ones, some never published before. These include a series of ten "Birthday poems" written for his wife in the years since her death. Literature Board Chair RF Brissenden has called the poems "quietly witty and always well made" and Professor AD Hope wrote of their "effective rhythms and often deeply moving tone".