

Consultation in Lebanon

“Lebanon’s message to the world is that you can overcome your hate”



Beirut was the venue for this year’s Global Consultation for the worldwide network of Initiatives of Change. Twenty-seven people from 18 countries met at a retreat centre outside the Lebanese capital from 30 March - 5 April.

The context for the discussions was the rising level of distrust and violence in the world, and the recent war in Iraq. As one participant noted, “We are building a two-class world and at the same time a borderless world. This is a prescription for trouble.” The purpose of the Consultation was to reflect on the role IC can play in encouraging creative partnerships in situations where people are deeply divided, and to deepen understanding of the relevance of IC’s message and experience.

Much of the focus was naturally on how to build relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims, but this was not the only concern. Africans present told of how they are seeking to promote reconciliation and tackle corruption on their continent.

Fresh articulation

Consultation participants were able to live into the communal tensions in India and neighbouring countries, and hear of encouraging developments. For others present, the spiritual crisis in the West and the breakdown of family life were the most pressing issues.

One distinctive feature was the search for fresh articulation of a vision to kindle new hope that things really can be different in the world. “What can be done,” asks the Consultation report, “to go to the heart of the despair in people and address the poverty, illiteracy and injustice which

often provide the seed-bed for extremism? In a world where civilisations confront each other and age-old values are being discarded, how can people be reminded that God

the El-Sadr Foundation for health and social education, whose family have been among the leaders of the Shi’ite community for hundreds of years. She said, “Lebanon’s message for the world

is that you can overcome your hate.” Greek Orthodox Bishop George Khodr, a noted voice of Christians in the Middle East, also addressed the Consultation. He noted that there had been long periods in history when Muslims, Jews and Christians had lived together peaceably, and that the experiences of the crusades, of colonisation and of missionary activity were the greatest causes of antagonism towards those coming from the West.

On visits in Beirut, one group visited Sayed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, a prominent Shi’ite spiritual leader. He described human beings as divine in origin, but becoming like muddy rivers; IC’s work, he said, was to help people take the rocks and the dirt out of their rivers. Another group were welcomed by leaders of the Bourj El-Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp. The camp is a crowded mass of tenement buildings connected by a labyrinth of narrow passages and open drains. Palestinian refugees may not return home, and have no passports, restricted opportunities to work, and cannot leave the country with any certainty that they will be allowed back. American Dick Ruffin, responding to the hosts’ welcome, regretted his country’s lack of even-handed policies towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and acknowledged his shame as a Christian for the mistreatment of the Jews by European Christians over hundreds of years.

Report taken from www.iofc.org.

The following statement was agreed by the Consultation:

An overarching vision for change

The situation of the world today is increasingly intolerable for many and unsustainable for all. The political tools and leadership to heal it are weak or absent, and communications have so shrunk the world that there is no avoiding the consequences.

It is a new situation, not simply an extension of the old, and the old tools - diplomacy, power-balancing and military force - are not on their own competent to deal with it.

What is needed is a revolutionary application of faith and conscience. This will come as much from ordinary people taking leadership and responsibility as from traditional elites. This is the path to a new culture of caring. This is the source of hope the world needs.

Change is possible. Changed, committed people can change the world.

has purposes for mankind and a unique way of suggesting solutions to problems? It is a dangerous moment for mankind, but also one full of opportunity for ordinary people to make a difference.”

Specific decisions taken at the Consultation include: to intensify “vigorous dialogues between Muslims and non-Muslims”; support and expand IC’s treatment of global issues of poverty and injustice; assist the American IC team’s continuing effort to address racial and religious divisions and to develop leadership in different sectors of American society; and to support IC peace-making programs in Africa, and in particular the *Clean Africa Campaign*.

In addition to the formal and informal meetings, Consultation participants were able to meet with prominent figures in Lebanese society including Mrs Rabab El-Sadr, head of

The journey continues...

After leaving India, the Action for Life team has split into two. One group, which includes Australians Natasha Davis and Rob Wood, as well as Frederic and Pilar Griffin (USA), Wambui Nguyo (Kenya), Peter Heyes (Canada), Violeta Frimu (Moldova), Ngan Lay (Malaysia), Vuth Kim (Cambodia), Laura Trevelyan and Bhavesh Patel (UK), has been in Thailand before heading on to Cambodia. They write:

The most important member of a Thai family is the guest."

Our hosts Naruemol Kunaanogool, a Buddhist, and Piyasuth Attipumipon, a Muslim, lived up to this Thai saying during our nine days there, giving us a taste of Thai society, culture and cuisine and introducing us to people engaged in health development with the basic idea that "the health of a country is its real wealth".

Our first meeting was with Ajarn Sulak Sivalaksa, a social campaigner who stands up for honesty in civil/political life. We heard how monks are working in the villages and caring for the environment. They bless the water in the lakes so people respect them and don't pollute them. Sivalaksa also believes that world peace will not be possible until each one of us cultivates inner peace. He stressed the need for critical self-awareness, and having good friends that tell you what you don't want to hear. We were also very inspired by his humble attitude towards Cambodia when he said, "We have been exploiting Cambodia. We have also looked down on their people. If we are sensitive we could become nice neighbours."

Our visit to the Foundation of the Islamic Centre of Thailand gave us an understanding of the work their leaders are doing to help their community care for the whole country. Disturbances affecting the Islamic community in southern Thailand in the first months of this year have been the focus of media attention. Corruption rather than religion may be the cause but the latter at times becomes a convenient smoke-screen.

The rest of our days were spent in Bangkok. Bangkok is full of temples and historical sites, and the river is a great way to get about the city. We met the International Network of Engaged Buddhists. They believe that spirituality is the basis for everything and their aim is to help people realise their capacity to learn. All action, whether it be in business, politics, agriculture, can be used as a tool to develop people's spirits. They work

with all sectors of society, training businessmen, monks, and farmers.

We visited the National Health Foundation, which works alongside the government on health research, public policy, and bioethics. One of their forthcoming projects is to look at the spiritual health of Thai society as materialism continues to undermine its basic fabric.

Major themes include peace, ageing, death and dying, volunteerism, emotional love, the female perspective, deep ecology, agriculture, secular spirituality, consumerism and inter-faith dialogue. The young scientist who will be heading up this program has asked us and IC generally for whatever assistance we can give.

We left for the Thai/Cambodia border early in the morning in air-conditioned minibuses and spent the final three hours on the back of a truck with natural air-conditioning for all! The sun was setting as we cruised through Cambodia, and was a very warm welcome to the next hot part of our adventure.

in Sri Lanka...

Meanwhile Australians Mike and Jean Brown, Clara Cheong and Chris Lancaster, along with John Freebury (Canada), Ilze Gutmane (Latvia), Altaf Khan (India), Aparna Khatri (Fiji/India), Nandor Lim (Malaysia), Min-Hui Na (South Korea) and Katia Zirjanova (Russia) have been in Malaysia. On the way from India to Malaysia, Aparna, Chris and Ilze spent about 17 hours in Sri Lanka – perhaps the shortest country visit in all of AFL's outreaches! Chris Lancaster writes:

We were so grateful to meet with friends, particularly the four students who were to have joined *AFL* in India but were prevented by government restrictions. They were part of a group who took part in a six-day Initiatives of Change seminar a year ago at their school outside Colombo. On this visit we were able to meet with seven of those students (who had travelled on up to 8 buses to reach us!) and, later,

with the founder of their school, Dr Antony Fernando. The school provides English language tuition for young people from rural areas in order to give them access to the wider world. It also includes a strong component of "character building".

We shared dinner with MRA-IC friends from Colombo before returning to the airport. In this marvellous day there was also somehow time for a swim in the Indian Ocean – yet another reason for much gratitude, and wishing we could have stayed longer!

...and in Malaysia

After a week of sightseeing and spiritual preparation in Penang the team divided into pairs for two weeks of internships with different organisations in and around Kuala Lumpur.

Aparna and Katia write:

Formally dressed and mentally prepared for internship at a corporate training NGO, we entered the office of People Potential (PP) and found that the atmosphere was much more friendly, relaxed and creative than we had expected. That is a part of this company's unconventional policy: values and people first. "Having worked in a corporate world," says Aparna, "I see that PP is really trying to do things differently with a constant 'Kaisen' attitude. They don't work or associate with tobacco or alcohol companies. It's been a breath of fresh air."

"Time with PP reinforced the feeling that this is the field I want to work in and am passionate about," says Katia. "I am looking forward to experiencing one of their trainings where we'll be observers." The company's motto (*Unfolding human potential*) is quite in line with Initiatives of Change, as was discovered during the presentation we made at PP. After that Terry Netto, the managing director, e-mailed his crew saying that if they want to come to Cambodia for the Asia-Pacific Youth Conference he will help them raise funds.

Min-Hui and Chris write:

We are working in the counselling department of a private secondary residential school outside Kuala Lumpur. At least once a week we meet every class in the school. Recently bullying has been a big issue in Malaysia. So this school is focussing on that through an Anti-Bullying

Globalisation, as if people mattered

Antoine Jaulmes is an engineer with PSA Peugeot Citroën in Paris. His wife is Dutch and they are both involved in the work of IC. He offered his perspectives on globalisation for the weekly commentary section of the Initiatives of Change international website (www.iofc.org).

Like many others, my company, a European car company, is engaged in globalisation – and I am personally involved. Globalisation in itself is nothing new. But for many years, selling our products throughout the world used to be the only form of globalisation around, and that did seem a safe if somewhat unfair world order. (In other words, depriving other regions of their fair share of jobs never was much of a conscience problem.) But the new trend is for companies to go and buy the components they need wherever they are cheapest instead of buying them next door as they used to. Globalisation is therefore now associated with fear – the fear of job losses, of the decline of our industries and of national impoverishment.

Obviously, the companies themselves have little choice. Trying to ignore economic realities would mean a more or less swift, but sure bankruptcy. As for individuals... well, they tend to behave like the companies. Let the ones who have never bought a less expensive or more attractive product produced in a far away country throw the first stone...

What are the risks? The advocates of alternative forms of development are very vocal about them. Joseph Stiglitz, winner of the 2001 Nobel prize for Economics, is quoted in a World Social Forum publication as follows: "Due to trade liberalisation, national markets

are opened up to speculative capital flow. When foreign investment enters a country, it produces an economic 'boom'. But very soon the foreign investment moves out from a country, leaving it with worsened economic and political conditions." In the same publication, Benedicto Martinez, Vice President of the Mexican Workers' Trade Union, warns that the multinational corporations are now closing down the *maquiladoras*, the famous low-cost factories recently set-up in exporting zones in Mexico, and moving them to India and China, where labour is much cheaper.

On the other hand, how can India and China meet the basic needs of their huge populations? Until recently, this seemed impossible. Socialist reforms, international solidarity and development aid programs were repeatedly tried but brought temporary relief at best. As a student I spent two months doing development work in a south Indian city called Sattur. The daily salary for unskilled workers there was six rupees, not much even by local standards. If a family was to earn a living at all, women and children had to work too – for between one and three rupees a day – often at a local match factory. Your heart sank when you visited the factory where school-aged children spent a 12-hour day lining up scores of minute wooden sticks on rulers.

Luckily, the situation has improved since then, in line with the general success of Indian manufacturers in the global market – thanks both to their own efforts and to some lowering of the trade barriers by the more developed nations. Now 29% of the Indian population lives below the national poverty line, compared to 36% five years ago. More generally, manufactured goods now represent 80% of the exports of emerging countries whereas 35 years ago minerals and agricultural products amounted to 75% of the total. The ILO has revised its 1996 estimate of the number of children at work globally from 250 to 211 million. This is still far too high, but we are moving in the right direction, fairly quickly. If sustained, the current growth rate in China and India of about 8% a year would mean a doubling of the GDP in just nine years.

Meeting human needs

If globalisation is able to raise the level of income so that the sons and daughters of modest families can attend school, and even enjoy a few consumer goods, while their parents benefit from improved working conditions, I have no hesitation in calling this a positive and potent change in the world.

Globalisation is not good or bad in itself. Certainly there are very real risks and nobody believes that market mechanisms are going to solve every problem in the world (for instance the problems of the third of humankind who live outside the strong growth zones). But when the incredible power of the market can be directed at promoting development and human dignity let's not fight the wrong fight. Directing the energy of the market towards meeting human needs is exactly what international institutions ranging from the World Bank to the International Labour Office are trying to do, with in-depth reflection on the globalisation process and many positive results. Of course, they have their shortcomings and the vigilance of ordinary citizens is more necessary than ever, in local as well as global issues. What is clear is that a principle-based human dimension always needs to be present at the heart of the debates and of the decisions. Just as humanitarian concern and moral principles have mitigated the effects of natural disasters, human concern should have the last word in shaping the direction of economic globalisation.

Action for Life - continued

Campaign. Through being here we are learning much more about Malaysian society.

Ilze and Clara write:

We have had a challenging time working as interns in a nursing home for the abandoned handicapped and homeless. There are very few funds coming in to support the home and its existence depends on a lot of faith that the public will donate provisions, funds and their time. It is inspiring to see the determination of the Director who initially started the home as a business, but soon realised that there was a need for charity to come first and opened his doors to all in need. He does not turn away anyone.

John and Altaf write:

Our internship is with JUST International, a non-government organisation working for human rights advocacy and international awareness. We were asked to assess the way they operate and to provide technical assistance wherever possible. We attended a talk by four prominent speakers on Palestine in the Islamic University of Malaysia and learned about the aboriginal peoples through our host Angelina, who took us to her church for a gathering on the Orang Asli religion. Altaf spoke at a local mosque on how Muslims can be active in their communities. And we both spoke publicly at the offices of JUST International on the subject of cultural relations and harmony in Canada and Kashmir in India.

Solomon Islands conference – 21-24 June, 2004

With the 'Winds of Change' conference convened by MRA/IC in the Solomon Islands just two months away, we print part of the invitation. The budget is \$41,390 and we are praying for ways and means to meet all the costs. "In country" expenses amount to \$11,400, the rest relating to overseas support work and foreign travel to the Solomons.. Anyone wishing to contribute financially please send to **MRA - Initiatives of Change** earmarked for the 'Winds of Change' conference.

'Winds of Change' – from tension to transformation

A Conference to Help Rebuild Personal and Public Integrity and Ethnic Harmony

Keynote address, **Sir Fr John Ini Lapli**

Conference themes will include:

- **The heart of transformation** (daily)
- **How can we go forward together – can I forgive?**
- **Decisions for the future that can make a difference**
- **Healing the past, building the future**
- **Honesty, trust and good governance**
- **Corruption – who cares?**

Universal problems

These are not just Solomon Islands' problems. All across the world communities struggle with conflicts, corruption and chaos. They cause human suffering, poverty, hunger, unemployment, crime and a lack of services. Yet in most places there are enough resources for everyone. What can make the difference?

The other side of the coin

Yes, of course we need civil and administrative order. But this is only one side of the coin. The other is the human side – integrity of leadership and conduct at all levels of the community, as well as relationships of trust, respect and responsibility between each other.

Changes are needed

We need to treat everyone with honour and respect. We need complete honesty in our personal dealings. We need a determination to put right the wrongs of the past, and a wholehearted effort to build national unity.

A beacon of hope

In the past years we have experienced the tragedy of violent conflict and civil collapse. Now as we emerge from the shadows we can be a beacon of hope for the Pacific. This conference will focus on how that can happen – a task in which everyone is needed.

Global club helps build a home

On Saturday 25 April members of the Armagh-based Global Club linked up with members of the *Habitat for Humanity (HHH)* organisation to do their bit for Melbourne families. The Global Club's original aim was to bring together "young to heart" people from different backgrounds. True to this aim, a group made up of people from Mauritius to Moldova joined HHH to work on a house that will be made available to a needy family.

Over a five-hour period, we stripped linoleum from floors, dismantled a bathroom, weeded enormous tracts of garden, filled in holes and prepared floors for painting and polishing. HHH had earlier used apprentices from a local TAFE college, steel from BHP and

"sweat equity"

other donations of tools, products and time to do much of the previous work to prepare a run-down home for a family to move in to. This home will shortly join the other 45 completed in Australia over the past 13 years.

Under the Christian-based HHH scheme, an eligible family must themselves work on the home for at least 500 hours (known as "sweat equity") and pay a \$500 deposit before purchasing the house on a "no profit, no interest" basis. Over recent years, the Global Club has linked up with other community organisations to complete many practical tasks that have emphasised to each of us that we all have something to contribute if we are willing to donate time and effort.

Frank Maguire



Open Homes reminder:

SUNDAY 6 June is International *Open Homes Open Hearts* day – an opportunity for Australians of all backgrounds to reach out to people from another culture, faith or ethnic background by inviting them into their homes to share a cup of tea or a meal.