

A 'coalition of the willing' to renew our civilisation

In June 1939 my father left his young pregnant wife at home, added to their mortgage, risked his job and took a few months' leave to travel by ship to Los Angeles. On 19 July, as Europe armed itself for war which came just weeks later, he and 30,000 people crammed into the Hollywood Bowl for the US launch of a movement of "moral re-armament – the ordinary man's opportunity to remake the world."

"The clouds of fear and uncertainty hang heavy over nations," said its initiator, Frank Buchman. (Notice the feeling of *deja vu*?)

"Hate and fear are at work everywhere," Buchman continued his two and a half minute speech. "Everyone of us longs for permanent peace. But longing for peace is not enough. There must be a fight against the causes of conflict, against selfishness, greed and hate."

Shafts of light

Shooting into the night sky above the Hollywood Bowl were four shafts of light. Buchman pointed to them and suggested that "absolute honesty, absolute unselfishness, absolute love and absolute purity... are the four standards of personal, national and international life."

We don't quite think of them that way, do we – if we think of them at all? More than any other commodity, morality has been privatised right out of the public market. It has become a matter of absolute personal choice, like your taste for caviar or hip-hop.

To freedom-loving Westerners – who view freedom as a right to live as we like and define our values to fit – such stark principles as "absolute purity" and "absolute unselfishness" seem downright repressive. Freedom is surely meant for the unfettered

expression of "self" so why would anyone be "unselfish"? Love is great as long as it's "love the way I like it"; and honesty means just being upfront about "truth the way I see it".

We forget that moral absolutes are a framework of principles designed to mirror the absoluteness of God's love and truth. We have mostly forgotten God anyway, except when tragedy drives us back to Him.

As war looms we feel threatened by Weapons of Mass Destruction in the hands of others. But hopelessness, fear, greed, addiction and, yes, violence wreak destruction within our own "developed" societies. By promoting this underside of our culture through entertainment and news, parts of the communications industry themselves become "weapons of mass destruction", killing consciences and poisoning our perception of any good and evil.

Which is why those four shafts of light above Hollywood Bowl stand today, as in 1939, in stark contrast to the culture Hollywood and our Western media have often propagated.

*'Longing for peace is not enough.
There must be a fight against
the causes of conflict, against
selfishness, greed and hate'*

Last weekend a young Australian, having just come from a Peace Rally in Brisbane, glowed with the thought that we live at a defining moment of history (which we do) in which we would see the collapse of the "American civilisation", as other civilisations have collapsed throughout history.

At first I reacted. I wasn't sure how

he defined "American civilisation"; but I had an uncomfortable hunch it includes much of the way we live and do things in Australia, too.

Then reflecting a bit more, I thought maybe his word was prophetic in a Biblical sort of way. Sackcloth and ashes won't help. But what might would be re-implanting those moral absolutes in relationships scarred by all sorts of abuse, in communities fractured by prejudice and inequalities, in a natural environment polluted way out of balance, in economic systems skewed by greed and HIH/ Enron collapses, in politics, arts, education...

Truth is, absolute love, honesty, selflessness, purity – embraced as penetrating positives – are not repressive but keys to liberation: for ourselves and for our culture. As much as principles for personal living, they are civilisation values.

Different paradigm

Rather than the "clash of civilisations" paradigm (which, if it is allowed to define international policies, will only create more clash), could we not find a "dialogue between civilisations" paradigm to meet the need of moral renewal of our culture, a common cause to which sincere Muslims, Christians and people of all faiths can together apply themselves?

I take heart from the thousands who left their weekend comforts to march for peace. No doubt, they were stirred by some of the same sentiments that stirred my father to sacrifice and go to America. But we need to go far enough. We cannot march effectively for peace unless we build it in our schools and communities. Unless we

work on it humbly and honestly with our neighbours in the region, like Indonesia and the Pacific states. Unless we create it through our treatment of the most marginalised, including those desperate for asylum and survival. Unless we find it through "doing justly" with original Australians.

In the end we need the moral absolutes to give us clear criteria, personally and nationally, for finding real freedom and curing the root causes of conflict. Is there a "coalition of the willing" who will make them dynamic working principles for social renewal?

– Mike Brown, Adelaide

Together we can make a world of difference

Huge opportunities and challenges in weeks ahead

When a regional conference was first proposed back 18 months ago, some of the themes suggested seemed pretty relevant:

- w Weaving the fabric of peace
- w Who is my neighbour?
- w Healing the past and building for the future
- w Strengthening trust and common cause between people of different faiths and cultures.

Since then events in the world, our region and nation have brought the need for working answers into sharper focus. Those who come to the Collaroy Centre during 23 - 27 April will have a lot more than Sydney's scenic northern beaches to ponder.

Starting the Wednesday after Easter and incorporating the Anzac Day long weekend, the conference will be a forum for 200-250 people from a wide range of cultures and experiences to share, encourage and challenge each other. For all who would like to be involved – whether attending the conference or supporting the process – we give this update of the possibilities and challenges as plans for the program take shape.



Who is coming?

A potent mix of people is being drawn together.

Ex-militia fighters from three different conflicts will be there. **Letlapa Mphahlele** was a commander in the South African Azanian People's Liberation Army who in last months has asked forgiveness of communities he had attacked. As mentioned in last NEWSBRIEFS **Hisham Shihab**, a sniper during the Lebanese civil war, will be in Sydney with four other Lebanese, Muslim and Christian, who are working to bring reconciliation in their country. Closer to home, **Matthew Wale** of the Solomon Islands Christian Council plans to come with a militia fighter from the war that ripped through their country.

Finding common cause across the religious divides will be another focus. A Muslim MP from South Africa, **Farouk Mahomed Cassim**, will tell of efforts to assist the search for peace in the Middle East. **Rev Mother Park**, leader of Won Buddhism in Korea, will attend. Indonesian student leader **Bahrul Muhammad** started a multi-faith group in Jakarta after the visit of an MRA group last year. **Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri**, a Malaysian artist and spokesperson

for "Sisters in Islam" is coming with Australian artists having conducted a workshop for refugees in SA.

Our need to deepen the processes of reconciliation and community building will be addressed by indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. **Doris Pilkington**, a patron of the Journey of Healing, has agreed to present the story of her mother as shown in the film, **Rabbit Proof Fence**. Two people at the heart of the Myall Creek Massacre memorial are coming. Several from the **Hope in the Cities** racial dialogue network in America will be there.

Experienced campaigners will bring evidence of the battle against corruption. **Joseph Karanja** and **Liu Ren-Jou**, founders of Clean Election Campaigns that have enlisted hundreds of thousands of voters in resisting bribes in Kenya and Taiwan respectively, will be there. So, too, **Patricia Mukhim**, a journalist from northeast India who has led a public stand against extortion. From Nagaland **Neichute Duolo** has started to recruit a generation of young entrepreneurs who refuse the lure of "quick money".

The list goes on, with others from Papua New Guinea, Fiji, New Zealand, India, USA, Canada and several European countries.

Who will be speaking?

With such a fascinating array of people, making space for each will be a challenge. The emphasis will be on sharing and interaction – a forum where many people can speak briefly rather than few long papers.

Some speakers have been invited to contribute at particular sessions, however. For instance, **Rev Tim Costello** will speak at the opening dinner with **Dr Cornelio Sommaruga**, former president of the

International Red Cross Committee and now president of the Caux Initiatives of Change Foundation in Switzerland.

Jackie Huggins, co-chair of Reconciliation Australia, and **Sam Akoitai**, Minister of Mining in the PNG government, will also speak.

At a public meeting towards the end of the conference, shadow foreign minister **Kevin Rudd** will address the question, "Who is my neighbour?" Other invited speakers are yet to confirm.

What will the program be?

It will be a dynamic process, depending on people and needs, right up until it happens. Broadly:

23 April: after registration, the **Opening dinner**.

24 April: under the theme "**Communities working together for peace and justice**", a stream of personal and community initiatives will illustrate how

people have confronted fears and prejudices to build bridges of understanding and action with others. As the day progresses, a brainstorming session will look at the idea of launching a national "**Open Homes Listening Hearts**" day to break through cultural barriers. The evening will be given to the Lebanese group to present their evidence of reconciliation at work.

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PROGRAM: Continued from previous page

25 April: Anzac Day. Looking at the theme "**Honesty, trust and good governance making a world of difference**", a range of people will share experiences on tackling corruption and applying an ethical basis for business, public and professional life. In the afternoon working groups will form to interact on the issues and begin to map out combined initiatives.

26 April: highlight of the day will be the public meeting when Sydney residents are expected also, to consider the searching question "**Who is my neighbour?**" A blend of invited speakers, short contributions and music will focus for Australia issues at the heart of our national character, and (hopefully) launch a national initiative to reach out to neighbours, at home and abroad.

27 April (half day): a final opportunity for personal decisions and joint "initiatives of change" to be shared. As the invitation states, "Anyone can be a peacemaker, a reconciler, an agent of change."

Each day will include times for morning reflections and silence, group discussions and person-to-person encounters, and chances to enjoy the beautiful surroundings of Collaroy.

How to confirm participation?

Printed invitations/ application forms are available from the *Conference Secretary*,

81 Jacaranda Ave, Figtree NSW 2525 Tel: (02) 4226 6525
e-mail: collaroy_conference@mra.org.au

Most motel units have been booked. However, plenty of cabin accommodation still remains. The "Early Bird" discounts of 10 percent (\$50 registration plus \$225 all costs included), due to close on 28 February, have been extended two weeks until 14 March. All applications must be in by Monday 2 April.

What are the needs, challenges?

Obviously, such an undertaking is a huge venture of faith, teamwork and courage. That is so also for many individuals and families, for whom the costs of travel and accommodation may stretch the family budget. The response to the concept from overseas participants, many of whom come from developing countries, enlarges the financial challenge considerably. For instance, the five Lebanese, who responded to an invitation of the Australian MRA network, will contribute part of their airfares but an estimated further \$12,000 will be needed. Ten people from difficult situations in the Pacific states – such as Solomon Islands, PNG and Tonga – also need supporting (estimated at \$12,000). Some from India and Indonesia, again coming on invitation, are raising funds in various ways but need help (estimated \$7,000). Altogether, the budget deficit mounts to around \$36,000.

If you wish to assist any of these people to come, contributions can be made out to "MRA-Initiatives of Change", and sent to the conference secretary or the address at the bottom of page 4.

Such financial challenges demand faith. Yet as we face together the need to make "a world of difference" through the lives and situations represented at the conference, the faith of each of us will be stretched even further. We can all be part of meeting that call.

Cambodia farmers have their say

In 2001 Son Soubert, a member of Cambodia's Constitutional Council, attended a MRA-hosted Farmers' Dialogue held in India and returned home determined to hold a similar dialogue in his country. Phil Jefferys, a pastoralist from Broken Hill and now Manilla, NSW, went twice to Phnom Penh for several weeks to help organise the dialogue. He and his wife Margaret have just returned and write:

Eighty five percent of Cambodia's population of 11.5 million live in the countryside. By nature a peaceful and gentle people, they are mostly hard-working but poorly-educated farmers who eke out a living on one acre, barely able to grow enough rice to feed themselves and their families.

The theme for our dialogue was "**What can farmers do to answer poverty and strengthen the Cambodian economy?**"

The weeks before were busy with issuing invitations, finding a venue, arranging travel, food and accommodation for over 70 farmers (more than half of whom were women) who came into Phnom Penh for the conference. Farmers from UK, France, Poland, Germany, Thailand, India, Japan, and Malaysia also came.

The venue was to be the Cambodian Agricultural Research and Development Institute, but because of political sensitivities it was changed to the Juliana Hotel. Then on 29 January, mobs attacked the Thai Embassy and Thai-owned businesses, including the Juliana. From our bedroom window we could see smoke rising from the burning hotel. No panic. We just moved the venue to World Vision – and for the third time had to issue invitations by letter-drops, phone, fax and e-mail, ably assisted by students who took time off from their studies or work (They had been at the MRA-IC *Asia Pacific Youth Conference* in Malaysia last July).

Finally, after Buddhist monks blessed the auditorium, Prince Norodom Ranariddh officially declared the dialogue open. Keynote speaker Dr K Balasubramanian from India described how Indian farmers and village women were creating "self help" groups. The similarities between Cambodian and Indian rice farming could lead to further exchanging experiences and ideas.

Rather than asking questions, many of the farmers took the opportunity to unload some of the issues that were affecting their lives.

Group discussions looked at food security, the role of women, seed banks and credit, bio-agriculture, integrated pest management and management of natural resources.

Before and after the dialogue, international guests were taken on field trips to farms in the provinces. They saw trials being made by one NGO on "Systems of Rice Intensification" – where, through non-traditional methods, yields can be increased from 1.5 tonnes per hectare to 3 or 4 tonnes – and saw another NGO helping farmers to form self-help groups. In Siem Reap they looked at farming projects run by FAO.

Empowered by 'Life Matters'...

The nine-day "Life Matters" course for "shaping a path and purpose for living" is conducted twice a year at Armagh, the MRA-IC centre in Melbourne. In February, the Australians from three different ethnic backgrounds took part. Overseas participants came from New Zealand, Iran, Zimbabwe and Korea.

Clara Cheong, a student of arts and commerce from Sydney, tells of a personal step she has taken since the "Life Matters" course:

Empowerment to make a positive difference to our world, particularly in the current climate, is an amazing gift that the *Life Matters* course and MRA-IC have given to me.

The most significant part of this gift is the fact that this positive difference starts with change in myself. The link between world problems such as poverty, environmental degradation, war and corruption with conflict at the individual level is a confronting realisation. This means that if I truly want to contribute to a better world, I need to resolve the conflict within my own heart and within my own home first.

With the support and encouragement of the Armagh team and phenomenal *Life Matters* buddies, taking steps to resolve conflict within myself has become a clear and essential goal. What is particularly wonderful about this goal is that it can be achieved. My first step has been to apologise to my mother for tension within our relationship, and in doing so I have just begun a journey to world peace.

... and touched by trusting relationships

Jonathan Field, a 22 year-old Melbourne businessman with a computer software development company, took time away from his work to be part of the course:

I was touched by the teamwork and community spirit that prevailed through the entire *Life Matters* course. To say "touched" is an understatement – for me, it was truly inspirational. It gave me great hope to build stronger, more loving communities at home and in my "social" circles. I am self-employed and overworked in my business. One of the great challenges facing me was how to balance work and relationships. I had always hoped for meaningful friendships with people of both genders. It was something I knew in theory, but I really felt like I tasted it for perhaps the first time during the course.

There are many other things that I learned during the course, but for me even just this one thing was invaluable. I now feel equipped to take some steps down that road of building deep, opening, trusting relationships all around me.

Through the fire storm

On 18 January, 85 year-old Marjorie Bates and all residents of Mirinjani Retirement Village were evacuated as bush fires hit the Canberra suburbs. She remembers:

The inferno that hit Canberra on 18 January was so unexpected and unprecedented that nothing could have stopped it. The fire fighters did their best, but in several suburbs whole streets of houses just exploded into flames. Most families had no time to collect their valuables.

As our Mirinjani Village was evacuated, there was no panic. The staff quietly urged us onto the buses.

For many, things will never be the same. Several friends in our church have lost their homes and their possessions. In one suburb alone 250 homes were destroyed. Four houses in McCubbin Street, only a metres from Mirinjani, were completely burnt. I had the thought to make some

If they only knew

In Tirana, Albania, a group of Muslim families have begun the practice – along with their study of the Koran and regular prayers – of listening to God or the Inner Voice. It started when some of them visited Caux; and now these "quiet times" have become a part of their lives. One of the keenest is the 15 year old Emi who, since she was 13, has spent a few minutes in silent listening every day. An Englishman, Dick Channer, who shared this practice with them on his visits to Albania, sent Emi the "19 good reasons for having a quiet time" (see NEWSBRIEFS August issue). This is part of Emi's reply:

"The quiet time is a personal spiritual discipline. It is a true quiet voice that comes from the deepness of our heart. It is also a daily discipline. It is true because we can't lie to ourselves. It is quiet because we can't hear it as we listen to the radio... I think it is true for people all over the world.

"There are lot of people who do not know what the Inner Voice is, so they don't have a quiet time like we do. There are people who do evil things and at night they think about what they have done. These people who aren't looking after the world but are just destroying it, if they only knew something about the Inner Voice, I think they would completely change.

"Inner Voice – the Truth of the Life. I think it is one of the main things that makes people change and know what is right and what is wrong. If people loved each other and did good things the world would be so different... I think the Inner Voice is contact with God... It is wonderful having a contact with God."

"Anzac biscuits" and take them to McCubbin Street.

I saw some people in a garage between two burnout houses, so I offered them the biscuits. One man just threw his arms around me and hugged me. He said that people had been so kind – perfect strangers, including teenagers.

I was inspired to write these verses which were later read at our Mirinjani chapel and at Wesley church:

*When trials and tribulations, tragedies and traumas,
when fires explode around us, doubts and devastation,
we cry in desperation*

*"O where is God - does he not care?"
But through the earthquake, wind and fire
there comes the still small Voice -*

*"I share with you your pain and loss and sadness;
I am with you in this ordeal
to comfort and sustain you.*

*Just trust in Me and you will see eventually
Your pain will turn to gladness."*