



Initiatives of Change

Towards an 'Asian community' - With Gandhi in Japan

Mike Brown from Adelaide joined Rajmohan Gandhi and his wife Usha for a week hosted by IofC Japan, as part of the IofC International President's 14-nation "Voyage of dialogue and discovery". Mike writes:

In 1955 four Australian ex-servicemen visited Japanese Prime Minister Ichiro Hatoyama. Les Norman, a Liberal politician, had been a prisoner-of-war in Changi. Gil Duthie, a Labor MP, had lost his brother on the Burma railroad. The two others were war-time airmen Jim Coulter and Stan Shepherd.

Their two-week mission seeking reconciliation, hosted by MRA (IofC) Japan and financed by ex-servicemen and women in Australia, was "the most rewarding experience of my 30 years in politics", said Duthie, then ALP Chief Whip in Canberra. On return they delivered a message of goodwill to Australian Prime Minister Menzies who, within two years, went on his first postwar visit to Japan and then welcomed Prime Minister Kishi to Canberra where Kishi made his historic apology in Parliament House. (Full story in my book, *No Longer Down Under*. Grosvenor Books 2002).

Last month Hatoyama's grandson – the current Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama – welcomed Rajmohan Gandhi, President of IofC International, in his office. Gandhi appreciated Hatoyama's focus on understanding the moral roots of economic crisis, and his striving for an East-Asian community,

which Gandhi suggested could be based on agreed moral principles.

Gandhi's message to the Prime Minister was simple. In the following week he repeated and expanded it in speeches, receptions, media interviews and at the 33rd Annual international conference of IofC Japan which came at the end of his stay.

He spelt it out in a two hour lecture before 230 at the Yukio Ozaki Memorial Foundation. Ozaki is known as Japan's "father of parliamentary government" and Gandhi began by recalling Ozaki's daughter, Yukika Sohma, "one of the most unforgettable people I have met... Her love for Japan was combined with care for the whole world."

Picking up Hatoyama's concept of forming an East-Asian community, Gandhi urged it go further: that Japan should lead in forming "an independent Asia community", spanning all the countries from East Asia to South-East, Central and West Asia, to shoulder the burdens of the planet in cooperation with, not opposition to, the West.

Initiatives of Change was supporting such a vision "by creating a non-state, small-scale, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious community across Asia where we know one another, care for



Rajmohan Gandhi with President of the House of Councillors, Satsuki Eda, and other Senators.

another, are sensitive to one another".

Back in the Sixties I remember we talked of a "strategic triangle" of Japan, India and Australia working together to counter the expanding Communist materialism. Today humanity faces the global challenges of economic chaos, inexcusable poverty and suffering, and climate change.

Gandhi saw a future Asian community as: democratic, free of imposition of any religious or sectarian views, working for the reduction of the nuclear danger and peaceful resolution of disputes, "pro-poor, pro-weak and therefore, pro-women". It would work for a clean environment, and would place "need over greed, bread over bombs".

The response, at the lecture and everywhere, demonstrated that there is a hunger and a capacity in Japan to break out of the self-absorption of its present economic woes and to respond to such a challenge.

At the Global Consultation, Romania

Alex Birnberg is currently working with IofC in Romania and attended the Global Consultation in April in Cluj - the first to be held in Eastern Europe. He gives his impressions:

It would have been hard to have a more dramatic ending to a Global Consultation (GC). Unprecedented, large scale changes had been agreed to by delegates from all over the world. A new International Council had been selected, and a new strategic direction envisaged. To top it all off, a volcano exploded almost as a giant exclamation

mark. We had started the Global Consultation aware of how potentially historic it could be. On the table was a very ambitious agenda: to look at the strategic use of Caux, and to decide on new global governance. What really emerged was the need to focus on our internal relationships and to be clear on our key ideas. As the three days set



Outside the library in Baia Mare. Alex Birnberg, second from right.

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aside for looking at Caux began to wane, there was a sense that not enough had been achieved. This naturally led to discussions around the key ideas of our network; what do we represent, what are we really trying to do and how are we trying to do it? All these theories,

swirling around, just made me want to get out of there, and get on with, as I saw it, the “real work”. During the selection process for the International Council, a team of us left with Rajmohan and Usha Gandhi for presentations in Baia Mare. At the local library, our Club for Young Leaders had

been busy, inviting friends, bringing fruit and generally filled with excitement at the event. It was here that Rajmohan gave a clear challenge: live to make others great. With this ringing in my head, I knew that there are some clear tasks just waiting to be done.

Creators of Peace - space and laughter

In South Australia...

Over the last seven weeks, following eight information sessions around the state, four Creators of Peace Circles were formed in Tailem Bend, the Barossa Valley, Eden Hills and Adelaide.

The groups totalled around forty women. Teachers, nurses, lawyers, farmers and businesswomen were just some of the professions represented. The cultural diversity amongst the groups was also rich, with old and new Australians coming together.

As part of the Gathering Point around the theme of forgiveness, the women are invited to write a letter. One woman shared how, as she began to write to someone that she had ongoing conflict with, she realised for the first time that she was not only the victim in the situation, but also part of the problem. Another expressed her gratitude for the space to reflect on things that she had pushed aside for years. Another said that

she had not laughed like this in all the years she had been in Australia!

Next there will be an opportunity for all the women from the four groups to come together over a shared lunch. We will reflect on what the Peace Circles have meant to us and exchange ideas for future Peace Circles, facilitation training and the possibility of Peace Circle exchanges. – **Bek Brown**

In Canberra...

Eight of us met over six weeks. Undeterred by frosty nights and busy schedules, it became – as many expressed – the highlight of the week. The two facilitators came from Christian and Muslim backgrounds. Somali, Kenyan, Indian, Anglo and Lebanese backgrounds were represented. There is much enthusiasm to go on exploring and developing what has been started.

– **Rosemary Thwaites**

In Sydney...

On 5 May, Jane Mills, with a cameo appearance by Rosemary Kariuki, ran a Creators of Peace workshop for 40 women at their annual Parramatta Catholic Women's League get together.

Joyce Fraser is heading up a new Marrickville CoP circle in teamwork with Marrickville Connect, a community program in Marrickville West Primary School with an outreach to many cultures. A Sierra Leone high school student who came to last year's CoP conference, has encouraged her cousins and friends to come and take part.

On Sunday 16 May, five women from the four corners of Sydney joined in a facilitation training to deliver CoP circles, run by Prasanthi Hagare and Trish McDonald Harrison. This will enable a number of new CoP circles to begin. A facilitators' get together is planned in July. – **Jane Mills**

Bishop Kevin Manning on the inter-religious experience

For the last seven years, interfaith dialogues between Muslims and Christians have been held in different parts of Sydney, sponsored jointly by the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta, the Islamic Friendship Association of Australia (IFAA), and Initiatives of Change (IofC).

At a tribute dinner given by the IFAA in honour of his interfaith work, Catholic Bishop Kevin Manning, recently retired, said:

“The experience of inter-religious dialogue in the Parramatta Diocese has been one of the richest experiences of my life, especially being invited into homes, experiencing the hospitality of my Muslim brothers and sisters and getting to know their families. This is just as much part of inter-religious dialogue as meetings between experts.

“I confess that it was not on my own initiative that I became involved in inter-religious dialogue. It was at the invitation of David Mills and Keysar Trad, and later of other prominent Muslim leaders too numerous to mention.

“I continued to be involved because interfaith dialogue is the teaching of the

Catholic Church and that teaching is based on the Church's belief in the unity of the human race and the God-given presence of truth and holiness in other religions. I haven't made this up: it is in the Documents of the Church...

“For the future, we must take courage and we must not flag in our commitment to inter-religious dialogue even though there are those who want us to fail. You have them in your communities and I have them in mine.

“A sense of perspective, a sense of history, and a sense of humour, all clothed in mutual respect will help us to worship the One God in peace and harmony.

“Pope John 23rd, who called the Second Vatican Council, said, ‘consult not your fears but your hopes’.”

Politicians, ambassadors, religious

leaders, academics and media people were amongst those who attended the dinner. Messages of appreciation came from the Australian Governor General, Prime Minister and Opposition Leader and the NSW Governor and Premier.

David Mills from IofC, who did much to help organise the Muslim-Christian dialogues, said the aim was “not just about comparing, debating or accommodating each other. It was developing a sense of united purpose through understanding what we have in common, and seeing how to mature our Australian community in learning to appreciate the beliefs and values of others who have so much to give. They had also been designed to highlight the deeper parts of spiritual life in a society where the materialist drive does not bring satisfaction.”

Mother-ship Armagh

Kenneth Harrison attended the recent National Gathering held at Armagh, the IofC centre in Melbourne. He writes about "an inspiring weekend":

I had only been to Armagh very briefly once before and didn't have the time to fully appreciate its beauty and the extensive work that is done in this nerve centre of Initiatives of Change.

For 54 years now, Armagh has been like the "mother-ship" of IofC in Australia and the Pacific. IofC is a "... world-wide movement of people of different races, religions, backgrounds and cultures working together", as the proposed new constitution of the organisation spells out. It goes on to say that IofC, "... encourages people to deepen their spiritual roots in their own religious traditions, and draws on each person's quest for meaning, wholeness and purpose".

Apart from being a meeting place for such groups as *National Gatherings*, it is also the administrative headquarters of IofC and a place of residence, care and guidance for people

from all over the world.

Programs conducted in the centre include the life-changing *Life Matters* nine-day residential course for young adults. The bottom line is to develop the skills and character strengths of those who want to bring change in society.

It is also the hub of planning and support for the Action for Life leadership training program, which sends teams of young people around Asia.

Armagh is hosted by Rob and Cheryl Wood, who have been "Mum" and "Dad", encouragers and mentors to hundreds of young people for the past 22 years.

Willingness to Look Forward

At the twice-yearly National Gathering of Initiatives of Change, from 30 April to 3 May, some 50 IofC supporters gathered from around Australia.

Throughout the weekend there was discussion about the future of IofC and how it could be best managed and

facilitated, and a willingness to look forward. Some of the most productive discussions were over meals. Each morning there was a thought-provoking reflection, followed by a quiet time and group-sharing.

One of the highlights was the two-way discussion through a Skype linkup to Switzerland and Romania, enabling Australians Andrew Lancaster and Alex Birnberg, who had attended the April IofC Global Consultation in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, to report the results of the consultation and answer questions.

My time at Armagh was rich in friendship and fellowship, sharing with people who really care about the people of this planet and their God-given potential. It provided me with a greater knowledge and appreciation of the work of Armagh and great hope for the future of this unique and exceptional network of peace "warriors", now operating in some 60 countries.

Life Matters 2 – equipped to serve

The idea to have a "Life Matters 2" follow-up training weekend came originally from James McIvor, Youth Justice Manager for the Gippsland region, and in recent years a keynote speaker at Life Matters courses. Over the Anzac Day weekend, 22 alumni from nine LM courses gathered at Armagh for a program on the theme, "Equipped to serve".

James McIvor took the first day to identify some life-tools, including a fresh look at goal setting. On day two, the focus was on taking up the moral and spiritual challenges that can lead to inspired life-goals. One session which touched many deeply was on "surrender" and how the "roadblocks" that prevent us from finding the Divine plan for our lives can be removed when we admit them and ask for the help we need.

There was an opportunity to hear from some in the group who are already taking action, such as Andrew Flynn who was about to leave for a year of service in Western Samoa as an Australian Young Ambassador with Ausaid.

The group discussed how we can support each other, and looked at possible initiatives we might take together, such as hosting an Asia-Pacific Youth Conference in Australia. Ten of the group based in Melbourne and Sydney offered to take on this project. They have already met in

person and over Skype and plan for further regular exchanges to take things forward. Before leaving, each of us wrote and signed our own "contract for change" and had it witnessed by a neighbour. It was a chance to commit ourselves to practical steps of personal change that will equip us to serve better.

– Rob Wood

The weekend allowed me to understand how I operated as a leader and the way to be more effective. It gave me time to slow down and reflect on how I contribute to the world.

– Ariya Chittasy

James McIvor talked about team-building. Trust, compassion, stability and hope, he said, were vital. When leaders focus on, and invest in, people's strengths, the odds of engagement go up eightfold. This really rang true. Where have I not been truthful, compassionate, stable and hopeful as a team member? Why is morale dwindling in a team? These are points to look at when considering how to improve a team.

– Deb Sullivan

Global Club and Friends of Armagh

The Global Club's Autumn Fun Day attracted a large crowd to one of the parks near Armagh. There were team games, a BBQ and a lively sports program. People gave their contact details and asked how they could become more involved with Initiatives of Change.

A "May magic" multi-cultural entertainment and quiz night was hosted recently by the Friends of Armagh (FOA) committee. The program included Uighur and Congolese dancing, Italian and Celtic songs, a tap-dancing fairy and a 12-year-old magician who held everyone spellbound with his tricks!

The night was to raise funds for maintenance – in particular to replace one of the two elderly stoves in the kitchen. A friend from South Australia raised \$150 from the sale of home-made pickle. With other gifts and promises we are now close to having what we need.

A new Friends of Armagh brochure was launched. Anyone interested in becoming a Friend can fill out the form on the back and send it to the FOA committee, Armagh, 226 Kooyong Rd, Toorak, VIC 3142. – Rob Wood

From the new National Coordinator - IofC: the secret of open hearts

Australia generally punches above its weight in the international arena and Initiatives of Change is no exception – at Caux, Asia Plateau and international programs such as Action for Life.

The aims and action of IofC Australia cover most areas of our national life: indigenous/non-indigenous partnership; becoming a trusted neighbour in the region; intercultural and interfaith partnerships; integrity and good governance in public and professional life; the comparatively new field of human security and the environment.

It is a privilege to be taking on the role of National Coordinator, Initiatives

of Change Australia. IofC, to me, is the secret that hearts which are open will hear the still, small voice, and those with enough courage and love will follow its inner direction. A bigger dimension is added when we are challenged to find that sense of inner leading together as a team.

IofC can set a standard on how transparency is demonstrated in the whole of life – from the smaller incidents like recently when I had to own up to a neighbour that I was the one who had scratched her car (I could have got away with it!), to the larger issues of building bridges of healing and trust between countries.

After a massive stroke which almost killed him, Frank Buchman said: “I have been organizing a movement. But a movement should be the outcome of changed lives, not the means of changing them. From now on I am going to ask God to make me into a great life-changer.” That spirit at the core of all we do might provide a win-win situation – give a sense of ownership to those who want to work with us and prevent us having strokes!

Barbara Lawler has worked in the administration of major Australian media organisations.

Our core business

Recently I'm attending an Alcoholics Anonymous group. Many will know that AA originally comes from the Oxford Group, the forerunner of MRA and IofC. This particular AA group is going back to the original material just after they separated from the Oxford Group. It has been very clear and very challenging to me on the core business of IofC.

What I found is a clear process that helps me go deeper into the four absolute values and quiet time. It put the finger on me and it made me realise how often I present these core ideas trying to be inclusive, but without the moral and spiritual challenge that is required for it to be effective. Recently I tried this more direct approach (nervously) in a training

program and someone commented, “I think you can challenge us even more; people will rise to it.”

Questions have emerged like green shoots: how can our fellowship grow to help people move from that initial spark to the deep commitment of “living the life”? How can our fellowship pass on the truths we hold to new people in a

way that equips them to hand it on to others? Is our current organisation structure and use of people moving towards this aim? How am I living the life? How do I pass it on?

Along with hope I am left feeling inadequate and powerless and with a need to return to quiet time, prayer and strong fellowship. - **Nigel Heywood**

Book review - A life lived to the full

The Thread of God in My Life, the latest book by Indian author Russi Lala, has the subheading “an autobiography with a difference”. Perhaps the difference is that Russi's God is so interesting – with a sense of humour and at home in many creeds.

He quotes from Frances Thompson's *Hound of Heaven*: “I fled him down the nights and down the days; I fled Him down the arches of the years.” Then he tells of his meeting with Chris Mayor, a young Australian who had been given hospitality by Russi's father. How he had been introduced to “listening”: to pausing in quiet to find his part in the truth that “as men change, nations change”. It became Russi's life-long practice.

Russi makes his own change, and others, sound exciting. He writes crisply and engagingly. And he has met a fascinating variety of people. Mother Teresa sends him on his way with the injunction, “Write something beautiful for God.” He has the humility to include snatches of beautiful writing of many others. Reinhold Niebuhr, Solzhenitsyn, Tagore, John Donne, William Cowper and Henry Drummond all have their timely word. He quotes Longfellow's words: “Age is opportunity no less than youth itself, though in another dress. And as the evening fades away, the sky is filled with stars invisible by day.”

Russi has come through a massive heart attack and several battles with cancer. But you sense he is still covered

by one of his many excellent quotes: “God give me work till my life shall end, and life till my work is done.”

- **Jim Coulter**

R M Lala: *The thread of God in my life*. Penguin-Viking 2009

- The reviewer, Jim Coulter, is well known to the author and recalls his friendship with Australian politician Kim Beazley Snr. “They shared a gift – both had phenomenal memories. If you quoted a line of poetry both could pick up on it. Products of the British Empire, they had both studied from the same poetry books! Very intelligent – but always more interested in what fresh intelligence God might have for them.”