



Initiatives of Change

Asia Plateau – 40th anniversary

The global work of Initiatives of Change marked a significant milestone this month, with the 40th Anniversary of Asia Plateau, the Initiatives of Change Centre in Panchgani, India. Over four decades, thousands from India and around the globe have wound their way up the Maharashtra hillside to the centre. Several hundred from around India and around the world made this trip again, some for the first time in several decades, to take part in the anniversary celebrations from January 15-21. Rob Lancaster reports:



PHOTO: ROB LANCASTER

Jayashree Rao speaks at the opening of Grampari, the IofC Rural and Ecological Centre at Asia Plateau

Asia Plateau, as well as India more generally, holds a special place in the hearts of many who are involved with the work of Initiatives of Change in Australia, and indeed it was the Australian architect, Gordon Brown, whose vision and expertise was integral to the realization of the dream for a Moral Re-Armament (as it was then known) centre in India. There was also a particularly committed contribution from this part of the world to the establishment and maintenance of the farm which is attached to the centre.

The anniversary was also the occasion for the official inauguration of *Grampari*, the rural and ecological centre at Asia Plateau. The centre aims to bridge the urban-rural divide, as well as offer sustainable paths to development. It will focus on rural health, nutrition and hygiene, empowerment of women, and documenting traditional wisdom.

Jayshree Rao, the driving force behind the centre, explains that “life at the centre will revolve around recycling and ecological preservation.” She continues, “success of this centre and many ventures alike is essential for the very survival, harmony and happiness of our society.”

The theme of the week was expressed around the ideas of re-connecting, re-visioning and re-engaging, and there was an abundance of each. Importantly, it was recognized that the experiences

and memories of those returning for the week were not necessarily uniquely positive, and the time was also an opportunity for healing. But the abiding feature of the week was a palpable sense of life and energy. After one of the cultural evenings, a devoted group were gathered around the piano through until midnight, bringing to life with great gusto all their favourite tunes.

The occasion was also an opportunity to look forward, particularly to the possibility of a heightened role for Asia Plateau over the next ten years. Many hearts were touched by the time as connections were re-established and memories revived, and if the spirit of the anniversary gathering is anything to go by, Asia Plateau has much to look forward to.

40 years on - a personal view

by Chris Mayor

The beauty, climate and clear atmosphere of Asia Plateau puts one in mind of Shangri-la: a haven high above the bustling society that comprises India’s 1.2 billion people.

But it is a Shangri-la vibrantly in touch with the current issues of the day.

In the mid 1960s, the hill town of Panchgani had been the site of a memorable camp for young people drawn by the vision of “a clean, strong and united India” spelled out by Rajmohan Gandhi during his historic March Across the Nation. My wife Janet and I had played a small though privileged part in that program and the succeeding events which led to the establishment of the MRA (now Initiatives of Change) Centre in Panchgani.

Now I was returning after many years, recalling that bare and ravaged

hillside. A memorable photo of the time shows one solitary tree that was something of a landmark before the area was transformed into the verdant magnificence that is today’s Asia Plateau. Now the green trees and the brilliant bougainvilleas called “namaste” to us.

I was travelling with my two married daughters Sarah and Ali who were revisiting the land of their birth for the first time in nearly 38 years. They were thrilled and want to return with their own families one day. “I feel so much at home,” said Sarah one day. “It’s in your blood,” commented Usha Gandhi.

Tribute was paid to those who had the vision, to those who sacrificed skills and treasure to create Asia Plateau and above all to those who have nurtured and developed it over 40 years. The

continued on page 3 »

Muslims and Christians celebrating the Advent of Jesus

On Wednesday night 5th December at the Imam Hasan Centre at Annangrove, in Sydney's northern "Bible Belt", something very special was in the air; 140 Christians and Muslims had gathered to sing carols, watch a powerful short film on reconciliation between both faiths' perspectives, have the opportunity to ask questions, and take part in that great community builder – sharing food together (halal of course). The venue was a Shia Prayer Centre. Three years ago, when it was being built, there was virulent opposition from some of the local community. The local Council would not give planning permission, a decision that was overturned on appeal. The situation culminated in a pig's head being put on a stake in the unfinished building and the walls daubed with its blood.

More in common

At that point, Initiatives of Change, together with Keysar Trad of the Islamic Friendship Association, Kevin Manning, the Catholic Bishop of Parramatta and a local committee, staged a public meeting entitled *Muslims and Christians – more in common than we think*. This was attended by more than 800 people.

Since then, the local committee, the Hills Interfaith Group, have continued to meet and hold bridge building events.

This latest occasion was the brainchild of Abbas Aly, the spokesman for the Prayer Centre. Because musical instruments are not traditionally used at the Prayer Centre, the carols were led a capella by the Galston Uniting Church Men's Choir. In introducing the film, *The Imam and the Pastor*, David Mills said: "Jesus was born into a world full of divisions. There were builders and destroyers. Amongst other things, he set a new standard of what it means to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. Against that standard we have the same choice today of being builders or destroyers of truth and unity."

Rev Gary Derkenne, a Uniting Church Chaplain, shared excerpts from the Advent Bible readings, pointing to the expectation, hope, readiness and preparation of Advent. Syed



Galston Uniting Church Men's choir leading the community carol singing

PHOTO: MALCOLM FRASER

Muhammad of the Imam Hasan Centre shared quotes from the Qur'an many similar themes – the holiness of Mary, the virgin birth, the significance of Jesus who will return at the end of time to bring peace to the world. He added: "No verse [of the Qur'an] speaks condemning other religions. No other religion has in their Holy Books the inclusion of prophets of other religions."

Questions that followed the speakers and the film related back to Australia and the need to build bridges here, and a challenge for us all to find and pursue strategies to promote reconciliation and harmony. The program of Creators of Peace circles was highlighted, and a number gave their names for future participation and bought copies of the DVD.

Jane Mills



Joyce Fraser and Barbara Lawler (of IofC and COP) selling DVDs

PHOTO: MALCOLM FRASER

Saying Sorry: a personal and national endeavour

After years of inaction, a change of government has brought about a change in official attitudes. Jane Mills writes:

By the time you read this edition of newsbriefs, Australia will have a Prime Ministerial apology to the Stolen Generations. Given the recent political to and fro surrounding this issue, it is worth remembering the power of apology and what it will mean for this nation. In 1996, the then Governor General Sir William Deane said in this introduction to the Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families:

“It should, I think, be apparent to all well-meaning people that true

reconciliation between the Australian nation and its Indigenous peoples is not achievable in the absence of acknowledgment by the nation of the wrongfulness of the past dispossession, oppression and degradation of the Aboriginal peoples. That is not to say that individual Australians who had no part in what was done in the past should feel or acknowledge personal guilt. It is simply to assert our identity as a nation and the basic fact that national shame, as well as national pride, can and should exist in relation to past acts and omissions.”

A visit to the Fulham Correctional Centre

Recently an Initiatives of Change team were invited to conduct a Harmony Day program at Fulham Correctional Centre in Gippsland Victoria. Rob Wood reports:

Your honesty about yourselves and your respect for the community here was what won their trust,” said the Program Co-ordinator at the Fullham Correctional Centre in Sale, Gippsland, evaluating the Harmony Day program offered there last month by a multicultural Initiatives of Change team.

The initial request for the presentation came from the Offender Development Manager, James McIvor. The presentation included songs, sketches, dances and stories of personal change and more than 50 attended. Following this there were discussion groups and informal conversations

during which the frankness of the exchange with the residents was encouraging. We were also surprised and touched by a spontaneous dance put on by an indigenous group. Apparently this has only happened once before for a visiting elder so we felt very honoured!

In a recent conversation with James McIvor, he indicated that the response to the Harmony Day program was well beyond any expectations. He also said that the inmates have asked for a full day with the group next time and some apparently offered to be part of a committee planning it.

Healing the people, building the future

Across Australia, many people have been taking practical steps towards building and fostering reconciliation. Rob Wood and Mike Lowe report on one recent workshop.

Healing the people, building the future is the title of four day-long workshops taking place at the Maya Healing Centre in Thornbury, Victoria, hosted by Reg Blow, who is the CEO of the centre. The first of these took place on 7 February 2008 bringing together indigenous and non-indigenous Australians for a chance to consider four important questions:

- How do we bridge the gap in our society?
- How do we learn to love and respect each other?
- How do we look after our natural environment?
- How do we find a vision for Australia that all can embrace?

After an opening smoking ceremony to cleanse the space and welcome the ancestors, there were cultural presentations including songs from Burma and a dance from West Papua.

Then a series of speakers shared with great courage and honesty about their personal “journeys of healing” – healing from past traumas, overcoming addictions and learning to forgive, followed by small group discussions in the afternoon.

There was enthusiastic feedback indicating that these workshops meet a need and will grow. The next *Newsbriefs* will carry a fuller report.

40 years on - a personal view (continued from page 1)

local paid staff, the women in their colourful saris and the men in their neat uniforms, who make it all possible through their devoted work behind the scenes were given a standing ovation at the opening session.

We heard from captains of industry, a military officer, a headmistress, a senior public servant and others of their enthusiasm for the training courses in leadership and social responsibility.

They send their personnel regularly. The regional head of the Indian Post Office released a special postal cover

highlighting Asia Plateau and its contribution.

An impressive display comprising 17 information desks with posters and literature featuring different Indian and world-wide programs currently being conducted by Initiatives of Change told a powerful story.

Much in evidence among the leadership of the six-day program were young men and women who clearly think of Asia Plateau and its future as their responsibility. The conference secretary whose executive skills were

manifest in the quality of the preparation and arrangements of all aspects of the gathering was a young Indian graduate who soon will commence higher studies at Melbourne University.

To those who have read about this dynamic emerging super-power but still wonder “if and how”, I can only say that a personal visit to India will convince them of the exciting future that lies ahead of this ancient and modern people who are now walking tall in the world.

See page 4 for Ali's view

Book talk

Trust and Integrity in the Global Economy

by Michael Smith, a freelance journalist from the UK

Launched in Panchgani in India on November '07 subtitled "Stories of people making a difference" this book is creating much interest in many places. It comprises 16 case studies of entrepreneurs, business people, farmers and charity workers whose motives have gone beyond the bottom line.

A Dutch editor was very enthusiastic about it as she is tackling the issue of corporate responsibility with renewed interest.

One friend in Australia wrote this: "It is a great read – a fantastic range of experience in short sharp stories. I gave it to my boss for Christmas and

both she and her husband read it and were enthralled."

Available from:-

Grosvenor Books
email: grosvenor.books@au.iofc.org
226 Kooyong Road, TOORAK, VIC 3142, Australia
tel +61 3 9822 1218
fax +61 3 9822 6871
mobile 041 616 4871

or Joyce Fraser (Sydney)
tel. 02 9559 2301

Cost: \$15

Return to Australia

Gordon and Marjory Wise have written appreciatively about their recent two-month visit to Australia. Despite the effects of a stroke in 2002, and with the assistance of John Munro who travelled with them, they were able to meet many old friends and colleagues across the country. Gordon, son of former WA Labor premier Frank Wise, served with the Australian Air Force in WWII and then, with his friend Jim Coulter, decided to give all his time with IofC (then MRA) to "win the peace". Gordon ended up serving largely overseas, did significant work in Asia and became the Secretary of the Oxford Group, the IofC body in UK where he met and married Marjory and now lives. His 350-page memoir, *A Great Aim in Life*, was published by Caux Books in 2006.

Asia Plateau 40th anniversary - Ali's view

Ali Brakha was born in India when her Australian parents, Chris and Janet Mayor, were working there with IofC in the early days of the Asia Plateau conference centre. She returned to India for the first time in January with her father and sister to take part in the 40th anniversary celebrations in Panchgani (see page 1).

It was wonderful to see and meet so many old and new faces who have been involved in and touched by Asia Plateau over the last 40 years. I found it very moving as I witnessed my father reunited with so many old and dear friends with whom he had not seen for four decades.

At the 40th Anniversary opening ceremony, many tears were shed as people reminisced about the old days, described what a difference IofC, and in particular Asia Plateau, has made to their lives and as we watched a short visual presentation remembering all those involved in AP who have passed away over the years.

To see and feel the huge sense of love, purpose and pride that filled the auditorium was quite overwhelming and to share in the joy of looking to the future and how to make a change for the better seemed all too easy when sitting



Some of the 40th anniversary celebrations

Life Matters

Don't forget that the 17th Life Matters course will be held between 15-24 February in Melbourne. The course will conclude with an evening of presentations and celebrations and is an occasion not to be missed!



Bougainvilleas outside one of the Asia Plateau buildings

amongst such a spiritual oasis as Asia Plateau.

It was also a great joy to have the privilege to be able to share in such an emotion-filled time with Dad and Sarah (and Mum in Spirit) and to return to an amazingly chaotic and yet peaceful land; a land which I'm enormously proud to call my birthplace.