



Reaching across the economic divides



Mohan Bhagwandas speaking at Armagh
 Credit: J Lancaster

Vice President of IofC International Mohan Bhagwandas believes this global network of Initiatives of Change has “a second journey for the future” through engaging with current social issues, in particular with business and economic leaders to create “ethical leadership, sustainable living and economic justice”.

Drawing on his 15 years’ experience as a business strategist with a global information systems

company, Bhagwandas spent the last 10 years developing a programme with business leaders, young professionals, academics, environmentalist and leadership trainers through the *Trust and Integrity in the Global Economy* conferences in Caux, Switzerland, in collaboration with similar business focused programmes in India.

“The world has seen a massive shift of power from the hands of political leadership to those who run the business, financial and economic worlds,” said Bhagwandas at a public forum in Melbourne last weekend. “Today, when financial leaders make decisions, political leaders have to adjust.”

Quite surprisingly, says Bhagwandas, a profound search is coming from the business community which resonates with the values of *Initiatives of Change*. Confronted by a world of limited resources and damaging impact on the planet, “the search is on for an economic framework that will generate wealth, conserve resources and effectively employ people.”

A Sri Lankan- born Australian, Bhagwandas was interviewed by Alex Birnberg at the National Gathering of IofC Australia in Melbourne. Through his travel to all continents as IofC’s Vice President, he sees an “amazing dedication and commitment of people at a grassroots level”. He referred to the first journey for IofC (or MRA as it was then known) in trust-building and reconciliation after World War II, and developing a movement with “a footprint in 60 countries”. The “second journey” is before us.

“If we hold to the heritage and values which are the essential identity of IofC, and are ready to go through the pain of transition into the 21st century, we can be a force to be reckoned with in international affairs,” he said. IofC’s engagement with business and economic leaders is very weak, compared to what it was in the immediate post-war period. He wants to harness all the collective skills of the network to empower connections with this sector, “to open up pathways through strategically thinking what we can do together”.

He points to significant penetration of IofC’s programmes such as Caux Initiatives for Business and “ethics in leadership and public governance” in India, which are impacting thousands of officers in Mumbai’s municipal corporation, for instance, and business leaders and management in corporations like Siemens India.

While in Brazil last year for meetings with IofC teams, Bhagwandas experienced a defining moment. Early one morning, before the tourist queues formed, he went to the foot of the huge statue of Christ, overlooking Rio de Janeiro. Looking down on the “favelas” with some of the poorest people in the world, and then in the distance some of the most of wealthy, he identified with the open arms of “Christ the Redeemer” reaching out to both. “It re-awakened my calling to bridge the divides... Living in the beautiful suburbs of Melbourne, it had become remote. I had lost that edge of wanting to make a difference. Standing there, the edge returned. IofC offers us a pathway to bridge those divides.”

IofC Australia in a new stage of ‘becoming’

After 18 months of an in-depth process of “cultural and structural change”, IofC Australia has moved decisively to make its governance and operational management more inclusive, transparent and accountable.

Clarifying the distinction between IofC the fellowship (whose values and spiritual principles form the movement) and IofC the organisation (necessary for its effective functioning and outreach), IofC Australia has opened up

the formal membership of its registered body. This means that in the past month, 60 new members have joined, more than tripling those accepting “a commitment to the organisational framework that promotes IofC’s aims in Australia”. The membership remains open to all who want to join in participating in that shared responsibility.

At the National Gathering in Melbourne 29-31 May, Chair of the Council of Management Andrew Lancaster

announced elections for the next Council at an AGM scheduled for 15 August. The Council is transitioning to a primarily governance role, and is experimenting with a system of six portfolio groups, each with new volunteers beyond the present full-time workers. These will be accountable for operational management in areas such as Programmes and Training, Communications, Legal and Structures, and Finance. It is looking for a team leader particularly for its “People and Pathways’ portfolio.

The more defined and devolved structure is a basic shift from the tradition of informal and collective decision-making across a flat organisational structure, while still holding strongly to a set of “Operational Values” drawn from the heritage and core of IofC over 80 years.

The Executive Office of IofC Australia, Athalia Zwartz, who began in her position last October gave the National

Gathering a report of challenges and progress in organisational areas. She presented the outline of a three year “Roadmap” process of data collection, discussions and decisions to clarify the purpose, direction and calling of IofC Australia, which would then determine the use of its major assets such as the Armagh centre in Melbourne. The National Gathering participants endorsed the plan, many showing their readiness to engage in the process.

Jonathan Klugman, the consultant who has guided the Council of Management and National Coordination Group through monthly workshops for Cultural and Structural Change, quoted Thomas Aquinas’ approach that we are humans “becoming”. He valued the sharing of several people whose stories illustrated the principle of “letting go, letting come”, which is at the heart of the cultural change happening.

Life Matters in Mindanao

The Life Matters Course – developed in Australia to help young adults “shape a path and purpose for living” – is now being adopted around Asia. From 12-21 May, the third such course took place in Pagadian, in the troubled province of Mindanao, Philippines. The 27 participants were from eight countries, 16 of them Filipinos – a balance of Muslim and Christian. Joseph Grant and Leonor Gumabon from Melbourne went as part of the facilitating team along with Rob and Cheryl Wood, from Australia’s Programme and Training team. For Joseph and Leonor, just getting there was a challenge, as Joseph describes:



Joseph and Leonor in Mindanao.
Credit: Cheryl Wood

shake our heads. A fundraising run had been a success. We were generously gifted some money from IofC. And unexpectedly, I did more overtime work in that final month than I’ve ever had.

The Asia-Pacific Life Matters Course 2015 was truly an eye-opening spiritual experience. It focuses strongly on sharing. And the participants shared their lives of poverty, discrimination and persecution, but also how these most humbling circumstances have proved an individual’s determination and grit. We weren’t sitting amongst a

group of young victims, but among young philosophers and ambassadors, with lives full of hope and strength.

We gained lifelong friends. The boys from Mindanao – Mac, Zai, Min and Omar – were so overwhelmed with gratitude that they held nightly meetings to dissect what they had learnt that day.

Then Ephriam, a 21 year old Vietnamese who exposed the horror he had experienced as a child when his family was persecuted for his father’s religious choice. He is now choosing to make positive contributions to his own society.

Lia, a beautiful, young East-Timor Leste lady who was wise beyond her years who could not recognise how powerful her contribution was to the people around her.

The workshops and seminars were well-prepared and well-presented. It was evident that the facilitators poured their heart and soul into the programmes because the content was challenging and engaging.

During our stay in Pagadian we were received by the mayor in his office where he shared with us the history and concern about this province. He granted us a security detail throughout our stay. A motorcade of the police escort supported us as we all climbed aboard a dozen tricycles and made a lap through the city streets. It was surreal, people taking photos and waving to us from shop windows.

The most confronting activity was our visit to the province’s orphanage, a halfway house for boys under the age of 18. Its tiny compound held 25 boys, underfed and unwashed. Although our hearts ached to communicate with them, it was so difficult to get them to open up. Nevertheless, by the time we left – after playing games and handing out soda – it was obvious from their faces how happy they were that we had visited them.

This experience really cemented for us what IofC as an organisation was about – from the ground, not from a classroom or conference hall.

We are grateful for all the countless eye-opening experiences, the life-long friends and the inspiration we now have in knowing that we as individuals can make ripples of change in our own communities. All we can say, from the bottom of our hearts, is thank you.

At a glance: Australians taking ‘initiatives of change’

A request for news items from our readers brought a stream of responses, some of which we can summarise here. Next issue will carry more:

Monthly Meetings: Daya

Bhagwandas reported two recent “Monthly Mondays” in Melbourne, at the IofC Australia-Pacific centre, Armagh:

The April gathering featured the political and social challenges confronting Ukraine. Melbourne residents Ian and Karin Parsons, through their close acquaintance with Ukraine, outlined IofC’s trust-building work there. And a Ukrainian couple, Lilia and Valentin Varetsa, now living in Melbourne, contributed to an animated discussion from their experiences, giving us insights about Ukraine’s historical relationship with Russia as well as showcasing a beautiful exhibit of iconic Ukrainian art.

The May Monday featured a documentary film, *Beyond Right and Wrong*, which captures stories of people’s encounters with perpetrators of violence through unique honest conversations that lead to healing and reconciliation. Professor Paul Komesaroff, Director of Global Reconciliation and the Monash Centre for Ethics in Medicine and Society, introduced the film and hosted a 45 minute discussion with 50 people afterwards.

Justice and healing: In Sydney, Graeme Cordiner is working with a grassroots reconciliation initiative that on 7 June commemorates the 1838 Myall Creek massacre, the only massacre of Aboriginals where the perpetrators were brought to justice. In 2000, a memorial walk was opened at the site in northern NSW.

Now the Myall Creek Memorial Committee, of which Graeme is part, is looking to build an education centre, as well as to pursue the unfinished business of a government apology “for when the blood that went into the ground and cries out for justice”.

Graeme and his wife, Sallie, also coordinate the Sydney IofC programme, “Heart of Change”. At a May workshop on co-dependency, a diverse group – some with a 12-step background – engaged with presenter Myra Davidson to discuss the ongoing effects of unhealed trauma.

Creators of Peace events keep buzzing. Shoshana Faire and Tanya Fox report from Sydney:

In late March a third Creators of Peace Circle was held at Sydney University’s Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, with nine women and two men participating – including Masters students in Peace and Conflict studies from Japan, Colombia, Sweden and Ireland, a lecturer from the Centre, with others from Iran and Columbia.

The Auburn Creators of Peace Network continues to address a range of topics relating to peace, women and culture through well-attended monthly gatherings at the Auburn Centre for Community.

On “Harmony Day” in March, in Sydney’s Hills district, the Creators of Peace stall used a PowerPoint presentation for over 100 people of different ethnic backgrounds who attended.

Creators of Peace (CoP) have been invited to participate at the International Peace-builders’ Forum and Exhibition titled *Non-violent conflict transformation: dignity, participation and inclusion*, at the IofC centre in Caux Switzerland in June. Australian CoP team members will have an exhibition stand and also assist later in running two Peace Circles (one in English, the other in French) along with facilitation training.

The call for Creators of Peace Circles world-wide is growing. Meeting the requests is beyond our means. So the Creators of Peace international coordinators are appealing for donations to the “Give Ten\$ Global Fundraising Appeal” in order to support travel and accommodation for facilitators to run Peace Circles and give Facilitation Training. Donations can be made at www.iofc.org/creators-of-peace-donate

An example of this call is a request from a member of the Tibetan government-in-exile to run a Creators of Peace Circle and facilitation training in New Delhi, India, in August. It has opened the possibility for two young Afghan women to travel from Kabul to also get the CoP experience and training. Following their participation in the Caux

Scholars Program in Panchgani, India, some months ago, they have nurtured the conviction to introduce Creators of Peace Circles in Afghanistan, but will need a total of \$2000 to cover their fares and accommodation. As students they find it very hard to raise their funds within Afghanistan. Contributions would be very welcome. Please write to jean.brown@iofc.org if you wish to help.

Education and Society: Margaret Hepworth from Melbourne has worked closely with the Indian IofC education team over two years. Just back from her fourth visit, she co-facilitated two workshops the *Education Today, Society Tomorrow* conference in Panchgani, 2-5 May, sending teachers home with practical tools and strategies for peace building. In the DPKV Agricultural University in Akola, Maharashtra, she ran “The Gandhi Experiment” workshops for staff and students. In both places, teachers enacted “The best forgiveness role play ever” and postulated ways to bring this into their schools and lives.

Peace Mobilisers: Two other Australians – Rob Lancaster and South Sudanese-born David Vincent – have recently facilitated a training in Kuajok, South Sudan, assisted by Youth in Solidarity and using a methodology and message inspired by *Initiatives of Change*.

Amidst political uncertainty, armed conflict, a humanitarian and burgeoning financial crisis, 55 Peace Mobilisers have begun work in Warrap State on the pilot phase of national consultation around the reconciliation process that is needed. The two-week training was held under the South Sudan Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation. The programme is an ambitious one, considered by some as imprudent in the current climate. Proponents, however, support the need for positive initiatives that fuel narratives of peace and forgiveness.

The next state to roll out the consultation will be Eastern Equatoria, with training of Peace Mobilisers to take place as soon as lessons have been distilled from the pilot programme.

Back your hunch and give it a go

At one of the many ANZAC Day commemorations held across Australia, World War II pilot Jim Coulter was guest speaker at an event at San Remo, Victoria. A few weeks earlier, Coulter had been awarded France's Legion d'Honneur,

along with three other ex-servicemen all in their nineties, for their role in D-Day and the liberation of France. "I have come to tell you, in the name of the French republic that we have remained grateful," said Ambassador Christopher Lecourtier, bestowing his country's highest award.



Courtesy of Justin McManus, *The Age*

On ANZAC Day, Coulter spoke to a crowd of 200 who came "all armed with umbrellas against the steady rain". He told them how he had spoken in a primary school to 8-10 year olds:

I will never forget those faces – so open, so innocent. And so keen to ask questions.

I was asked: "Did you ever meet a Victoria Cross winner?"

Well, it just so happened I had known Group Captain Geoffrey

Cheshire. He was a natural hero: not only had a Victoria Cross, but also a Distinguished Flying Cross and bar... After the War he established (with his wife, Sue Ryder) the Ryder-Cheshire homes – 220 in 45 countries – to care for the sick and disabled. He was typical of a large number of men and women who as a result of their war experiences did something quite different post-war to try and make the world a better place.

Finally, a searching question: "Were you ever afraid?"

I think all of us were. For me it followed a crash in fog in Britain that left the plane a complete wreck and me not much better.

I was given rehabilitation leave and was staying with an elderly Anglican Minister. I rebuffed his offer to pray. But by next morning I knew how deep was my fear. We prayed together. It gave me an inner peace which stayed with me through a year of operations including D-Day.

D-Day was described as "the greatest amphibious operation against the most strongly defended coastline that any force had ever tried to assault". My squadron was part of an air and naval force which successfully stopped the packs of submarines from getting into the channel to attack the invasion fleet.

But my most vivid memory was my last operation less than a year later. It was a day after the War in Europe had officially ended. We flew over this island in the Bay of Biscay which had been occupied throughout the War. A whole group of children burst out of their school to see if we were a friendly plane – and then rushed back into their class room to re-appear all waving the small French flags which they had been making to celebrate the War's end. Then we in our 25 ton flying boat circled them at about 100 feet while they waved and waved. I don't think there was a dry eye among our rather tough crew.

In enlisting you hope your efforts may not be primarily about killing but aimed to free people. So I can still see those children waving their Tricolours!

Rita and I were born in 1922. It was but four years after "The Great War" – 60,000 dead out of a population of four million (Australians). It was "a war to end all wars and create a world fit for heroes to live in".

Yet we were still in high school when WWII started and, at 19, I was training to be a pilot. As our War came to a close, we dreaded that a 20-year world-war-cycle might become the norm*.

At least that cycle has been broken. Those children I saw in that school had a hope and confidence that spoke of a better world... We can all have a part in consolidating it. One of the children had a comment that perhaps challenges us all: "Peace," she said, "is not just when countries stop fighting but also when fighting stops in every family."

*As a post-script, Jim wrote that he finished his service feeling "it was one thing to win the war, but the creation of an enduring peace was the real challenge." For this reason he spent the last six months of his RAAF service on full operational pay having training in Moral Re-Armament to equip him for this. It included a period with Frank Buchman, initiator of MRA, in the USA.

After arriving back in Australia on a troop ship, he was introduced to Prime Minister Ben Chifley and shared his apprehension about continuing his service with MRA, as it meant giving up the position held for him as a journalist on *The West Australian*. Chifley responded: "If I were you, young fella, I would back your hunch and give it a go!" It turned out to be his life's work.

See also the Initiatives of Change Australia website:
www.au.iofc.org

Facebook page: [lofc-Armagh](https://www.facebook.com/lofc-Armagh)

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