



Mohan Bhagwandas (seated left) and Ron Lawler (seated second from right) with the International Council and the IofC Nigeria Board

IofC International focuses on addressing the root causes of extremism of all kinds

Two Australians – the vice-president of IofC International, Mohan Bhagwandas, and Ron Lawler, its treasurer – spent two weeks in Nigeria during February for the International Council’s start-of-the-year strategy session. Ron gives this overview of their visit:

From our small hotel on the banks of lagoon that opens to the Atlantic Ocean, we see contrasting images of Lagos – the energetic, endless market places splashed with people and shops resplendent in vibrant colour; and the grey skies of the dry season and the homes of those struggling to eek out a living in an extended city of more than 20 millions.

The advantages of our seven-day face to face meeting of the International Council (IC) were clear as we arrived at strategic priorities for IofC International over the next three years. We can only meet like this twice a year. Otherwise it is virtual and usually late night for Australians and early morning for Americans.

A key decision emerging out of the IC meetings was to propose an overriding priority for the IofC movement: to focus the next three years on ‘Addressing the root causes of extremism of all kinds’.

As our report says, ‘Extremism is a symptom of deeper problems and cannot be answered by force nor by moderation and tolerance. A passionate inclusivity is needed which affirms the essential dignity and

contribution of every single person, of whatever race, religion or background, while also demanding justice. The rising dynamic of extremism can only be countered by a rising dynamic of compassion, integrity and service.’ (*Copies of the IC document can be requested from ic@iofc.org*).

Imam Ashafa and the Pastor James Wuye (who visited Australia in 2008) flew in to Lagos to be with us. They continue their bold work in reconciling divided communities and addressing root causes of extremism in northern Nigeria, presently one of the more dangerous parts of the globe. They gave us some incisive challenges: IofC, with its tools, diversity, spirituality and stories is best positioned to address extremism, but that too much IofC work is under the radar. They pointed out that IofC needs to wake up, to get punchy. We need to raise our voice. The world needs to know who we are.

This time in Lagos was made possible by the generosity of the Nigerian IofC team, who covered accommodation and all on-ground costs for two weeks, a very substantial contribution. During our first day of orientation to Nigeria Abiodun Owoseni, our Nigerian member of the International Council, described the innovative cross-generational programs and composition of the IofC Nigeria team.

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The IofC African Co-ordination Group took advantage of our presence to facilitate training workshops for 28 members of the 12 African IofC boards who came to Lagos for that purpose. Personally it was a particular challenge to facilitate two 90 minute workshops on governance and financial management to this group, on my first visit to Africa. The teams were appreciative of what they could take away to work on in their home countries.

Responding to advertisements, several Lagos companies sent 16 managers to participate in a pilot 'Trust and Integrity in the Global Economy' training program. The first day was delivered by Kiran Gandhi, former vice-president for human resources with three leading Indian companies, and three others of us from the IC. The second day was a fascinating workshop on 'Leading in the time of trauma' delivered by Barry Hart, IC member and Professor of Trauma, Identity and Conflict studies at the Eastern Mennonite University, USA.

- Some of the responses given by the participants were:
- » Listen to the inner voice and be human so as to lead spiritually.
 - » Give importance to how we as leaders acknowledge and respond to our errors before expecting others to change.
 - » Ethical considerations should override legal rights.
 - » Don't allow the fear of consequences stop us from doing the right thing.

A senior producer in a media company wrote thanking us 'for a wonderful and impactful time... I feel better equipped now to handle some basic issues of life personally as well as in the work place.'

Alongside a significant International Council meeting, we felt privileged to participate in training and capacity building with a dynamic African network.

From Lahore to Dandenong

At 3.15 am, 28 March, Margaret Hepworth's phone beeped with a message from Lahore, saying a school she had visited just a month before was 'marked safe' following the suicide-bomber blast which killed 72 people.

Margaret spent the rest of her night on FaceBook messaging her friends. 'For the people of Lahore, Pakistan, my heart goes out to you.' Then quoting a line from *The Gandhi Experiment* (her workshop approach to education): 'To the people who perpetrate these acts, if you want your cause to be heard, to be known, then speak, because your violence deafens us.'

Inspired by her visits to India and teamwork with Indian educators (see Newsbriefs Feb 2015) Victorian educator Margaret launched *The Gandhi Experiment* last year to introduce non-violent peace-building into schools, here and overseas. Invited to present at Lahore's Allama Iqbal Open University in February, she held four workshops in schools on the same visit.

One day after returning to Melbourne she was in Dandenong, planning with Nazer Nazir, an Afghan graduate of Life Matters who started the Afghan Australian Initiative (AAI), for a school conference which, on 9 March,



Margaret Hepworth with students in Lahore during February

brought together 80 people – Afghan refugee youth and local students – to workshop on 'Global participation – it starts with us'.

In between, on 27 February, Margaret and IofC volunteers also supported the AAI at their workshop for Afghan women on 'Positive responses to negativity', funded by Dandenong City Council. It was also attended also by Yvette Shaw, senior community engagement officer working on a social cohesion under the department of Premier and Cabinet, and by local MP Gabrielle Williams. Watch for more reports on www.au.iofc.org or follow Margaret's blog at www.margarethehepworth.com/blog/

What governments can't do

Fifty years ago, 53 Australians and New Zealanders (mostly under 25) left from Perth for India with their musical revue *Sing Out Australia* – invited by Rajmohan Gandhi to assist in his campaign for a 'clean, strong and united India' and, in the process, to 'teach what you know and learn what you don't.'

Before leaving Foreign Minister Paul Hasluck told them: 'Human warmth and understanding are necessary. If there is anything you can do that governments can't, it is in that field... You are doing a job that should have a lasting effect both in India and Australia.'

In mid-February this year, 17 of those who were in or associated with *Sing Out Australia* met in Perth for a two-

day reunion. They came to Perth from India, New Zealand, the UK, and across Australia. A number had not seen each other in the last 40 to 50 years.

They watched an audio-visual of their 1966 tour with the musical, from Canberra, through the Snowy Mountains, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth (performing to over 15,000 people), then on to India, where they performed to over 36,000 as well as in 34 schools and colleges.

They heard messages from Rajmohan Gandhi and others who couldn't attend. And they shared the impact that experience had on their lives and what they have been doing in the years since.

An unequivocal message from Arnhem Land



Djjirikaymirr Mark Yingiya

As the first 'Yolngu' person (from Arnhem Land) to get his pilot's licence, Mark Yingiya once flew a light aircraft into Tullamarine landing between jet aircraft. But his recent speaking tour that swung through Darwin, Adelaide, Melbourne, Geelong and Sydney was telling a different story: the case for a Treaty between the indigenous people of Yirrkala and the people of Australia.

With the title of 'Djjirikaymirr' (judge) among his people, Yingiya has been selected by the Yolngu Nations Assembly to run as an independent for the electorate of Nhulunbuy in August 2016 Northern Territory elections, on the platform of seeking a Treaty. A highly skilled social organiser and interpreter, he has been working with

Charles Darwin University and the Northern Regional Council of Congress of the Uniting Church.

'We have maintained our system of law over 40,000 years, and never ceded it,' Yingiya said in Adelaide. 'Now we need space to live, work and think for ourselves.'

Graeme and Sallie Cordiner of IofC Sydney, who in 2012 went to Arnhem Land, have been supporting Yingiya through this huge first step in the unfinished business of acknowledging the First Nations people of Australia – the only Commonwealth country which does not have a Treaty with its indigenous people.

The 14 March meeting in Redfern, reports Graeme, sent 'an unequivocal message for the recognition of sovereignty out of which Treaty flows. The people of Arnhem are not waiting for government or for whatever is happening elsewhere about constitutional change. They are just doing it.' See more at www.yingiya.net

Out of the black mists

Hard facts and deep emotions emerged during 'Black Mist, Burnt Country' – an evening at Armagh, on 21 March, about the atomic tests in the South Australian desert in 1951 and the loss and illness of those who were affected by the fallout.

A glimpse of the emotions and cultural understandings of Aboriginal Australia were conveyed by Margo Birnberg in her second book of poems, *Dreaminglines**. The poems are complemented by photos of intricate artworks and brief descriptions of artists from the Central and Western deserts who painted them. Artworks were also shown to illustrate the effect of the atomic tests by J D Mittmann – curator of a travelling exhibition which will travel to Australian cities over the next year.

**Dreaminglines*, hardback 153 pages, JB Publishing, PO Box 56, Marleston SA 5033



Margo Birnberg and J D Mittmann with 'Dreaminglines'.
Credit: Misun Lee

Open conversations on painful experiences



Part of the 'Learning and Healing' planning group: (from left) Andrew Dawson, David & Helen Bunton, Peter & Rosemary Thwaites

In mid March 27 people attended an 'Open House for Open Conversations' weekend at Armagh to consider issues raised in the *Towards Learning & Healing* report by Revd Glennis Johnston, Dr David Bunton and Helen Stacey Bunton.

The report summarises deep and searching conversations over several years with more than 50 people who, while appreciating the benefits of the years they spent with Moral Re-Armament (MRA), reported painful experiences that resulted from questionable attitudes and practices within the group. In many cases their experiences prompted them to distance themselves or leave.

The weekend was sensitively and skilfully facilitated by Shoshana Faire and Judy Greenberg, with in-depth group discussion as well as plenary sessions. It concluded with a unanimous recommendation to the IofC Australia Council of Management about next steps in this learning and healing process.

'In all my years with MRA, this has been a new experience,' said one veteran. Another person said the weekend brought a 'much yearned-for open sharing, looked for over years'.

More information from David Bunton drdrbunton@yahoo.com.au

Communities of hope bonded by a global 'inner net'

Contributed by Paul Ntoumos, an IT consultant to medium and large corporations in Melbourne, who serves on the IofC Council of Management, and much more...

This is a time that can make a person feel either utterly helpless... or respond to the call to become fully practically and spiritually empowered.

Every single person is now impacted by the events unfolding in our world, whether in Australia or elsewhere. As much as we would like to continue with business-as-usual, or turn off the news and retreat to other times when such terrorist attacks and ugly wars 'never happened', we must face the truth that we are now living in the age of the unimaginable, the unthinkable, and even the unbearable.

But it also means we are capable of unimaginable acts of transformation. Through *Initiatives of Change*, we have many years of demonstrated experience in that field. We are not newbies! The inner work of personal transformation and 'cultural change' within our organisation is not for our personal healing or organisational change alone, but ultimately so that we are prepared to take that healing to others, to become a channel of grace and hope in the world.

Organized religions alone have not been able to keep pace with the evolution of contemporary humanity. We are now 'technically thinking and networked' people who need more sophisticated spiritual and moral change tools to use and share with others, whatever anyone's religious alignment, so that we can unite instead of separate. A society requires moral and ethical 'custodians' and structures through which it can maintain a form of social accountability.

Together we can become communities of hope, bonded through a global 'inner net' of

collective intention to do unifying acts of generosity and humanity. This is what I see as the nature of being 'called to service, called to changing our world'.

Now more than ever is the time to bond our spirits and direct that power toward collective acts of positive transformation. If not, we will be transformed by events unfolding around us. Participation creates destiny. Passivity leaves us to the unpredictable hands of fate.

Our test of relevance in this evolving world, as an IofC Australia entity and as individuals, is the vigour and innovation of our participation in, firstly, our own organisational healing and transformation; and secondly, reaching out with renewed enthusiasm, with new and existing tools, to become channels of grace and hope in our communities.

Over the last two years, the Council of Management, the Executive Officer and the Portfolio Team leaders have focused on creating a set of structures with an aim of sustaining and regenerating engagement. These structures are a vehicle; the work itself is what makes the difference. It is not up to any 'official' body of IofC Australia to generate that eagerness to get involved and participate in the work we see as our calling. It comes down to each of us to make a difference.

Equipping emerging young leaders

For my partner, Judy, and me, one of our chosen commitments is to collaborate with others to deliver a number of Life Matters Courses (LMC) and workshops, and, when possible, to assist the Asia Pacific Youth Conferences (APYC). Our vision is to contribute to 'empowering young emerging leaders in our country and in the region, and to equip them with



Paul Ntoumos with Life Matters participants.
Credit: Kevisato Sanyu

effective tools to be change-agents in their own families, communities and societies'. Some have already expanded their work to national and international levels.

For example, a few young friends from Indonesia whom we met during a LMC are now dedicated to addressing the roots of extremism in their country. Through Judy giving an 'art therapy' session at an APYC, one Indonesian participant got trained and is now using that modality in her professional work in Indonesia.

After the APYC in Victoria (2011), we hosted a Pakistani in our home. Through many in-depth conversations, he has dedicated himself to interfaith dialogue in his country – and recently received an award in the 'Emerging Leaders of Pakistan' program. Others we have worked with are dynamically connecting across cultural and religious barriers in powerful ways that shatter stereotypes. They are pioneers who pave the way to establishing 'communities of hope' in their own local or regional environments. Judy and I, with others, do what we can towards those young people's undertakings, helping them persist in realizing their dreams.

As we ask at one point in the Life Matters Workshop: 'If not me, who. If not now, when?'

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

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New subscriptions and address changes: NEWSBRIEFS, 226 Kooyong Road, Toorak, VIC 3142 E-mail: office.manager@au.iofc.org