



Istiqlal Mosque, Jakarta

Muslims and Christians - sharing common values

"Muslims and Christians sharing common values and living together in friendship" was the theme of a public meeting in Sydney's Northern Beaches region on Sunday afternoon, 23 May. 250 people filled the main hall of the Cromer Community Centre for a "dialogue between faiths", as a sign in Arabic described it. The food for the afternoon team was cooked and given by the Muslim and Catholic communities. David Mills and Peter Thwaites report:

The gathering had been planned by three groups: the Manly Catholic Social Justice group, the Islamic Association of Manly-Warringah (based at the Dee Why mosque), and the Sydney team of MRA-Initiatives of Change. It was chaired by the Mayor of Manly, prominent Independent politician Dr Peter Macdonald, who welcomed the occasion to "build bridges not walls".

The *Manly Daily* printed a special four-page advance feature by writer Marj Belessis publicising the event with photos and interviews. It quoted one of the initiators, Abdalla Eissa, an information manager with the Australia Council: "A few extremists are highjacking the agenda but the majority (whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish) are desperate to talk to each other. The trouble is, they haven't had the venues to allow them to do so. We are trying to change that."

Addressing the community dialogue, Abdalla Eissa spoke of the veneration of Muslims for Jesus as one of Allah's Messengers, and for his mother Mary, "chosen by God Almighty to be the most honorable among women". She is mentioned 31 times in the Qur'an, more than Jesus himself who is mentioned 25 times.

"Islam opposes any form of indiscriminate violence," he said, quoting passages from the Qur'an. Terrorism and the killing of innocent civilians has been repeatedly condemned by leading scholars across the Muslim world. "Fanatics and extremists exist in every nation and in the followers of every religion. Usually it is related to non-religious factors," he said. "To have a unified stance in facing unjust powers and fanatics is a

public duty where all of us have to cooperate."

Catholic Bishop Kevin Manning expanded a theme of the afternoon:

"Open minds, open doors", to include "open hearts". "Much Christian-Muslim dialogue in the English speaking world has been galvanised by the events of September 11, 2001. The fact that we are gathered here at all may be the product of terrorism, but it is also a defeat for terrorism. Instead of closing minds and closing doors,

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'Change starts with me'

Barbara Lawler, who has Human Resources responsibilities in a large department of the ABC, spoke at the Muslim-Christian dialogue:

The Qur'an says at Surah 13:11 Thunder "God will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in their hearts." There were many steps in the beginning for me. One was to take responsibility for my life and to apologise to my parents for blaming them for what had gone wrong. Another was to write to former bosses, putting right the lies I told in order to take "sickies". There was a chain reaction of change which transformed my family at that time. I looked at my life in the light of absolute moral standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love and gained a newer, deeper understanding of what it meant to live my Christian faith.

After September 11, 2001 I was walking in Darling Harbour and saw a lady in her hijab. I felt anger rising. I asked God to help me with these wrong feelings. I want to apologise to all my Muslim brothers and sisters for such a generalisation. Not long afterwards I went to visit my local Islamic Centre in Earlwood and was warmly welcomed. I have taken every opportunity I could since then to build bridges of trust and understanding with my Islamic family – God's family.

At the end of September last year, I had the privilege of spending eight days in Indonesia, invited with two other Australian Christians. We worked with our very impressive group of Islamic student hosts to deliver a program of presentations and workshops under the auspices of MRA-Initiatives of Change. We went to the University of Indonesia, the State Islamic University and other educational institutions. The aim for all of us, Muslim and Christian, was to communicate the idea that "change starts with me".

We found when we shared honestly about difficult relationships, particularly in the family, there was a resonance. Some of those we met decided to take steps to heal their own relationships. One girl shared honestly about the need for healing in her relationship with her estranged father. One of the boys in the University is also rebuilding his relationship with his father. He was someone who loved to 'party' and has now decided to use his spare time working voluntarily with a UN NGO in Jakarta.

As part of my preparation for Indonesia, I met the Imam here who gave me a copy of the Qur'an for research to help with presentations. I was impressed and inspired by the Qur'an. I found there was a recurring theme of forgiveness and I could identify similar values to mine as Christian.

Learning from those who suffered

After leaving Thailand, Australians Natasha Davis and Rob Wood have based in Cambodia along with Fredric and Pilar Griffin (USA), Wambui Nguyo (Kenya), Peter Heyes (Canada), Violeta Frimu (Moldova), Ngan Lay (Malaysia), Vith Kim (Cambodia), Laura Trevelyan and Bhavesh Patel (UK). They write:

The heat was quite literally a hot topic of conversation when we first arrived in Cambodia. We felt like the "Not much Action, not much Life!" team but we're slowly adapting.

We've been meeting an amazing array of change-makers, supporting the local MRA-IC teams and organising the next Asia-Pacific Youth Conference (APYC) with the Khmer Youth Association (KYA).

The last APYC in Malaysia had a big impact on the Cambodians who attended. As one of them shared re-

cently: "At first I could not understand why people were talking about their personal lives. I never shared anything because I felt vulnerable. Then I asked my roommate why she shared and ended up opening up to her. I admitted that my parents were divorced and that I felt very embarrassed about it and pretended we were a happy family. Now I am not afraid to share honestly about myself and I realise that people become friends not only because of a common commitment but also through constant honesty and sharing."

Laura writes

It was good for me to land here in the hottest month of the year because it felt hellish. It was a constant reminder of the living hell that so many went through during the Pol Pot regime. I remember watching it on the news at about nine years old. At times it feels surreal that I am here now working alongside men the same age as me who grew up in Khmer Rouge children's camps. Separated from their parents they were forced to do hard labour in the fields (dead bodies lying around were a common sight).

For the last 10 years they have poured their all into the Khmer Youth Association (KYA), an NGO raising awareness on such issues as domestic violence, drug addiction and HIV Aids. It is an exciting new development that *Action for Life* and the KYA are working in partnership. Without a doubt lives are going to be changed during the APYC conference and my hope is that all of us leave with the kind of passion that sustains these young adults in their daily quest to heal and re-build their country.

Rob writes:

In Phnom Penh we visited Lay Prohas, the Secretary of State for Planning, who grew up in Australia where his parents and siblings are settled, and chose to return to Cambodia in order to offer his help and particular skills for the ongoing development of his homeland. Over a three-hour conversation he shared this and other important choices which have marked his journey into public life here.

One particularly significant milestone was his decision to refuse a 17 million dollar bribe to turn a blind eye to the continued illegal logging of Cambodia's forests. Towards the end of our time together he said, "I am a person of the heart and want to work with people of the heart." We hope that the friendship between him and friends in our Cambodian team who were there with us will continue to grow and bear fruit.

Kim adds:

Another of the incredible personalities we met is Kassie Neou, chief negotiator for the Royalist party (Funcinpec) currently working towards the development of a tripartite government. As I listened to his story and heard how he not only forgave, but made a friend of,

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your presence here today moves our communities towards opening minds, doors and indeed hearts." He referred to the late Cardinal König of Vienna, mourned as a friend by Muslims and Jews as well as Christians. "For him every meeting with an individual was an authentic human encounter." König's successor, Cardinal Schönborn, also says that in inter-religious dialogue "friendship is the key".

"In a world in which communication was never technically easier, we have fewer and fewer true encounters with our fellow human beings. We can never know people if we do not talk to them," said Bishop Manning. He suggested that it was important to talk about the differences as well as the similarities between religions as part of increasing understanding and mutual respect.

Muslim women

Majdolin Khatib, an Optometry student from the University of NSW who wears the hijab, described being a young Muslim woman in a non-Muslim society. She asked the audience not to judge a book by its cover but to read what is inside. "Muslim women are not oppressed and ignorant." Wendie Wilkie of the Uniting Church National Assembly suggested that Islam often honours and protects women better than Western culture. She spoke of her work with the *Journey of Promise* program in which young Jews, Christians and Muslims work together.

Barbara Lawler, working in human

resources at the ABC, told of the anger she had felt against Muslims after the 11 September attacks, and apologised to the Muslims present for this "generalisation" (see box page 1).

Youth worker Ahmed Khodr (also on the panel), a former school captain at Condell Park High, responded later: "As the sister said, we start from ourselves. Am I living the way I am meant to live, or just doing what everyone else does?"

During the discussion at the end some in the audience questioned the Muslims about perceived discrimination against women, including the practice of female circumcision. This in fact is not required in Islam. As Abdalla Eissa explained, it is important to distinguish between the religion and local traditional cultures, especially when many Islamic countries still belong to the third world.

People eagerly took copies of the 2003 Collaroy Conference report and one man quoted Cornelio Sommaruga's keynote address during the discussion. Donations covered expenses and made it possible to contribute to two orphanages in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Preparations for the dialogue began several months ago with a few individuals who had been inspired by other such actions: the large meeting in Greystanes last October, and before that the MRA-IC International conference in Collaroy in April 2003. Another occasion is being planned in Sydney's north-west Hills district on 30 July.

Many people gave their names to participate in an ongoing inter-faith friendship group in Manly-Warringah.

Action for Life continued

the Khmer Rouge soldier who tortured him, I realised just how much I need to learn forgiveness.

Fredric writes:

As a US citizen, coming to Cambodia has been very educational. I was largely unaware of the suffering we had caused this country. I didn't know, for example, that more bombs had been dropped on Cambodia during the Vietnam war than in Vietnam itself. Regardless of the reasons of the US involvement, the destruction and pain caused was significant. As an American I feel I need to say "sorry" to the people of Cambodia. Likewise, as an American visiting Vietnam this feeling is intensified several times over. The need for my nation to own up to its actions seems as pertinent now, looking at the crisis in the Middle East, as it was (and still is) during the Vietnam War.

Vietnam

From Cambodia, the group travelled to Vietnam where they were joined by Australian Phan To Loan and Dang Thi Hai from England, before returning to Cambodia. They write:

Some of the most fruitful times were our meetings with the four Vietnamese who attended the last APYC, and their friends. They were touched by the life experiences we shared and the challenging questions we asked. We are delighted that 24 of them have applied to come to the APYC. One student said: "Although I have only known AFL for three weeks, I have learned many things. At the beginning I just thought I would practise my English but after I met all of you everything changed. I discovered there are still a lot of things to do and learn besides studying. Thank you for helping the young Vietnamese find their bigger purpose in life." Another said: "When I was a child I wanted to become a businessman. I believe that after attending APYC I will become a good businessman. I am asking 'what do I need to put right in my life, and what special skills do I have to help make a better world?'"

We were fortunate to meet Sister Tam Van at the Buddhist pagoda where she is Abbess. She touched us with stories of her struggles in becoming a nun, and her deep concern for people and nature. We hope she will be able to come to the APYC to speak about the role of Buddhism in creating lasting peace for the region.

Taiwan...

Nigel Heywood and Christina DeAngelis have been travelling in Taiwan and Korea with the East Asia AFL team. The team writes:

One of our main objectives in Taiwan is to reach out to university students. Hearing students share their personal lives in small groups and telling our own experiences helped us connect on a deeper level. During one presentation Keith spoke of his journey repairing his relationship with his brother and father. As soon as he had finished sharing one of the students asked to speak. He talked about his own family, his eyes filled with tears.

The Taiwan MRA-IC team is an inspiration for all of us. Commitment, organisation and hard work probably give you a very simple description of what we found here.

Regular story-sharing with some of the local MRA-IC team is inspirational; many of them have been involved for more than 20 years. Among some of the secrets of their success as a team we found the following:

1. Good teamwork of committed people. That includes regular meetings, shared responsibility and inclusiveness in decision-making. Taiwan is very good not only at manufacturing, but also at producing chairmen in their MRA team.

2. Full-time MRA workers, supported by the whole team. If even one or two are available for 1-5 years, they make a difference.

3. Regular newsletters to keep the team informed, ensure transparency, and to connect with the wider world.

Korea

After miraculously obtaining visas, Nigel and three of the team left for the chilly spring weather of Korea where they were welcomed by the Seoul MRA team. They write:

We've been interacting with youth groups and individuals in the universities. A highlight was meeting the Venerable Mother Park Chung-Soo, a Won Buddhist nun. Her work has taken her to 53 countries, helping to build schools, hospitals and establish orphanages. We learned that unconditional LOVE is what keeps her going. She says: "My mind is full of plans and struggles how to help others. I have no space to hate or think of evil things. When I see people suffering and I can do something to help, I have to take action or I cannot rest."

Singapore...

Meanwhile, Mike and Jean Brown, Clara Cheong and Chris Lancaster have been with a third team visiting Singapore and then on to Indonesia. Clara writes:

Arriving in Singapore was a huge culture shock. Late night drinking and partying are the main forms of entertainment for the younger generation here. Initially I was quite critical, but I realised how quick I was to judge other cultures when my hometown, Sydney, experiences similar problems.

Three of my aunts took our group out to a huge 10-course lunch and shared their stories with us. They are the family of Ee Peng Liang who is renowned for his work helping the less fortunate in Singapore. He escaped death three times during the Japanese occupation of Singapore and believed that God had saved him in order to serve his community through charity work. He has passed away, but his children are continuing in his spirit through their volunteer work counseling abused women and children.

... and Indonesia

Mike writes:

The short *Life Matters* course for 55 people over two and a half days up in the mountains was wonderful - cool and beautiful, quiet, and full of vibrant friendly young people dying to talk (or sing) with us night and day. Some really moving sharing. We also had a four-hour program at the University of Indonesia.

We had two hours with Inayah Wahid (daughter of former President Wahid) at the offices of one of her father's organisations - a network of about five million women/girls between 12-30 years of age working for their rights and education. All the IC-Indonesia team joined us as we lustily sang "Better to light a candle". They were thrilled, and keen to set up "partnership programs" with us. The umbrella organisation - which her father heads - is the largest Muslim organisation in the world, with probably around 130 million members throughout Indonesia.

Altaf Khan from India adds:

I stayed with a family and had a chance to see Indonesian life closely. I prayed in the biggest Mosque of this region, Masjid e Istaqlal. I am trying to understand what this all means to me: sometimes we try to be teachers and want to be important, however Indonesia is showing me the way that I can be me without being very important.

Who will break the chain of hate?



Niketu Iralu from Nagaland, close to the Indo-Myanmar border, is convenor of the Coordination Committee preparing the grounds for the renewed negotiations to settle the half-century-long fight for freedom in Nagaland between Nagas and India. He wrote these reflections for the Initiatives of Change international website (www.initiativesofchange.org).

A chain of revenge and counter revenge starting from unhealed hurts is the story inside every conflict. The chain becomes bloodier with every act of "paying them back in their own coin". Some current conflicts threaten to spiral out of control. It is easy for those outside to pass judgment from comfortable distances. But for those directly involved, the possible consequences of defeat are so grave that hitting back good and hard to cause maximum damage is seen as the only safe road map to follow.

Meanwhile more and more families and communities are subjected to fear, hate and destruction beyond what the human spirit should have to bear.

What is urgently needed, and possible, is for the whole world to claim joint responsibility for the terrible legacy of revenge. It is after all the human family which has nurtured this legacy, and allowed it to become the monster it is. Each of us has to recognise where we have ignored the hurt we have caused others, and made them think revenge is the answer. "An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind," as Mahatma Gandhi said.

There was a haunting song in the mid-1970s arising out of the experience of the Nagas who live on both sides of the Indo-Myanmar border. For over half a century they have struggled desperately for aspirations they perceive as vitally important for them as a people. The song, "A Mother and Her Three Sons", was in a musical revue *Song of Asia*, in a sketch based on the true story of a Naga family. Grieving for her two sons, who had gone to fight for the cause of their people but been killed due to inter-tribal rivalry for control of the struggle, she cries to her third son who is just setting off to avenge his brothers' deaths:

"Who will break the chain of hate?"

*Who will break the chain of sorrow?
Ancient wrongs shed blood today,
Wrongs today shed blood tomorrow.
Who will break the chain of hate and
fear?"*

Thirty years on Nagas are still struggling. But it now includes a parallel search "to break the chain" so that the peace process and unconditional talks now going on between the Nagas and the Government of India may lead to an honourable settlement. Nagas have understood the urgency of going beyond the blame and revenge which have paralysed relationships within their tribes.

Two years ago, the Naga Hoho, the apex body of all Naga tribes on both sides of the Indo-Myanmar border, and the Nagaland Christian Forum, launched an initiative for reconciliation. The presidents of 29 tribes participating in the ceremony jointly read out a pledge they had signed on behalf of their tribes. It stated:

"We are prepared to go beyond seeing only where others have hurt us and see where we too have provoked them to hurt us, so that forgiving and being forgiven will become possible."

Nagas believe they have been given a dependable road map which all sides can trust as they walk together to find a just solution. It has come from their acknowledgement of the failure of past ways to meet present and future needs. The obstacles are daunting. But the pledge has become the thinking and commitment of many Nagas.

Other conflicts are, admittedly, more complicated, older and wider in scope. But they too are often sustained by a failure to acknowledge that we each have our share of responsibility for the wrongs of others which we so vehemently castigate. The decision by the Nagas to try a new way in their corner of the world may help others in their reflection on new ways forward.

Reconciliation Week

Aboriginal leader and "father of reconciliation", Pat Dodson, reminded a packed Great Hall in Canberra's Parliament House of the significance of National Reconciliation Week. May 27 is the anniversary of the 1967 Referendum, while the High Court's 1992 Mabo judgement was in early June. Then the "Bringing them home" report was presented on 26 May 1997.

In his inaugural ANU Reconciliation Lecture, Dodson expressed his belief that the creation of a new peak Aboriginal organisation could be Australia's next step toward reconciliation - "the opportunity for a resolution of the 'unfinished business' between our people".

Fifteen hundred people attended a community celebration of the unveiling of two memorials at Reconciliation Place near the National Library: one to the stolen generations, the other to indigenous leaders Vincent Lingiari and Neville Bonner.

Australia's shame

Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser referred to this earlier in the week when he launched a *Sorry Day* event at the Sydney Opera House. "We can be grateful for this memorial because, as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has shown us, the truth about what happened is vital to the healing process." He referred to the "shame" that Australia's Indigenous people die 20 years younger than non-Indigenous, and the gap is widening, whereas in every other comparable country it is narrowing.

Fraser quoted an article in the *Medical Journal of Australia* which argued that Australia has become an uncaring society, and racism is the inevitable result. "The way we are treating children in our detention camps suggests they are right. We need to become far more compassionate."

"This is where the stolen generations can help us. Those who have suffered can understand the suffering of others." He invited the audience to "help us become a nation which respects all our cultures and creeds, shares our resources fairly, and can contribute to building trust and co-operation on the international scene."

Report edited by Mike Lowe