

Solomon Islanders confront 'ethnic cleansing'

by John Bond

Few conferences hear a businessman tell of repaying A\$850,000 in cheated taxes, or witness forgiveness between victims of brutal ethnic conflict. Perhaps that is why the Solomon Islands media gave immense coverage to an MRA-Initiatives of Change conference held in the capital, Honiara, last month.

The Solomon Islands comprise half a million people speaking 70 languages. In 1999 ethnic tensions exploded into violence as rival militias took up arms. Over 100 people were killed, and more than 10,000 left homeless.

Last year military intervention from Australia and other Pacific countries, at the request of the Solomon Islands Government, restored stability. But how can the grievances be resolved so that conflict does not break out again when the military forces leave? This question lay at the heart of the conference, "Winds of Change". Among those who helped with the costs were AusAID, the British High Commission and the European Union office in Honiara.

The conference was initiated by a group of Solomon Islanders headed by Joses Tuhonuku, MP, Leader of the Labor Party, and Matthew Wale, a prominent accountant, who both attended the international MRA-Initiatives of Change conference last year at Collaroy, Sydney.

War on corruption

At the height of the violence, Matthew was one of the few to condemn the militias publicly. He barely escaped death. But he also became a rallying point, and the Solomon Islands Christian Association Peace Office, which he directed, became a focus of attempts to resolve the conflict.

The Peace Office has now given birth to a Civil Society Network aiming for national reconciliation and personal and

public integrity. The MRA-Initiatives of Change conference was called to advance these objectives, which are closely linked. As Joses Tuhonuku put it, "Corruption is present in all walks of life in the Solomons, and terrorism is a product of corruption. If the Solomons are to advance, war must be declared on corruption."

The conference focused national attention on these issues. When a manager from the electricity authority, Jan Sanga, exposed corruption in the authority, the *Solomon Star* carried her revelations on its front page and followed up with an editorial. When Kenyan anti-corruption

campaigner Joseph Karanja spoke on the bold moves of his country's

new President, Mwai Kibaki, to stamp out corruption, much of his speech was broadcast on national radio. When 30 of the country's 50 Members of Parliament met with conference participants, their questions were mainly directed to Karanja, and most wanted to know about the Clean Election Campaign which he initiated in Kenya. Not that they were all in favour. "I would support a Clean Election Campaign here," one Member told Karanja afterwards. "It would save me a lot of money in bribes!"

The logging industry is a major driver of political corruption, environmental destruction and social instability in Pacific countries. So there was plenty of interest when Malaysian Joseph Wong spoke. He is the Managing Director of logging companies in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Until 1999, he said, "I carried five firearms and got my way with money or force."

That year he attended an MRA-Initiatives of Change conference in Australia, where he was deeply moved by "the love and care shown to me... For the first time I spoke freely about my pain, and the wrongs in which I was involved." He de-



Judith Fangalasuu

ecided to change his whole approach. He repaid over 1.5 million kina (A\$850,000 at the time) to the tax authorities, threw away his guns, and refused to be involved in destructive logging practices. Recently he encountered immense difficulties in renewing his work permit in Papua New Guinea. So he has moved to the Solomon Islands to take charge of a new logging operation, which he intends to develop on sound social and environmental principles. "It is pointless to go on making a few people rich and many poor," he said.

Attending the conference were 300 Solomon Islanders, and the pain of many was close to the surface. So there was profound empathy with two South Africans who spoke.

Willing to forgive

White university lecturer Ginn Fourie lost her only daughter in 1993 when freedom fighters burst into a Cape Town restaurant and gunned down four young people. The order for the attack was made by Letlapa Mphahlele, at the time operations commander of the Azanian People's Liberation Army. At the conference Ginn and Letlapa stood shoulder to shoulder as they told their powerful story of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The next morning a woman from the island of Guadalcanal rose to her feet to tell of her years of pain since her brother was beheaded by militia from the rival island of Malaita, his body dumped in Honiara's Central Market in an act of contempt that rocked the nation.

Susan Kukuti told participants that, having heard Ginn Fourie's story, she had found it in her heart to forgive her brother's killers. Matthew Wale then

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Open Homes, Open Hearts

On the first weekend of June, *Open Homes, Open Hearts Day* is celebrated with multicultural gatherings in many countries. Joyce Fraser, coordinator of the campaign in Australia, and Mary Whiteside write about two events:

The Mayor of Marrickville and three other Councillors were among those who celebrated *Open Homes, Open Hearts Day* at the Debbie and Abbey Borgia Community Centre in Marrickville last month.

Local resident Ray Vincent, Aboriginal artist and member of the “stolen generations” gave the Welcome to Country. “We welcomed the new arrivals 200 years ago,” he said, “and we are still welcoming people who want to come to our land today.” Sydney singer/songwriter David Mills set the tone of the afternoon with the song, “Walk a mile in another man’s moccasins.” The participants then learnt a Swahili song, a Greek Zorba dance, and a Maori Haka, and had a great time.

When I spoke, I explained why I had arranged to hold the event in the centre. When the centre was being planned, I felt the residents were not being heard, and I became bitter. I apologised for this. I am

entitled to my opinions. But when anger and frustration took over, division came in. Now, I said, we need to put the past behind us, so that Marrickville continues to be a place where people want to live.

Council web sites and local newspapers carried information about the event, and local papers requested interviews.

In Melbourne, over 40 people met at Armagh, the MRA-Initiatives of Change centre, to hear from two young Muslim women - Bibi Grenade, a teacher at Frankston High School, and Sherene Hassan, a teacher, presently employed by the Islamic Council of Victoria. With humour, frankness and zest they told how they are building understanding in their jobs and everyday living. One of those present, Jill Scurfield, wrote afterwards:

“A door opened a little wider for me at the gathering. These women gave an impression of what the modern-day Muslim



Bibi Grenade and Pari Sanyü

woman feels and encounters in their everyday contact with Australian society. They described how it is possible for a Muslim to be passionate and committed to their faith without being blinkered and fundamentalist.

“Wearing the hijab was something I had previously thought to be imposed, but as they talked it emerged as a symbol of empowerment and faith. The openness of family discussion was another revelation (Westerners seem more ready to rate certain subjects as taboo). These women are courageous in wearing the hijab as a symbol of faith. Let’s open the door wider, for it is from communication and understanding that initiatives for peace will come.”

The simple challenge of our calling

Chris Mayor has just retired from the Australian MRA-Initiatives of Change Council after serving on it since 1961. He shared some reflections at his final Council meeting last month:

As I reflect on the visible depictions of the Christian message by Christ’s followers through history I treasure more greatly the simple, practical and fulfilling challenge which Frank Buchman, the founder of MRA-Initiatives of Change gave the world.

What would Jesus make of man’s depiction of his message:

- The crusades; the inquisition
- Henry VIII, Defender of the Faith and executioner of his wives
- The splendour and gold of an Orthodox Church ceremony in Czarist Russia and the social bitterness which sired the Communist revolution
- The magnificence, costumes and serried ranks of cardinals and bishops during Easter celebrations in St Peter’s and the drug scene of Christian Central America
- The drama of TV evangelists pacing the platform as they preach to thousands before them and millions over the ether, while the address to which you can send your donations flashes on the screen

- The world-wide exposure of sexual abuse in the churches
- Professing Christians who detain mothers and children, not charged before any court, behind barbed wire; who advocate pre-emptive military strikes against distasteful regimes; who claim that a wealthy lifestyle is the due reward for religious fidelity
- Christian communities in Ireland, Spain, Rwanda, Colombia, Papua New Guinea and the Solomons engaging in factional bloodshed
- Mourners from Melbourne’s underworld at the funerals of executed colleagues, crossing themselves in their grief

How have we come to this when Christ said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, the merciful, the meek, the pure in heart”, “Love your neighbour as yourself”, “Feed my sheep”?

Buchman stressed:

- Take time to be quiet and seek God’s direction
- Commit yourself to obey His leading

- Change the world by starting with yourself
- Seek teamwork with others
- Live by absolute moral standards
- Share your needs in honest confession
- Share what you have with those who have less
- Care for the whole world – every creed, class and colour
- Challenge what is wrong and fight to establish what is right
- Judge not lest you be judged
- Be intelligent and relevant in all you do

The history of God’s people – and not only Christians – shows the distortion of His message by the culture of the day; the control of human authority and ambition; perverted interpretation and the baggage of human frailty.

I am grateful for the simple, earthy challenge that Buchman gave nearly 100 years ago. Whatever my concerns and doubts, my fears and disappointments and failings, I am forever grateful that I was touched and called, and given the chance to be part of this historic adventure. And I pray that I may live it more effectively in the coming years.

Chris Mayor, Bendigo, Vic

'They took the children away' – National Memorial dedicated

John Bond, Secretary of the National Sorry Day Committee and the Journey of Healing, tells the story behind the recent dedication of a memorial in Canberra.

The Journey of Healing – which is working to heal the wounds of the stolen generations – took an important step this year. A memorial was dedicated in Canberra. Entitled “They took the children away”, it stands between the National Library and the High Court. Its opening statement reads:

For 150 years until the 1970s, many thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were removed from their families, with the authorisation of Australian governments, to be raised in institutions, or fostered or adopted by non-indigenous families. Some were given up by parents seeking a better life for their children. Many were forcibly removed and see themselves as “the stolen generations”.

Many of these children experienced overwhelming grief, and the loss of childhood and innocence, family and family relationships, identity, language and culture, country and spirituality.

Their elders, parents and communities have experienced fear and trauma, emptiness, disempowerment, endless grieving, shame and failure.

Most who looked after the removed children believed they were offering them a better future, and did all they could to provide loving care. Some abused and exploited the children.

This place honours the people who have suffered under these policies and practices. It also honours those Indigenous and non-Indigenous people whose genuine care softened the tragic impact of what are now recognised as cruel and misguided policies.

Given the Prime Minister’s refusal even to use the term “stolen generations”, how did he approve such a statement on a national memorial? I can only give my view.

Many steps have brought us to this point - the steps of the Australian community, who commemorated Sorry Day in 1998, and then walked on bridges in 2000. That year the Prime Minister announced that an area in Canberra would be set aside to commemorate the reconciliation process, “and will include a memorial and depiction of the removal of children from their families”.

But the Government’s ambivalence was apparent when they refused to include those who had been removed in developing the memorial’s design. This provoked demonstrations, and criticism from many including former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser. The project ground to a halt.

Our Committee went to see the Minister, Philip Ruddock. “This memorial could be immensely healing,” we told him, “if it comes out of genuine consultation. We are prepared to consult the stolen generations, former staff of the

institutions, and those who fostered or adopted children, with the aim of reaching consensus on the design.”

Eventually the Minister accepted our proposal. We organised consultation teams in every state and territory, who met with several hundred people, bursting with ideas. These ideas were brought

together in three days of passionate meetings in Sydney. But through the heartache, people listened to each other, and shifted from hard-held points of view. By the end, we had a provisional text. Further consultation refined the text, and we presented it to the Government.

For five months the Government did nothing. So we let them know that Malcolm Fraser had accepted our invitation to give the 2003 Sorry Day address in the Great Hall of Parliament. Immediately we were invited to discuss the text of the memorial. Our discussions enhanced the wording. But since we had reached

consensus, we were able to resist attempts to remove words which the Government found awkward. Eventually, a proposal went to the Prime Minister. His response reached us just two hours before Malcolm Fraser gave his address. The wording had been accepted.

Then the memorial had to be approved by a Parliamentary Committee and both Houses of Parliament. Parliamentary committees can work slowly. By the last



“Stolen generations” people in front of the Canberra memorial

day of Parliamentary sitting for 2003, the Committee had still not given its approval. Some people in the bureaucracy, who felt deeply the importance of this memorial, urged the Committee to call an emergency meeting. A quorum was gathered, and approval gained. Quickly it was submitted to both Houses of Parliament. Three hours before Parliament broke up for the year, the process was complete. The builders could get to work.

In May, stolen generations people came from across the country for the dedication ceremony. Though grateful for the memorial, many felt deeply hurt by the Government. Would the ceremony increase the bitterness, or help towards healing it?

Our Committee was invited to develop the ceremony. We proposed that a stolen generations person speak first, and that the churches and the Government respond.

When the moment came, Audrey Ngingali Kinnear told of the pain of the stolen generations, and of their longing for healing. Then James Haire, President of the National Council of Churches, spoke of “the profound hurt experienced by many of the children removed into the care of church-run homes”.

He honoured those who worked in these homes. But, he concluded, “some of the stolen generations

were abused by those who should have protected them. In many cases, these wrongs have still to be dealt with.”

Finally the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator Amanda Vanstone, spoke. She acknowledged the depth of hurt in indigenous communities, and described the memorial as “an honest interpretation of a tragic part of our history. That story needs to be told.”

“This memorial could be immensely healing”

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invited any Malaitans who wished to accept Susan's forgiveness, and offer theirs, to come forward. A dozen did so, breaking down in tears as they surrounded Susan. Among them was the conference chair, Judith Fangalasuu. "I did not know what my people had done to her family, and yet she is willing to forgive us," Judith said later.

By the end of the conference plans were being made to work for national reconciliation and to challenge corruption throughout the Solomon Islands.

The following Sunday, more than a hundred people met to plan further. For, as the Speaker of the Parliament and Solomon Islands' first Prime Minister, Sir Peter Kenilorea, had told the participants



Father John Ini Lapli, Governor-General of the Solomon Islands (second from right), talks with overseas speakers after officially opening the conference - (l to r) senior Fijian chief Ratu Meli Vesikula, Dr Visier Sanyü from Nagaland and Australia, and Kenyan lawyer Joseph Karanja.

in his closing address: "At a time when the overwhelming tragedies of the recent ethnic cleansing seem to have stunned our leaders, you are a light in the darkness."

The Church without a pulpit

On Sunday 20 June I organised for my parents, Peter and Rosemary Thwaites, to give a presentation on Initiatives of Change at Cafe Church in Glebe, Sydney. Cafe Church is an alternative Christian community – a very loving, vocal, opinionated, free-thinking bunch of people! – who value the arts, discussion and social justice as the basis for our Sunday evening service. These gatherings are intimate and relaxed, which encourages people to share ideas honestly. "Story-telling" is more appropriate than lectures from the pulpit (there isn't one).

The presentation included clips from documentaries and projected photographs of past and present IC projects. Peter and Rosemary struck a wonderful balance between delivering the facts about MRA/IC and their own story within it, emphasising the need to nurture one's spiritual life as a foundation for any "good works" on a local or global level.

A lot of interest was generated and many questions were asked following the presentation. The night was a great success.

Rob Thwaites

Your chance to sponsor Cambodians for the Asia Pacific Youth Conference

The 11th Asia Pacific Youth Conference (APYC) will bring together 200 young people in Cambodia, 21-31 July, including at least 30 from Vietnam. We are planning it with the Khmer Youth Association, a most professional organisation of people deeply committed to empowering young people and developing this country.

The conference will be held in the grounds of a temple in the history-rich town of Siem Reap, home of the Angkor temples. It will focus on building relationships between urban and rural communities, tackling corruption and healing conflict.

We are asking each Cambodian delegate to find A\$30 towards their conference costs. This is a huge amount when the wage for most of those fortunate enough to have jobs is A\$30-60 a month. But the actual cost for each participant will be A\$290. So we need to raise a further A\$260 for each of these participants – a total of A\$29,000. To achieve this, the *Action for Life* team in Cambodia is engaged in a variety of fund-raising initiatives.

Cheryl Wood will leave from Melbourne on 14 July to attend the conference, and would be glad to take any contributions to the fund. If you wish to donate, she can be reached on cheryl_wood@dodo.com.au or (ph) 03 9822 1218. Cheques should be made payable to MRA-IC.

The Action for Life team in Cambodia

Why Terror? booklet encourages dialogue

Few religious gatherings in Australia bring together several hundred people. But a series of Muslim-Christian dialogues across the Sydney region has done just that. Initiated by MRA-IC with Christian and Muslim leaders, the next gathering will be on 30 July in Baulkham Hills, scene of an ugly confrontation when the Muslim community applied for permission to build a prayer hall.

In Britain, IC has just produced a booklet, *Why Terror – is there no alternative?* which is of great relevance to this dialogue. The 42-page booklet is edited by Imam Dr Abduljalil Sajid, Chair of the Muslim Council for Religious and Racial Harmony in Britain. Last month the British daily *The Independent* carried a commentary on the booklet by columnist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown. "Imam Sajid has edited a reassuring new booklet - *Why Terror?* which contains reflections by 19 thoughtful Muslims worldwide," she writes. "One of them, Hisham Shihab, used to be an extremist Lebanese militiaman trained to kill Christians. Today he writes: 'We need to alleviate the miserable economic conditions most Muslims live in. But that by itself will not answer terrorism. The lack of democracy and human rights in Muslims societies creates a vacuum of leadership that is often filled by extremist groups. We must look to our own wrongs.'"

The booklet is available from Grosvenor Books in Melbourne for \$6 plus \$1 postage.

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It was enough to build a fragile bridge. Wiping away tears, a number of stolen generations people went and greeted her.

Our Committee released a statement thanking the Government. "As South Africa's *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* has shown," we said, "acknowledging shameful past practices is a crucial first step in healing the wounds caused by those practices. This memorial will inform Australians and, we hope, will inspire a new determination to overcome the continuing harmful effects of the removal policies."