

To tell a better story

By Mike Lowe

In his book *Tips from a travelling soul-searcher* Tim Costello quotes an incident from the life of Ivan Illich, a great South American advocate of the poor. Illich was asked what was the most powerful way to change society: was it by revolution where the hated power-brokers were overthrown, arrested and executed; or was it by peaceful reformation using education and gradual, democratic and industrial reform?

Illich replied that it was neither. Neither revolution nor reformation can ultimately change a society, he said. Rather you must tell a new and powerful tale, one so persuasive that it sweeps away the old myths and becomes the preferred story, one so inclusive that it gathers all the bits of our past and our present into a coherent whole, one that even shines some light into the future so that we can take the next step forward.

Since I read that a couple of weeks ago I have been asking myself, "what is the new story we are meant to tell?" I had also just read *Al Qaeda and what it means to be modern* by John Gray, Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics. While not offering much of a new story, the book does give a good critique of the old story which shapes the mess we have gotten ourselves into now. The old story says that:

1 The way of faith does not fit with modernity (so either modernity should

be opposed or faith is something which should be helped to pass away).

2 The way of faith inevitably leads to conflict.

3 The advancement of science and education will lead all humanity to become similar types of purely rational and economic beings, and thereby abolish conflict. (Gray says that this last one is the most potentially destructive myth because it says that we will all become the same when we should be preparing ourselves to live with conflict.)

More recently we can add a further story - one which has been around for a long time but which is particularly to the fore since 9/11. This story says that Islam is particularly backward, incompatible with modernity and opposed to the rational, scientific, democratic ideal, and that Muslims above all have a propensity to conflict.

Way to harmony

Of course the situation is complicated because a lot of religious people and communities have shaped themselves around these old paradigms. Gray is particularly good on explaining how Al Qaeda is itself a product of modernity, borrowing from strands of thought first developed by the Russian revolutionary intellectuals who were the precursors to Bolshevism!

Which brings me back to my first



Learning to value our diversity through dialogue

point - the need to tell a different story.

Early in the 20th century, long before words like "interfaith" and "ecumenical" were as common as they are now, Frank Buchman, the initiator of (what later became) Initiatives of Change recognised that when people of faith focused on *Praxis* (how you live the faith) rather than *Dogma* (what you teach about the faith) then there is common ground and the possibility of partnership. For those with eyes to see, there is plenty of evidence for this different story which says that faith can be the answer, not the problem (so long as faith is God centred not religion centred). This story recognises the common ground of moral values on which our diverse cultures and religions can grow together whilst retaining their unique and diverse identities. In contrast to the old story, this one says that the way to harmony lies through living our faiths more fully. This story says that it is not human for us all to be the same, but that as we develop a relationship with the deep spiritual dynamic that some call God, we learn how to relate to those who are different with love and respect.

You will find this story shining through the pages of *Newsbriefs* and other Initiatives of Change publications. I hope that for more of us this will also be the story of our lives.

More peace circles launched

Against the backdrop of recent events in Sydney, not least the Cronulla riots, another round of "Peace Circles" were launched at the Belmore Community Centre (South West Sydney) on 22 January. Peace Circles are culturally diverse groups of women who commit to meet regularly over a number of weeks to explore and develop their peace-making ability.

Twenty five women from almost as many backgrounds made the effort on a

hot Sunday afternoon, including two Iraqi Australian schoolgirls. There was never a dull moment. Salam Deeb, a Lebanese Australian who participated in last year's round, spoke about how much it had meant to her, and we concluded with a prayer song from Chichi Seii from Kenya. There was enthusiasm to sign up for further Peace Circles along with the possibility of conducting them in a school.

Barbara Lawler

Life Matters

The biggest ever *Life Matters* course is now under way at Armagh, the Initiatives of Change Asia-Pacific centre in Melbourne. The 21 participants come from diverse backgrounds including Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Solomon Islands, Europe and multicultural Australia. As well as discovering the "other", the participants are exploring meaning and purpose for life and learning to become agents for positive change in their families and communities.

The extraordinary life of Alec Smith

Alec Smith from Zimbabwe died unexpectedly in London on 19 January. Son of Zimbabwe's last white Prime Minister, Ian Smith, Alec worked for an end to the civil war and towards a peaceful transition to majority rule in the late 1970s. John Bond, who worked with Alec between 1975 and 1983 recalls:

Alec Smith once told me he reckoned he had had 50 trips of LSD. Enough to send most people into insanity. No wonder his conversion to Christianity was dramatic. He was driving along in his Volkswagen one day in 1972, high on marijuana, when he heard a voice from the back seat say, "Go home and read the New Testament". Having searched the car and found no-one, he obeyed the voice. He found himself fascinated by a book he had until then dismissed as boring.

One day he took me to a vast rock famous for its ancient bushman paintings of animals. At its heart was a small stream which had channelled its ways through the rock. "This is where I was baptised," he told me. Alec was a white African, deeply in love with his country.

But to me, the most fascinating part of his story comes after his baptism.

At that time a man named Kit Prescott had come from Britain to Rhodesia - as it was then called. Kit had worked most of his life with MRA (as Initiatives of Change was then known). In his sixties he had a heart problem and was told by the doctors to go where he could rest. He and his wife Joyce chose Rhodesia.

Alec's father, Ian Smith, was the Prime Minister. He and his Government had rejected Britain's attempts to ease the country towards majority rule, and had declared independence unilaterally under a Government elected by the white minority. The African majority was growing increasingly restless.

Kit rested, but he also expected God to use him in this tense situation. He didn't know how, but he and Joyce made friends far and wide, and were able to bring hope to many in despair about the national

situation. Then someone told Kit he should meet Alec.

Alec was intrigued by Kit, and came to a meeting of the MRA team. At that time interest in MRA was limited to an elderly group of white Rhodesians, and Alec thought he had stumbled upon some sort of evangelical outreach to geriatrics! But their aims intrigued him. As Christians, they were attempting to bring the truths of Christ to bear on national policy.

Kit asked Alec to lead the meeting. Alec hadn't a clue what to do, and was still recovering from his drug-taking. One of those present described the meeting as "like rowing in treacle". But Kit asked Alec to lead the next meeting, and the next. And gradually he began to see a connection between his new-found faith and the national situation.

Then Kit suggested that Rhodesia needed an international MRA conference aimed at bringing about the change in people that

alone would make political change work. Alec agreed. "Will you raise the money for it?" Kit asked. Before long Alec was pounding the streets of Salisbury, visiting all the businessmen he could reach, and eventually raised nearly \$30,000.

It was an historic conference. Across Africa MRA activists saw its potential, and worked out how to get there. So in 1975, in the heart of Salisbury, several hundred people came together. Many powerful stories were told. But probably the one which made the most impact was Alec's. "I took for granted the privileges



Alec Smith and his wife Elisabeth in 2005

that my white skin afforded me," he told the conference, going on to express his commitment to build a country in which everyone was treated fairly.

His words gave hope to Africans throughout the country. We followed it up by arranging public meetings in many towns, at which hundreds came to hear Alec and others, black and white. In the following years, I often heard Africans say, "If the son of the Prime Minister can change, perhaps a multiracial country is possible."

It was a painful time for the country, with thousands dying in war. Eventually in 1979 - thanks in large part to the then Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser - a political settlement was reached, and elections held. But would the agreement be kept?

Coup averted

Though we did not know at the time, the head of the Rhodesian Army was planning a coup should Robert Mugabe win the election. Again Alec played a crucial role. Though his father had dismissed Mugabe as "the Red Terror", Alec asked him to meet Mugabe secretly. His father agreed, and went to Mugabe's heavily-fortified residence. Had that meeting not taken place, the country would probably have descended again into war.

Today Zimbabwe is in a sad state, thanks to Mugabe's determination to hang on to power. No solution is permanent. But I have no doubt that Alec's work saved thousand of Zimbabwean lives at that time. In a desperate hour, a man was used by God to help his country towards a better future.

“ If the son of the Prime Minister can change, perhaps a multiracial country is possible. ”

Fiji Islands conference will focus on vision

A diverse group of Fijians will host a conference on the theme “Fiji: A Vision Possible” to be held between Friday 17 and Tuesday 21 November 2006. The University of the South Pacific campus in Fiji has been booked to accommodate up to 250 international participants including Fijians, Pacific Islanders and other nationals. The organising committee, brought together by Initiatives of Change activists Ratu Meli Vesikula and Jone Dakuvula, includes members of Fiji I Care, Fiji Interfaith Search, the Citizens Constitutional Forum and officials of the Ministry of National Reconciliation. The Fiji Ministry of Reconciliation has given

its support to the conference and helped pay for the preparation of the invitation pamphlet which should be ready for circulation by the end of February.

The general theme of the conference is about contributing towards a vision of a reconciled and better Fiji through changes that start with individual transformation in the heart.

Moral and spiritual foundations

Keynote speakers from Fiji and overseas will address themes such as: reconciliation; healing the past, building the future; creating partnership across cultures and beliefs; the moral and spiritual foundations of democracy;

corruption, honesty, trust and good governance.

The Vice President of the Republic of the Fiji Islands, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, has agreed to be one of the keynote speakers. Initiatives of Change activists Peter and Glenys Wood from New Zealand, Suresh Khatri from India and Lesley Bryant from Australia will be in Fiji towards the end of February and early March. They will accompany members of Fiji I Care and officials of the Ministry of Reconciliation to meet the Prime Minister of Fiji, other political leaders, and significant leaders in various fields to inform them of the conference and ask for their support.

Solomons Clean Election Campaign intensifies

Following months of preparation work by the local Initiatives of Change team in the Solomon Islands (named Winds of Change), six groups of volunteers have now left for different provinces and islands to conduct voter education campaigns ahead of this year's general election. Funding for the campaign has come from local sources and the British High Commission, with some additional funding from Initiatives of Change Australia.

Describing the initiative as “the country's first attempt to clean up the political process from the grass roots up”, *The Solomon Star* newspaper quoted Campaign coordinator Eric Houma: “As the election is getting closer and

candidates start their campaigns, we are moving out to the provinces hoping to remind ordinary people just how important it is for the future of this country that each and every voter chose who they vote for wisely.”

We must change ourselves

Mr Houma said the teams would not be telling people who to vote for but rather encouraging them to think carefully and pray about the choices they make as a voter. “In fact we ask the people themselves to identify what are the characteristics of a good candidate and almost everyone comes up with the same things such as honesty, integrity and people who have a sense of responsibility

to their communities. What we are doing is just reminding people that in the end the choice as to who will lead our beloved nation is theirs.” Candidates would also be targeted and encouraged to conduct their campaigns with honesty and integrity.

The theme of the campaign is: “If we want to change our nation, we must change ourselves.”

For voters this means not accepting money or other benefits in return for their ballot. For candidates it means not buying votes, not promising things that can't be delivered and not intimidating people with threats and other gestures to support them. The group has already produced a *Clean Election Campaign* brochure, which sets out why you should not sell your vote or accept bribes, and includes a one-page pledge that voters can sign if they want to make their commitment to a clean election public.

Muslims, caring for others

Aileen Shepherd from Adelaide spent five weeks in India at the end of last year supporting programs at Asia Plateau, the Initiatives of Change centre in Panchgani. She writes:

India has a predominantly Hindu population with a large Muslim minority. It is very easy to have attitudes towards minority groups be it in India or Australia. I was very moved and informed by the story of a Muslim couple who came to visit me. They have a small travel agency in Pune, employing six people, and have worked hard to build up the business. The husband, with the

agreement of his wife, decided that he would like to see each of their six employees with “their own roof over their heads”, which so many are unable to have in a big city like Pune. So, with some sacrifice, they gave each employee a gift of money, and then advanced a loan with no interest, telling them they could repay it when they were able. Two have already done this. Included on the staff

was the peon, who has the humble tasks of running messages and guarding the door. He was treated in the same way as the highest-paid employee.

I found this story of care, concern and sacrifice very challenging, and it is an answer to what many feel about a lack of care in Muslim societies. It is so easy to judge a whole culture or religion because of the actions of a few and also out of ignorance. Alms giving is one of the important tenets of Islam, and the Koran says: “Woe to those who pray but are heedless in their prayer, who make a show of piety and give no alms to the destitute.”

Caux conferences 2006

The theme for the 2006 annual Caux conferences is Globalising Integrity, Personalising Integrity. Conferences will run from 6 July to 17 August at the Initiatives of Change conference centre above Montreux, Switzerland. Invitations are available from IofC centres and from the website: www.caux.ch. Excerpts from the invitation text:

Integrity could be the energy for social transformation in the 21st century – a growing momentum of people who become agents of change and reconciliation, forging relationships of trust across the world's divides. The 60th anniversary of the Initiatives of Change conferences in Caux is a chance to investigate past initiatives and to open up fresh, innovative avenues of personal and global change." Individual conference themes are:

July 6 - 12: Service, Responsibility, Leadership

... Xenophobia, addiction, and the breakdown of family life have at their centre the question of our identity, as individuals, groups, societies and nations. Exploring and understanding who we really are – the light and the darkness, our past and present, our strengths and weaknesses – will help us to discern where and how to serve, take responsibility, and give leadership.

July 14 - 21: Tools for Change

The world needs committed and skilled change agents. This session is the first in a series of annual development opportunities offered in the context of the unique Caux community. Participants will examine the core tools of Initiatives of Change, essential inner resources and effective professional skills. They will also select from specialised workshops such as: conflict transformation, personal spiritual empowerment, dialogue creation and facilitation, healing history, team building, communications and story-telling.

July 23 - 29:

Transforming the Way Things Are: a continuing conversation

... Art and culture spring from the creative energy in all human beings: in acknowledging this, we aim to discover together the stories we want to tell through various art forms.

July 31 - August 5:

Trust and Integrity in the Global Economy

Every profession and enterprise needs trust ... New regulations or laws may be necessary, but trust is built best when we show integrity and vision for what we contribute to society.

August 7 - 17:

An Honest Dialogue for a Clean and Just Africa

Africa will not rise and flourish as a continental charity case. There is a need for honest and productive dialogue amongst African policy makers and grassroots activists, the diaspora, and their counterparts in the global North. The conference will focus on how best to develop policies that will strengthen and empower the rising generation of Africans and help tackle problems such as poverty, corruption and the challenges of trade, health and food security.

In Brief

Action for Life

Action for Life, a nine-month training and outreach program bringing together an intergenerational, international, multi-faith team of 30-45 people, has reached its second "outreach in India" phase. The team has split into five groups travelling across India to Delhi, Lucknow and Uttar Pradesh, Kolkata and Jamshedpur, Guwahati and the North-East, and South India. Highlights have included visits to the oldest Muslim university in Delhi, a boat trip on the Ganges in India's "Hindi Belt", presentations in schools and in Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity Home for the Dying.

Diana Damsa from Romania observed: "The poor are very generous. They give us much more than we give them." Initially she had felt uncomfortable to be singing in the Home for the Dying, "but when I saw the expressions of joy on their faces I sang with more passion than I had before."

A presentation by some of the group on the ethos of service - drawing on and celebrating the life of the great Hindu teacher Swami Vivekananda, led to an interview with the *Times of India* newspaper.

Discover the Other

Presentations of the *Discover the Other* program in Geelong have led to an invitation to present a one-day workshop for 30 people as part of the *Living in Harmony* celebrations in March. Writing in the *Geelong Advertiser*, Monsignor James Murray, head of the Geelong Network of Faith Communities, said the *Discover the Other* sessions would "help build better understanding and then, hopefully, trust and respect between cultures", and would "help counter the worrying trend of an increasing focus on a homogenous approach to national unity, rather than an acceptance of a diversity of beliefs". He added that the program has the full support of religious leaders from a variety of faiths throughout the region.

Discover the Other is a new initiative to "build better relationships for a better world" drawing on the 70 years' experience of *Initiatives of Change*.