Dealing with the moral deficit

By Andrew Lancaster

Over the three days leading up to Anzac Day, 50 people drawn from most Australian States and from New Zealand and Fiji met at Armagh the Initiatives of Change (IoF) centre in Melbourne for IoF’s bimannual National Gathering. These are designed to exchange news, to share insights about developments in Australia and the region, to assess priorities and to ensure that programs or projects we have already agreed upon have an optimal level of support – or, put another way, to discern where our callings are leading us.

Grabbing the headlines as we were gathered was the news of riots in Honiara following the election of the new Prime Minister, while for a much longer period in Australia we have had a daily diet of new disclosures at the Cole Inquiry into AWB’s role in the Iraq food for oil scandal. So these were two issues among many which formed the backdrop for our discussions. When Mosese Waqa spoke of his concern at the ‘moral deficit’ in his own country, Fiji, I think all of us from Australia would have reflected that, sadly, the same deficit was all too evident in Australia. And there is little doubt that concern about a ‘moral deficit’ in the political processes of the Solomon Islands caused the mobs to vent their frustration and anger in Honiara last month.

But there are people and groups in all these places actively working to turn the tide and we heard about some of them. Mosese Waqa is part of one such group in Fiji and included us in plans for an IoF conference at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, 17-21 November, on the theme ‘New hope from Fiji’. In part the invitation reads: ‘In Fiji and the South Pacific we’ve marked time for too long.

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eting 46 people together from 22 countries, and sending them out in
well-prepared teams into 15 countries in Asia and Africa on an intensive, quarter-
of-a-million-dollar, nine-month program is no mean feat. Yet it comes down to
three Aussies, two New Zealanders, two Koreans – all in their 20s and 30s – who
are coordinating the third Action for Life (AfL) program.

A few of us with grey hair are assisting from time to time. But it is
this young ‘Support Group’ who have to grapple with these challenges each
morning, having got to bed probably late the night before despatching urgent
e-mails and balancing the accounts.

Why this huge investment of sweat and effort? The purpose of AfL (says the
printed brochure) is ‘to mobilise a new generation of change-makers equipped
with integrity, faith and commitment, who are dedicated to bringing
transformation, healing and development in Asia and the world.’

Big task. So what is AfL delivering?

After five months of campaigns, workshops, presentations,
encounters across India, five AfL groups left in early April for other parts of Asia and Africa.
Those arriving in Kenya were received and guided by two
graduates of the previous program. Since taking part in
AfL2 Wambui Nguyo has been actively serving Initiatives of
Change in the US and with the Clean Africa Campaign in her
homeland. And Kofi Bassaw on his return to Ghana turned down a well-
paying job to plan and facilitate a ‘Leadership Training’ course for West
African nations; and has now committed two years to developing it further. ‘It’s been a dream come true for me to have
AfL3 in Africa,’ says Wambui, ‘to share with my people what I did on AfL and for
AfL to share what life is like being in this part of the world.’

Similarly in South-East Asia, AfL2 graduates are not only coordinating the activities of the current program, but
taking the chance to advance their own efforts at ‘transformation and healing’ in
their countries. So one of the first activities AfL3 found themselves doing in
Cambodia was distributing books to

prisoners where the local Initiatives of
Change group go to teach literacy. Kim
Vuth and Le Ngan. AfL2 graduates from
Cambodia and Vietnam respectively, are
using these fresh reinforcements to
advance the ‘Cambodian-Vietnam Dialogue’ which they started after AfL2.

Aided and financed by international NGOs who recognise the trust-building
potential of this initiative, their student exchange visits are exploring and
addressing their region’s painful history.

In Malaysia, Nandor Lim came back from AfL2 with a 5-year plan to develop
IofC training for Chinese-speaking communities throughout the region. With
his new wife Weny, he has established ‘Akasha... a learning community that emphasises initiative, independence and
realization... with programs related to the family, inner change, “EQ” development and conflict resolution,’ says Nandor,
participants is forced – by their own radical openness to each other – to go
deeper into their motivations and callings. ‘Our global community spirit
has grown through empowering each other to take humble leadership,’ wrote
Australian drama graduate Chris James, at the end of five months in India. ‘I often struggle with an overwhelming sense of
pride... Yet I have learned that if I want to become a good leader I need to help
other people to do a better job than I could ever do – that everything I do and
have is not a right, but a gift from God. It is about having a caring vision for
others and helping them reach their potential.

Seven of the present AfL come from the former Soviet Union bloc. Olka
Hudz was among the throngs who in 2003 endured snow and threatened
military crackdown as part of the ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine. Over breakfast in
India, far from Kiev, she and Lena (a Russian living in Ukraine) opened up
history and politics: the ‘closed topics’ they get usually stuck on. ‘I can’t be
proud of the great sides of my nation and ignore
what we have done to the
countries of Ukraine,’ says Lena,
misty-eyed with contrition. ‘But
what about me?’ responds Olka.

‘If I allowed myself to disrespect
Russians, even in jokes or my
thoughts, how can I expect to
break the bricks?’ For Olka it is a
‘process to be continued’. ‘What is forgiveness for you?
How do you forgive others and
more importantly how do you forgive yourself?’ were questions
on a piece of paper confronting Alex
Birberg, a young public servant from
Canberra, during a day of quiet
contemplation. ‘Normally, I’m someone
who has an answer for anything,’ said
Alex. ‘But this time I went blank. I had
to search deep within me, and I came to
some uncomfortable conclusions. I got
to see hurts lying in my heart. The search
is proving to be an important moment in
my growth.’ Next month he will likely be
sharing similar experiences among the
young Indonesians he meets.

And so it goes... each one a different
experience of inner journey. Nine
months may not bring them to
destinations, but certainly to significant
turning points.

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people have never heard of this work challenges us to search for more effective ways to get our news out, to make it accessible – in itself a huge task. We also recognised that the core challenge is to keep listening to the direction and insights that come out of silence. So much rests on that. Over the weekend we heard many examples, told with brave honesty, of how different people are responding to that challenge – and being liberated in the process.

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Fresh discoveries

I have always wanted my faith to be relevant and longed to be an encourager to young people on their spiritual journeys. Some of us have given our lives, as best we know, to what we understand of the Almighty’s plan, personally and globally. But we feel something vital is missing. Many of those nearest and dearest haven’t caught the flame, or at times have felt hurt by our commitment.

For me, being part of Action for Life (AFL) has been the best thing that could have happened. It thrust me out of my mental, physical and spiritual comfort zones. At the beginning of the AFL programme, while attempting to be a caring support member, I quickly realised I didn’t really know how. I felt totally inadequate and wondered why on earth I was there. Through a Family Workshop I began to uncover my true feelings and started to find my real self.

Early in my life I had been won to Frank Buchman’s vision to remake the world through change in the individual, starting with myself. But being a personality type that depends on human approval, I let this dominate my relationships and became a typical loyal supporter, prepared to do the sacrificial thing, even before considering my family’s needs, let alone my own. I tried to be always positive and reliable, but underneath I was dogged by persistent doubts and fears and a perception of being inadequate. I often found myself adopting others’ ideas and convictions.

‘Emotional addiction’: these words jumped out at me from a book I was thumbing through in November. For the first time I recognised my addiction, the constant habit of blaming myself because of my inadequacies. I suddenly understood the self-hate which had triggered the drinking of a family member with an alcohol addiction.

During a church service I found tears running down my face. ‘Why, God’, I asked, ‘am I so weak and inadequate. Why, when I have been giving my life to serve you all these years, trying to follow you?’ I had an image in my mind of a clay pot useless and broken on the floor. ‘How can I ask you to fill me with your love when I am like that?’ I pleaded.

The following day I picked up a book called ‘Steps to Life’, about the Alcoholics Anonymous programme. The first step to overcoming an addiction, I read, is to recognise one is powerless to change the addiction. I need to ask God to change what I cannot. I now understand the phrase, ‘our weaknesses can be our greatest strengths’. I shared these discoveries with the young AFL participants and was overwhelmed by the friendship, trust and warmth of heart this engendered. I will always treasure the farewell messages they wrote me and my husband after seven precious weeks.

Back home, sitting in my local church the following Sunday, God gave me a wonderful gift. I saw my life as a beautifully crafted clay pot! I just need to keep it as a vessel for His Love.

‘India is a land of beauty, often however covered by the layer of rubbish,’ writes one of those who started an ‘anti-plastic bag campaign’, equipping all the AFL participants with cloth bags they had sewn. ‘Nothing will change in our societies if we don’t act now,’ wrote José Carlos León Vargas from Mexico.

Arriving in Thailand, he and his group found themselves walking through alleyways of the largest slum in Bangkok. Carlos was stirred by Buddhist social campaigner Sulak Sivaraksa whose stand for justice and peace has landed him in prison. Yet, said this Nobel Prize nominee, ‘while my voice still lasts, while my brain still functions I shall say something to make this society better.’

Which generation?

For my wife and I, now into our 60s, backpacking around Asia with such a group has added challenges. Especially as I also serve as a member of IofC’s International Council and had responsibility for setting up last month’s Global Consultation in Malaysia. A crazy model of administration, you might say. But I found that sitting each morning with eight young people, sharing your innermost thoughts and discoveries from the morning meditation, keeps you honest. And grounded. In fact, my learning curve seems as steep as some of those Himalayan roads we tackled north of Delhi.

You often hear people sentimentalise that youth are ‘the future’. Well, 20 or 30 years down the track, that’s inevitably true. In the meantime, it’s probably more accurate to say that we’ve as much to learn from each other as together we wrestle with the issues of the future, and within our own lives and experience. And in that partnership lies the future of Initiatives of Change.

Maybe in future AFL programs, more of us side of 60 can join the action?

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Solomon Islands
Behind the headlines

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Behind the headlines

The images of riots and burning buildings in Honiara has underlined the need for the message that the local IofC team called Winds of Change (WOC) team are bringing to the Solomon Islands. Amidst the destruction the WOC office was saved, in spite of the shop next door being burnt to the ground. Some of the young WOC volunteers have been helping with the clean up around the city.

Several media commentaries have tried to analyse what went wrong in the Solomons. Not enough was done after the civil war. Modern ways have interfered with traditional ways. A particular group or particular people are responsible for the corruption. And there may be some truth in all these explanations. But what lies at the heart of getting things right in the country?

Prior to the elections on April 5th, the message of the WOC volunteers who conducted a ‘Clean Elections Campaign’ through the Solomons was that everyone can be a part of building a new nation. This included the acceptance of being absolutely honest as a basis for ending any kind of corruption in the country. It called for people who can be trusted, and without honesty there can be no trust.

It was a vision that gave people hope and a sense that there was something they could do to make a difference. The volunteers have said that people everywhere have been telling about it. Both leaders and led were invited to put the future of their country ahead of personal gain.

In the light of the Solomons crisis much is being said about nation-building. Inevitably there is the need for new structures and new resources. But most of all is the need for people with a vision of what they are building and an open, unselfish, inclusive way of doing it.

David Mills

In Brief...

Melbourne conference

There will be a major IofC conference in Melbourne, 12-16 January on the theme ‘Australia as a neighbour - bridging the divides with compassion, integrity and global responsibility’. The invitation reads: ‘In its breadth of diversity, Australia is a microcosm of the world. No one said it was going to be easy living together, but if we can get it right we have something precious to offer a divided world.’ The conference will look at ways in which Australians can become better neighbours, building bridges across the many divides. More information will come in the next issue of Newsbriefs.

Book talk

Many years ago, I am told that there was a campaign entitled ‘Sell a Book a Day’. Some of our readers may well have taken part. Recently an overseas guest was telling me he still tries to do it. He keeps a booklet in his bag and makes conversation with people in trains and buses and wherever he is. He finds it is a big conversation opener and it builds hope and faith in a needy world.

Have you a favourite MRA/IofC book which you would like to share with others? It might have helped you at a particular time. Write about it in 100 - 150 words telling about the content and why you like it.

Please send contributions to: fraserjm@optusnet.com.au or Joyce Fraser, 22, McGowan Avenue, Marrickville NSW 2204.

Open Homes, Open Hearts in June

Open Homes, Open Hearts (OHOH) will be on the fourth day of June this year. This is an opportunity for you to invite guests—perhaps of a different race, ethnicity or religion—into your home or community center to share a meal and personal storytelling.

For more information visit www.ohlh.org

The Dorcas Trust

Enclosed is a new brochure to include readers in a move to assist funding for Initiatives of Change’s full-time voluntary workers. We are most grateful for the support over many years already from many readers of Newsbriefs and invite you to consider if there are further ways in which you and your friends would like to help.

For further copies of the brochure, please contact the trustees: at 226 Kooyong Rd, Toorak, VIC 3142.