

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 (IofC)* centre in Melbourne for IofC's biannual 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 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 *IofC* 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.

In an age which calls for greater openness, why have we allowed narrow, sectarian thinking to stunt our national growths? It is time we dealt with blocks in all of us – of prejudice, selfishness, hatred, fear. Time to outgrow these and become truly constructive. Then the South Pacific could again take the world by surprise – this time for the right reasons!'

Another group from Melbourne brought us up to date on plans for an international conference at Melbourne University's International House, 12-16

For many years our dear friend and colleague Alan Weeks made sure that a candle was always lit at our National Gatherings. This time our deliberations were marked by a poignant awareness of Alan's spirit being with us while his body battled in hospital. He finally died on the Monday afternoon after having a chance to say goodbye to many family who were in Melbourne at this time. The next issue of Newsbriefs will feature some of the tributes to Alan which came from the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea and the President of the Autonomous Bougainville Government, as well as news of how Alan's legacy of care for the Pacific is being continued.



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Details of the invitation are being finalised but one key theme – and perhaps the main theme – will be how to create the kind of Australia our regional neighbours want, with all that implies for new relationships within Australia as well as a new relationship with them. We were encouraged to hear that a fresh team, itself a microcosm of this nation's diversity, is forming to continue the planning for the conference. And as is true with all *IofC* conferences the emphasis in Melbourne next January will be not on theory but on practice. One

only has to read the reports of the last three *IofC* conferences in Australia, not to mention the 2004 *Winds of Change* conference in the Solomons, to know that these gatherings do make a difference.

We also discussed plans for the visit to Australia, New Zealand and Fiji in October and November this year of Imam Dr Abduljalil Sajid and his wife Jamila. Iman Sajid, who is from Pakistan originally, has lived in Britain for many years. Throughout that time he has been a constant champion for building understanding and trust between Muslims and non Muslims, and between Muslims and Jews. He is a prominent national Muslim spokesman as well as an adviser to the British Government. He is also a regular contributor at *IofC* conferences and serves on the International Advisory Council of *IofC's Agenda for Reconciliation* program. Very soon more publicity about their Australian visit will be available on our (soon to be redeveloped website) and from capital

city *IofC* centres. In the meantime we can be giving thought to whom in our respective cities the Sajid's should meet, what sort of occasions we might arrange that will enable us to make the most of this opportunity. From Australia the Sajids will visit New Zealand and then participate in the conference in Fiji.

A brief review of the current involvements of those taking part in the National Gathering took us to the facilitating of Peace Circles and Muslim-Christian Dialogues; to the work in different places with Indigenous Australians and the national *Journey of*

Healing; to workshops conducted by the *Discover the Other* team; to an inspiring report by the three Australians who had taken part in the Global Consultation in Malaysia (reported in the last *Newsbriefs*); to the ongoing support of the *Winds of Change* group in the Solomons as they seek to establish a new political culture in their nation.

We talked a good deal about communications. Most people when they first encounter the ideas of *Initiatives of Change* respond eagerly to the underlying message of hope and transformation. But the simple fact that vast numbers of

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Mobilising a generation... Action for Life

Getting 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

'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.'

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,



AfL participant Han Ting in a rural community in Kenya

who has scheduled weekend camps for the *AfL3* just arriving in Malaysia.

In Indonesia, the 'new generation of change-makers' mobilised by earlier *AfL* visits will host the 12th Asia Pacific Youth Camp, for 250 young Asians at the climax of this *Action for Life*. (See announcement below).

And so the network of friendships and commitments grow, equipped with integrity, faith and commitment. But action alone can be superficial. This program emphasises, in Gandhi's words, the need to 'Be the change you want to see in the world'.

As they interact with a huge range of people, cultures, faiths and social conditions, each of the *Action for Life*

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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'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 our side of 60 can join the action?

Mike Brown

The 12th Asia-Pacific Youth Conference (APYC) will be from 21st-30th July 2006 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Themes are: Inner voice and inner healing; Diversity - source of strength or conflict?; Islam and universal peace; and, Human security and social justice - a brighter future.

Fresh discoveries

I have always wanted my faith to be irrelevant 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

"For the first time I recognised my addiction, the constant habit of blaming myself"

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



Glenys Wood

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.

My husband has declared he has a new wife! And my 24-year-old son and 27-year-old daughter feel they can more readily communicate with their mother who is open to new ideas and new ways of doing things. We have given each other the space to be ourselves and enjoy the creativity emerging.

Glenys Wood

Solomon Islands 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



Solomon Islanders team up for clean election campaign.

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 the last few years, *IofC* has

promoted this event in various countries to provide a practical way to build bridges, promote better understanding and create new friendships across cultures, religions and traditions. Dedicating one day which stands out, the first Sunday of June - June 4 this year - especially for this kind of bridge-building means that all over the world, everyone in the *IofC* fellowship will be doing this one thing together.

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.