

The Toorak mansion that was given and keeps on giving

Australian Federal Treasurer Peter Costello and his wife Tanya were among the 200 guests at a dinner to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the gift of 'Armagh', a large mansion in Toorak, Melbourne, to the work of Initiatives of Change.

Costello, who is the local Federal MP, recalled coming as a student to a conference at Armagh 30 years ago and said, 'There's been a lot of talk tonight about Armagh as a house but as we all know it's the people that make a home... When you talk about changing lives it's not empty rhetoric, it's born out of your experiences... we need organisations like this that contribute so much to the character of our society and to the character of the region and the world.'

Earlier in the evening, James Coulter, who had returned to Australia to work with Moral Re-Armament (now Initiatives of Change) after flying Sunderland flying-boats in World War 2, told guests how he had consulted Frank Buchman, the initiator of MRA, in 1956 about the need for a centre in the

Australia-Pacific area.

Cecil McKay, a wealthy industrialist and philanthropist, had just put his family home, Armagh, on the market and Coulter and his colleagues intended to make him an offer well below the market value. 'Frank [Buchman] mused that he thought Mr McKay may laugh in our faces,' said Coulter, 'but that if this was our conviction we had better go ahead.'

'Cecil McKay was warm in his welcome but came directly to the point: "I gather you want my home, but how much?" When we told him our figure, as Frank had surmised, he burst out laughing; but thanked us for coming. We left our letter of offer and a deposit.'

Some weeks later McKay had contacted Coulter and one of his colleagues to say that he had decided to give Armagh to Moral Re-Armament outright because he felt 'MRA was a force for good in a troubled world'.

'It was totally unexpected,' said Coulter, 'we were left speechless. We felt it was God's doing and got on our knees to thank Him.'



MIKE LOWE

McKay's main condition was that his gift was to be completely confidential, and it remained so until McKay's widow wrote about it in her biography of her husband nearly 20 years later.

Jim Beggs spoke about coming to Armagh in 1956 as a young wharfie, suspicious of its grandeur and Toorak location – but nevertheless 'captured by the spirit of the people we met and the sacrifices made to keep it going'. At the time the waterfront was a hotbed of militant politics and was responsible for nearly 30 per cent of the industrial disputes in the country.

Beggs and his wife Tui started to invite men from the waterfront to meetings at Armagh 'to see what we had found - a new unity between us through honesty,' and to meet Bunny Austin, a former Davis Cup tennis star who was living there. 'Our lads were all boxers and their leader was known as "the washing machine" because he was such an agitator. At one point in his talk Austin said "Moral Re-Armament is a bit like boxing: if you are going to succeed you need to give more than you take." It was a point we understood.' In 1961 Beggs and his team fought a campaign that resulted in a change of leadership on the waterfront and a new spirit of cooperation. Beggs himself went on to lead the Melbourne waterfront workers for 21 years, including seven as national president of the Waterfront Workers Federation.

The celebrations of the 50th anniversary also included an Open Day on Sunday 8 October which highlighted some of Armagh's current programs. These include residential training courses for young adults, interfaith and intercultural meetings, workshops to help people 'discover the other' and a series of dialogues between North and South Sudanese to help heal the rifts after decades of civil war (see page 4).

Mike Lowe

What Armagh has meant to different people

People came from as far afield as Darwin, Launceston and New Zealand to attend the celebrations. Others who couldn't attend sent messages:

I think the power of Armagh lies in its daily 'quiet time' and sharing where people can express their problems freely. I was... grateful when I could share my family problem which I had always kept secret. It enabled me to ask forgiveness from my Dad.' – *Bachrul Ilmi, Indonesia.*

'I was respected as Dadan and I was also respected as a Muslim. I hope that Allah will give me a chance to stay at Armagh again so that I can increase my value as a human.' – *Dadan Nugraha - Indonesia*

'It was the greatest experience of change I've had. Quiet time has become a conscience for my actions. It is more valuable than anything.' – *Phlong Pisith, Cambodia*

'I sensed the meaning of life every second of being there.' – *Ye Bo, China*

'Six months of an experience and a lifetime.....of growth - that's what I received from Armagh.' – *Bambi Kevichusa, Nagaland, North East India*

'The care of the Armagh community helped me find freedom as a person and gave me a firm faith for which I am endlessly grateful.' – *Laura Boobbyer, UK*

British Imam builds bridges across Australia

Leading British Imam, Dr Abduljalil Sajid, and his wife Jamila, have been visiting Australia as guests of Initiatives of Change on a mission to support efforts to build trust between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians. Imam Sajid, who is active with IofC's Agenda for Reconciliation programme, is Chair of the Muslim Council for Religious and Racial Harmony, Chair of the UK chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace and Secretary of the UK Ethnic Minorities Representative Council. Arriving in the wake of the Pope's controversial speech in Regensburg quoting a Byzantine emperor on Muslims and violence, and landing in Sydney during the controversy over Sheikh Hilaly's comments on women's dress, the Sajids' visit has attracted considerable interest. The following brief reports are from the different cities they have visited so far:

Perth

Four hours after his arrival in Perth from Indonesia Imam Dr Sajid's first appointment was a live broadcast on ABC Radio 720. From there he went to the Mirrabooka Mosque and spoke to several hundred Friday worshippers. The previous week this mosque had been subjected to a drive-by shooting as worshippers, including women and children, prayed inside.

Their third event that day was a symposium at the University of Western Australia convened by The Centre for Muslim States and Societies.

The following day, Saturday 7 October, an interfaith evening titled *Gateways to Building Community based on integrity and trust* drew 180 people from Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths.

State Premier Alan Carpenter met with the Sajids over a lunch in Parliament House graciously hosted by the Hon. Kim Beazley Snr and Mrs Beazley.

Mrs. Jamila Sajid joined a group of Perth women for an afternoon tea, telling many fascinating stories of her life including luncheon with Queen Elizabeth and addressing a gathering of several thousand people at a book launching in Pakistan.

The agenda of the regular meeting of the Western Australian Heads of Churches was amended, to enable Imam Sajid to speak to and engage in conversation with those present.

Lindsay Cartwright

Adelaide

The Sajids reached out to the Adelaide community through a public meeting; a visit to Flinders University to talk to about 100 Muslim students during Friday prayers and later to speak with academics; a small group meeting for those interested in furthering interfaith dialogue; individual interviews and five radio and press interviews.

The public meeting was held in

partnership with IofC and St Pauls City Ministry and was chaired by independent state MP, Kris Hanna. Around 140 people attended from a wide cross section of the Adelaide community – Police, Family Court, Equal Opportunities Commission, Immigration, Public Service, Business, Church representatives, along with the Muslim and Jewish communities. The topic was *Why Terror? There is an alternative - Creating trust and developing community based on common values.*

John Mills

Brisbane

More than 60 people attended a dialogue on *Islam and the middle way – Why terror? Is there no alternative?* at the Multi-Faith Centre in Brisbane's Griffith University. They included Christian ministers, lay people and several Muslim imams. Dr Sajid was welcomed by pro-Vice Chancellor, Professor Max Standage and introduced by Professor Toh Swee-Hin, director of the Multi-Faith Centre. Skillfully fielding questions on the Middle East, Imam Sajid said that the world's problems could not be solved by simply blaming others but that moves towards peace would need to be based on a 'change first in ourselves'.

The next day, Dr Sajid spoke to the Local Government Association of Queensland, drawing on his own experiences as a Muslim trying to build community in the UK.

Brian Lightowler

Gold Coast

Elanora Uniting Church hosted an evening for the Sajids to speak on 'Being a Muslim in the West' chaired by Duncan MacLeod. In his blog, www.pacifichighlander.postkiwi.com, MacLeod reported on the event, commenting: 'The story that stays with me is the impact of hospitality on Imam Sajid's life and work. Staying in a

London hostel [the] Imam was forming a poor impression of life in the UK. Coming from a large gregarious family he was used to lively conversation. But in his first year in London he only encountered people intent on maintaining privacy, whether that be in the hostel, on public transport or in lectures. It wasn't until he responded to an invitation for a Christmas home stay that he discovered a family that lived out values of dialogue, service and hospitality. The family turned out to be that of a Christian minister. It was in his interaction with this family that the Imam discovered in himself a passion for living a life of passionate faith, more than the loyal submission he'd been living up to that point. From that point he set up Islamic societies and became involved in interfaith projects that helped form a warmer environment for migrants... I came away from the gathering encouraged to keep on taking initiative in building relationships with people in my own community, despite my own fears of rejection or feelings of discomfort.'

Sydney

The Sajids' nine-day visit had been set up over several months, but many things came together at the last minute. It so happened that the Imam's good friend from UK, Sir Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the Commonwealth, was also visiting Sydney and warmly welcomed him to a reception at the Great Synagogue where he was meeting a dozen other Jewish and interfaith representatives.

With the issue of government pressure for local imams to preach in English, and later the controversy over Sheikh Hilaly's sermon on women's dress, there was much response to Imam Sajid's sensitive voice of reason from an Islamic perspective. John Laws (Radio 2UE) spoke to him for 20 minutes in an almost completely constructive interview and expressed his admiration at the end. Altogether there were 7 radio interviews, 5 press articles (plus mentions in other news stories) and 3 TV appearances. Rachael Kohn interviewed the Imam for Radio National's *The spirit of things*.

One of the first Sydney events was a women's tea party at the home of Lao Australians, especially to hear from Jamila Sajid. In the suburb of Mosman where the Sajids stayed they were received by the Mayor. A public meeting in Mosman's Community Centre drew a



Imam Dr Abduljalil Sajid (left) and speakers at an interfaith evening in Perth

crowd of 120 at short notice, including media people and social activists. The next day the NSW Community Relations Commission arranged a breakfast hosted by the NSW Minister on Citizenship, for the Imam to speak to 10 heads of State Government Departments (held in a beautiful reception room with a panoramic view of Sydney Harbour). Later he was welcomed to the Parliament by the Speaker and spoke to a group of MPs. The Sajids then called at Government House and met the popular Governor of NSW, Prof Marie Bashir.

The Imam spoke in four of the city's main mosques and Islamic centres: Dee Why, Annangrove, Lakemba and Rooty Hill, and addressed a group of Christian academics at Macquarie University. His visit has reinforced the ongoing work of bridgebuilding between Sydney's many communities which has happened recently through the series of Muslim-Christian community dialogues, the women's Peace Circles, and the international Initiatives of Change conferences.

Peter Thwaites

The approach which broadens minds

While many interviews were focused on current local controversies, Imam Sajid was always able to broaden minds with his approach:

First, it is necessary to include everyone in the dialogue, including those with 'obnoxious' views, rather than simply condemning. No group should be isolated, because isolation and alienation lead to extremism. Minorities need to be empowered more than controlled. Minorities too must claim their place in the wider society by showing their loyalty and participating actively in work for the common good. This is a commandment in Islam.

The Imam supported the call for sermons in mosques to be given in English, for the sake of the younger generation of Muslims and for the sake of integration (not assimilation) into the wider society. But non-Muslims need also to understand the importance of Arabic as the language of the Qur'an. Integration has to be a two-way street: both the minority and the wider community need to show more understanding. If Australia can use its special advantages as a nation to achieve this it will be an important model for the world.

All this is backed up by the long track record of the Sajids as community 'bridge-builders'. They have lived in, and understand, eastern and western societies, and in their 30 years in Britain have been pro-active in reaching out to those different from themselves. The examples of their work at local and national level in UK have been instructive and encouraging to Australian officials and ordinary citizens working to develop our multicultural society.

Peter Thwaites

lofC conference: New hope for Fiji - making this vision possible

The Vice-President of Fiji, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, will give the opening address at a conference convened by MRA – Initiatives of Change in Suva, Fiji, this month. The conference theme is 'New hope from Fiji – making this a vision possible.'

'Can Fiji and the South Pacific surprise the world?' asks the invitation. 'Why have we allowed narrow, sectarian thinking to stunt our national growth? Could we heal past wrongs through honesty and forgiveness? It is time to rid ourselves of prejudice, selfishness, hatred, fear.'

The Fijian Cabinet has discussed the conference, and is giving its full support. It comes at a time of extreme tension between the Fijian Prime Minister and the Commander of the Armed Forces resulting from the coup in 2000. These tensions have their source in the distrust between the indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian communities. In recent years Initiatives of Change activists have conducted large-scale programmes in schools and elsewhere to help overcome this distrust.

Conference participants are expected from all over the country and from overseas. Twenty people will come from the Solomon Islands, bringing a drama entitled 'Stitching the Solomons together'.

The organisers are particularly keen that Australian Aboriginals take part in the conference. At present two are going, one from Melbourne and another from Wilcannia. We need \$2,500 to cover their expenses. Contributions would be welcome, and can be sent to Armagh, 226 Kooyong Rd, Toorak, Vic 3142.

New lofC brochure

Enclosed is a new brochure outlining the ideas of Initiatives of Change and its programs in the Australia-Pacific region, and linking people to the Australian Initiatives of Change website. It was produced in time for the 50th anniversary celebrations of the gift of Armagh, and also the visit of Imam Sajid and Mrs Sajid from Britain, and has already been used with many people wanting to know more. Further copies are available from the Melbourne office.

Skeletons in Albany

Cast ready? Go curtain. Lights up on the opening scene Sandy....' So the stage manager releases the handbrake. One more 'thumbs up', a deep breath, and the actors make their entrance.

In the South West of WA, a local theatre company is in the midst of their 3-week season of Hugh Williams play, *Skeletons*. The play explores in sometimes uncomfortable depth the skeletons in the lives of an everyday family whose dysfunctional lives can be tracked clearly back to those skeletons. The cast are very experienced but have found this fare a new experience, a challenge, and very much to their liking.

Rural cities around Australia usually boast a repertory company with varying reputations. Albany has three! This company, 'Spectrum', has a ready audience for light comedy and farce. To drag an audience to a serious play has proved historically difficult, and our opening weekend has born this out.

However, in this middle weekend the numbers are swelling as the word gets around town is that it is 'worth seeing'.

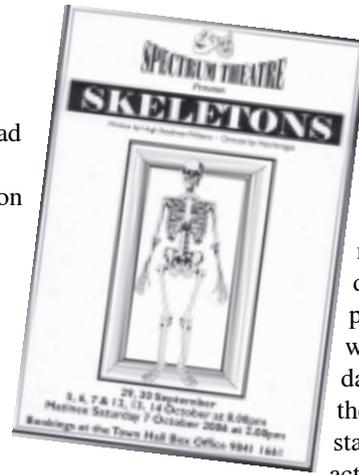
Ruth and I have lived virtually all of our married lives in rural Australia, far

from the capital cities and daily support of IofC friends. We have had to try to glean what we are being called to. People need to see a vision of what they could do if they gave their wills to the programme of the Almighty. We need to be free to carry that vision to all people, whatever their belief structure.

It was in this frame of mind several years ago that 'The Eternal' broke through my layers of protective thought to tell me that my years of singing and acting were not a sidetrack, but were the vehicle I was meant to use to shine a light into peoples lives.

The credentials we had built up in this town over twelve years meant that when I approached the Spectrum Committee with an unusual play, with 'religious overtones', I was trusted to run with it. Many of those involved with amateur theatre have no interest in, and are wary of organized religion, much like many Australians. But I have had nothing but support and encouragement from everyone involved.

The depths of conversations and



discussions after the performances has been unique and commented on. One father told me he had cried during a particular scene when the daughter washes the feet of her stage father as an act of forgiveness

and acceptance.

We don't know what will flow from this. We may never know all the consequences. All I know is I sensed a call to do this, so we did. I guess that's faith! I hope so!

Mick Vertigan

Conference reminder

The deadline for 'early bird' discounts for registration at the *Australia as a neighbour* conference is 10 November. Conference details are available on www.au.iofc.org/melbconf or by post from *Newsbriefs* at the address below.

Sudanese journey towards healing

Over the past year in Melbourne, young Sudanese from North and South have started a healing dialogue after decades of civil war. In August, David Vincent, who initiated the dialogue, travelled to the IofC conference centre in Caux, Switzerland, where he was able to meet others from Sudan and other Africans working for reconciliation. He writes:

Before I met the IofC team through attending the Life Matters course, my heart was full of bitterness. My entire generation grew up knowing that people from the North are our enemies. The more we fought back the more lives were lost. Properties were destroyed. About 2 million lives were lost and thousands displaced. It has been 20 years since I saw my mother or even communicated with her. I had built a huge hatred in my heart against the Muslims from the North.

During the Life Matters course, I was able to revisit that past. I remember that morning when a miracle happened to me. It was a time for reflection. I was helped to understand that without our past experience, however bitter, we will never

find the solution to the present. It is through the past that we are able to establish an understanding that opens many doors. Since then I have become a new person. I was able to let the weight of the past go. I was able to forgive those who contributed to my suffering. I learnt that to forgive is a process to be able to free your heart.

I was able to get the strength to be able to meet with the people that caused the pain in me, the scattering of my family.

With courage I met with some of the North Sudanese youth in Melbourne and organized a meeting to take colleagues through the journey of reconciliation. I never thought this would happen, sitting down at the same table and sharing about

the past. Now we have devoted young people from both North and the South who are working together to put things right in our country. We are all inexperienced in conflict resolution but we have a strong conviction that we are meant to do it. The passing of the bad seed down to every generation has to stop.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement that was signed earlier last year needs support to be able to last. We need to create a trusting platform where every Sudanese can be free to speak out and be able to let go the past. At times I get frustrated when things do not go as expected. However, I still trust in God, who led me to meet Initiatives of Change, to lead us to where we can find some help.

Four people involved in the dialogues will soon travel to Sudan to share their experience and help prepare a conference there. Two fares have been given by a Rotary Club and they are actively raising the rest. David may be reached via 226 Kooyong Rd, Toorak, VIC 3142.