

## New hope from Fiji

As tensions in Fiji mounted over the threat of a military coup, a major international IofC conference entitled 'New hope from Fiji: making this a vision possible' took place in the capital, Suva, with joint sponsorship from the Fijian government's Ministry of Reconciliation and National Unity and the New Zealand government. Chris Lancaster reports:

Whatever happens, this is our home; we will need each other, and the strength which comes from our interconnectedness,' said Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, Vice-President of Fiji, speaking at the opening dinner, adding 'I am the richer and humbler for the experience of reaching out to others.'

Some 150 from Fiji and overseas participated in the four-day conference held at the University of the South Pacific in Suva. As the Vice-President had made clear, in the context of the previous fortnight's political tensions this theme could not have been more timely. Students, businesspeople and politicians were among the Fijians who took part.

Ratu Meli Vesikula and YP Reddy spoke together, telling the audience of 250 their story of cross-racial reconciliation. Ratu Meli, an ethnic Fijian, had been involved in the 1987 coup and one of the most feared figures in the Indian community. Through engagement with IofC he had a change of heart and later apologized for his actions to YP Reddy, an Indian business leader, and to the wider community.

Dilamawa Vesikula, had recently taken part in IofC's Asia-Pacific Youth Conference (APYC) in Indonesia: 'Finding the ability to listen to my inner

voice about the changes in my life wasn't that difficult,' she said. 'But finding the courage to take action on those changes was very hard. I decided to make three commitments in my life: to God, to my family, and to IofC.'

Ana Vesikula and Sreani Bainimarama work at the Ministry of Reconciliation and National Unity, and following their involvement in the Brisbane IofC conference in 2005 were key to the unique partnership between the ministry and IofC in hosting the conference. Ana shared from her own experience: 'Unless God builds the bridge, it cannot be a good bridge; to be a bridge-builder you have to take on the load in your heart. I have to work on the prejudices which have built up in me over the years.' Ushneesh Yadav, a research assistant at the ministry, was another who attended the APYC in Indonesia; he returned home with decisions to apologise to his wife, spend more time with his elderly relatives, and restore communication with his brother after six months without speaking to him.

The largest overseas contingent were the 22 who came from Solomon Islands, bringing music, drama, stories of change and the experience of conducting a nationwide 'Clean Election Campaign'.

Naomi Tate Kelah spoke of her journey, as a mother, to healing and new hope following the death of her husband in the tensions there three years ago. Harry Maesua told of his decision to stop playing in nightclub bands after realising how that lifestyle contributed to family breakdowns.



(Left to right: Fr Michael Lapsley, H.E. Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi (Vice-President of Fiji) and H.E. Bernard Narakobi (Papua New Guinean High Commissioner to New Zealand) at the conference opening dinner

Other overseas visitors came from near and far. Australians Troy Blow and John Bond shared experience of personal healing and of the *Journey of Healing* movement. Troy, an indigenous Australian who has battled with alcoholism said, 'the turning point in my life was when I realised that although I thought my addictions were my problem, they actually weren't. They were my solution to the problem, which was a deeper lack of self-esteem and self-worth.'

### From victim to victor

'We should not forgive and forget,' said New Zealand-born South African Fr Michael Lapsley. 'Rather we have to move from destructive memory to redemptive memory, by getting rid of the poison. And the poison lies not in what we think about the events of the past, but in what we feel about those events.' In 1990, while Fr Lapsley was active in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle, a letter bomb destroyed both his hands and one eye. He spoke of his subsequent journey from victim (an object, someone to whom something is done), to survivor, to victor (as someone who shapes events themselves).

Many were touched and spurred to personal decisions by the small group discussions, sharing, and personal conversations. Three days later a team of 11 visited Lautoka Teachers' College, and after their presentation the two staff members who had participated in the conference both shared apologies which they had decided to make. The following day 45, including the Solomon Islanders on their last day in Fiji, attended a follow-up meeting in Suva. Even these initial outcomes make clear that the conference's vision for Fiji is indeed possible.



Discussions in small groups allowed trust to develop

# British Imam's Australia tour concludes The Sajids down under

As reported in the last Newsbriefs, Imam Dr Abduljalil Sajid – one of Britain's leading Muslims – and his wife Jamila have been visiting Australia as guests of Initiatives of Change as part of IofC's mission to build bridges of trust across the world's divides. Brief reports of the second stage of their Australian visit follow.

## Canberra

During the Sajids' five days in Canberra there was impressive media coverage. There were two full reports by Graham Downie, in *The Canberra Times*, each with a photo, the second with the headline 'Imam calls for community to find cause of acts of terror' which ended with a question from the Imam: 'Is it not time that we should see how the world's issues could be helped by faith communities?'. Imam Sajid was interviewed on *The 7.30 Report*; another televised interview on *Australia Outlook* was beamed to 41 countries, and later the first of three broadcasts of Rachael Kohn's 50-minute interview with Imam Sajid was heard on ABC Radio National's *The Spirit of Things*.

Two government ministers asked Imam Sajid penetrating questions about his experiences in Britain which might have relevance here. There were meetings with five other MPs, including the Member whose electorate includes Cronulla, scene of last year's riots. He

told of various initiatives which are taking place to build respect and understanding between young Australians. Another MP promptly recommended to the producer of *The 7.30 Report* that Imam Sajid should appear on the program. A Labor MP from an outer Melbourne suburb which has a large Turkish population observed that before 9/11 they identified as 'migrants', after as 'Muslims'. She was concerned how to keep building trust in the community – a concern reflected by the Sydney MP whose electorate includes Lakemba Mosque.

## Bridging the divides

The Sajids were also welcomed by the President and the Executive of the Canberra Islamic Centre. Imam Sajid also had heartfelt exchanges with the Catholic Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn, Michael Coleridge, and with Gregor Henderson, President of the Uniting Church in Australia.

On their final night in Canberra there was a public 'conversation' at the

Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture between Anglican Bishop George Browning and Imam Sajid on 'Building trust across the world's divides – a task for Muslims and Christians'.

Andrew Lancaster

## Wagga Wagga

A highlight of 60 hours spent in Wagga Wagga was a private dinner bringing together 30 community leaders of the region. Guests included leaders in politics, state and national government, the Church, education, the media and business. Thirteen Muslim professional people were amongst the guests at this event hosted by our Muslim friends in the very fine Chancellor's room of Charles Sturt University (CSU). Imam Sajid addressed the company after the meal on requirements and challenges of leadership. Six of the guests were asked to provide a reflection in response, one of whom suggested that we should further this spirit of the occasion through 'a forum where voices that need to be heard are heard'.

The Mayor of Wagga Wagga, Councillor Kerry Pascoe, welcomed the Sajids to the city at a public event in the Historic Council Chambers where they spoke to 60 people. The function theme was 'Family and community values: common ground?' and Jamila joined her husband in telling their story of reaching out across cultural barriers in UK. Hosts

of the occasion were the MultiCultural Council of Wagga Wagga, the Muslim community and Initiatives of Change.

The Islamic Student Association hosted a public lecture at CSU attended by 75 people. There were four excellent articles, with colour photos, in the daily and weekly papers, a 20 minute ABC Radio Riverina interview, commercial radio and television reporting.

Ron Lawler

## Melbourne

In Melbourne the Sajids had many opportunities to engage with Muslim communities who were feeling the weight of bad publicity in the wake of the controversy over Sheikh Hilaly's comments on women's dress.

In meetings with officers of the Islamic Council of Victoria, addresses at the West Melbourne



PHOTO: ROB WOOD

(Left to Right) Ruth Leonard, Grahame Leonard, President Executive Council of Australian Jewry, Imam Dr Abduljalil Sajid, Naim Melhem, Susan Melhem



PHOTO: ROB WOOD

Imam Sajid (rt) with Salah Salman, Director of the Australian International Academy, one of Melbourne's largest Islamic schools.

## New President of Initiatives of Change - International

The new President of *Initiatives of Change - International* is to be distinguished Algerian and United Nations diplomat Mohamed Sahnoun, who takes over from Dr Cornelio Sommaruga on 1 January 2007.

Mohamed Sahnoun is a former Deputy Secretary-General of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and was Deputy Secretary-General of the League of Arab States in charge of the Africa-Arab dialogue. He has served as Algeria's Ambassador to Germany, France, the United States and Morocco, as well as the United Nations. Currently he is a Special Adviser on developments in Africa to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. He will bring to his new role with IofC vast knowledge of the developing world and a commitment to peace-making. He resides in Geneva.

His predecessor, Cornelio Sommaruga, formerly a senior Swiss public servant, became well known internationally during his 12-year term as President of the International Committee of the Red Cross. As President of *Initiatives of Change - International*, he established valuable relationships between IofC and several international and interfaith organisations, and played a significant part in IofC's support of the peace process in Burundi.

*Initiatives of Change - International* is the name of the International Association (IA) created in 2002 to federate the registered national bodies of IofC around

the world, to help in standardising procedures and maintaining the integrity of this global network. The Australian legal body is one of the 20 members.

The IA has enabled a more formal and corporate approach to international bodies like the United Nations, where IofC is now an NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It also takes responsibility for some international projects like the new 'global communications strategy' and the management of the international website, and provides an appropriate channel for funding them.

The IA as a legal body with specific functions is not to be confused with the International Council (IC) which has general responsibility for oversight of IofC's global work and directions. Each has its own role in the international network.

Members of the International Council are selected by representatives of IofC teams at the Global Consultation which takes place every two years. Current serving members of the IC are: *Mike Brown* (Australia), *Chris Evans* (UK), *Will Jenkins* (USA), *Nombulelo Khanyile* (South Africa), *Andrew Lancaster* (Australia), *Grace Liu* (Taiwan), *Haridas Nair* (Malaysia) and *Inese Voika* (Latvia).

More details about *Initiatives of Change - International* can be read on the global website [www.iofc.org](http://www.iofc.org)

Mosque and the Doncaster Mosque, the Imam reminded Muslims of their calling to make a positive contribution to the wider community – Muslim and non-Muslim – and to win hearts by doing so. In the Australian International Academy, one of Victoria's largest Muslim schools, he addressed years 9-11 students and answered their questions on subjects as diverse as the causes of terrorism, the rights of women and the Islamic position on adoption. This was followed by a reception by the Mayor and Councillors, as well as local community leaders in Moreland, one of Melbourne's most ethnically diverse areas, and home to many Muslims. The previous day Mrs Sajid had joined women from Moreland's ethnic communities for afternoon tea.

The Sajids' packed programme also included visits to the Melbourne Grammar School, lunch with academics and international students at Trinity College, University of Melbourne, meetings with journalists Martin Flanagan and Waleed Aly, with Peter Brown, Mayor of the City of Greater Dandenong and Grahame Leonard, President of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry. They also managed to squeeze in a meeting with the penguins at Philip Island.

Their Australian sojourn ended with a public meeting in Armagh, IofC's centre in Melbourne, on *Beyond tolerance - towards understanding* in which the Sajids spoke winningly of their own journeys towards understanding British culture and the effective bridge-building work they have done, first in Brighton, UK, (where they live) and then in the wider context of Britain, Europe and now the world.

Mike Lowe

### IofC Melbourne conference, Jan 12-16 2007

## Australia as a neighbour

Bridging the divides with compassion, integrity and global responsibility.

**Bishop George Browning**, Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn (Anglican) will give the keynote speech at the opening dinner of the *Australia as a neighbour* conference in Melbourne.

Other confirmed speakers for the conference include **Tim Costello**, CEO of World Vision Australia, **Waleed Aly**, lawyer, writer and member of the Islamic Council of Victoria Executive Committee, **Phong Nguyen**, Chair of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, **Mary Louise O'Callaghan**, Journalist, Solomon Islands, **Denis Tracey** Author of *Giving it away: in praise of philanthropy*,

**Nithi Nesadurai**, Journalist; President, Environmental Society, Malaysia, and **Grahame J. Leonard** President of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and a Director of Transparency International, Australia.

A public forum on Saturday 13th at 2.30pm will focus the theme *Australia as a Neighbour* asking 'Can we find a big enough vision for Australia and the region which needs all of us, working together across the divides, to make it real?'

For more information visit the conference website: [www.au.iofc.org/conferences/melbconf](http://www.au.iofc.org/conferences/melbconf)

## Life Matters reunion

On a Friday night, when you would expect people to 'go out' and entertain themselves after a hard week's work, a group of more than ten people decided to come to Armagh in a peaceful environment and share a meal together. It was the beginning of another *Life Matters* Reunion night!

The *Life Matters* Reunion nights usually occur every three months. They are chances for those that have completed IofC's *Life Matters* course to catch up with one another, and provide a place to share and learn from each other's experiences.

It had been approximately six months since the last time some of the group had met. As more and more people arrived, the dining/reception room was filled with many familiar and excited voices. People were moving from one chair to the next as they balanced eating their meals while, at the same time, reconnecting with those they had not seen for while.

When most of the group had finished their dinner two questions were suggested as possible points for reflection. The first

one was what they had learnt from the *Life Matters* course and how they had applied it in their lives recently. The second was what challenges lay ahead for them and how they saw themselves overcoming those challenges. The sharing began with recounting of ideas that were learnt from the course. However, the sharing soon became very real, deep and honest. The group shared what was on their hearts and the highs and lows in their current lives. 'Fear' was mentioned as a common reoccurring obstacle, but there were also offers of advice, from individual experiences, on how to tackle fear and not let it control their lives. What was expected to be a two-hour discussion turned into more than three hours of sharing and listening.

The night ended with some amazing harmonic 'singing' and piano performances played by some musically talented individuals in the group. It was just the right kind of music to put the heart at ease and prepare oneself for a peaceful and unburdened sleep.

William Nguyen

## Sudanese fundraiser

As reported in previous issues of *Newsbriefs*, young Sudanese from North and South have been meeting in Melbourne to work for reconciliation after decades of civil war. On 12 November they held a fundraising dinner at Armagh, the IofC centre in Melbourne, to enable four of the group to travel to Sudan to prepare for a conference there next year which will bring together people from North and South. David Vincent writes:

On behalf of Sudanese Youth for Reconciliation and Hope, I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank all those who took their time off to attend the fundraising dinner night at Armagh. More especially I would like to thank the Armagh family for their continuing support for the group. The delegates, Biong, Faten, Nelson and Ahmed are now in their early stages of the visit to Khartoum Sudan.

On Sunday night seeing the number that attended was very encouraging and tells us that whatever we are trying to do we are not doing it alone. The civil war in Sudan has lasted over two decades and the work of nation building rest on the shoulders of the young people from Sudan. The war has built a great wall between the South and the North and we

are now trying to break the wall and build a new bridge of understanding among ourselves despite the fact that we all come from different ethnic and religious background. Personally, I know it is very hard to forgive the past; it takes courage and love of God to be able to open up and let all that go. From my experience there is indeed a joy in forgiving.

Your generosity and contributions has enabled the delegates to extend our desire to work together for our future in Sudan. The success of the reconciliation process we are undertaking belongs to all of us and we shall always acknowledge your continued support for the group. On the 30th December there will be a report-back by the group. *If you are interested in attending please call the Armagh office (03 9822 1218) for details.*

## Book talk

Following the appeal for *Newsbriefs* readers to donate old MRA/IofC books, Joyce Fraser writes:

Thanks to all those who supplied second hand books for our book stall at the Fiji conference in Suva. Friends from the Solomon Islands were particularly keen and went away with many leaflets and booklets for their office.

Several speakers mentioned the Clean Election Campaign which took place at the beginning of this year. In the updated version of *Corruption who Cares* (see below) the history of all the campaigns makes interesting reading. This illustrates the ripple effect of creative ideas. The University of South Pacific bookshop bought five copies for their library and shop.

### **Corruption: Who Cares** By Brian Lightowler

*Corruption: Who Cares?*, which features Transparency International's contribution to the worldwide campaign for integrity, is now published in a revised and updated edition. Published this year in India by St Paul's Books\*, this new edition highlights actions for integrity in India, in Kenya and other parts of Africa and in the Solomon Islands.

The author, Brian Lightowler, introduces the reader to people, businessmen and politicians, whose radical honesty not only challenged the corrupt but advanced the cause of integrity across their societies and nations. R. M Lala, author of *The Creation of Wealth, In Search of Leadership* and many other books, writes that *Corruption: Who Cares?* "is a very important contribution on a subject which financial experts and economists totally ignore."

This new edition is available in Australia for \$9.95 (including postage & packing) from Grosvenor Books, 226 Kooyong Road, Toorak, Victoria 3142; tel: 03 9822 1218; email: grosvenor.books@optusnet.com.au

\*First published in 2003 by Grosvenor Books in Australia