

Australia's spirit lifted

David Mills reports on outreach and outcomes from the recent conference 'Together we can make a world of difference':

"The spirit of Australia has been lifted." This was the assessment of one participant in the MRA - Initiatives of Change conference held in Sydney, 23-27 April. The 350 people who came from 27 countries all felt uplifted, judging from post-conference evaluation meetings and surveys.

For the Australians it did indeed 'lift' their nation. On radio and in the press, stories from some of the delegates at the conference were also told. Three of the overseas groups were featured on ABC Radio National. Cornelio Sommaruga, from Switzerland, was interviewed by Peter Thompson on his *Breakfast* program and later on *The World Today*. In her program, *Life Matters*, Geraldine Doogue unraveled the heart-rending reconciliation between Letlapa Mphahlele and Ginn Fourie from South Africa. And the four from Lebanon - working to build bridges in their country between the Christian and Muslim communities - told their stories to Rachael Kohn on *The Spirit of Things* and were extensively interviewed on SBS Arabic Radio. In the press there were articles and reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald* by Mark Metherell and Tony Stephens, in the *Sydney Weekly Courier* and other local Sydney papers. *The Age* in Melbourne and the *Adelaide Advertiser* also had interviews.

Of particular significance was the impact of the Lebanese. The divisions in their own country have been replicated here in Australia. The courageous reconciliation of the two former militia fighters, Assaad Shaftari from the Christian community and Hisham Shihab from the Muslim community, were deeply appreciated wherever they went before and after the conference. In Sydney the Lebanese Community Council arranged

a meeting with their community leaders, a Lebanese businessman gave a dinner for other business and political leaders, a Maronite church invited them to speak to 300 young adults (the first time a Muslim had spoken there), they were received in the NSW Parliament at a special luncheon, and they spoke at the Centre for Peace and Conflict studies at Sydney University. (This led to a front page report in the *University of Sydney News*.) The party later visited Melbourne for similar events.

Several of these community leaders who are keen to overcome divisions have expressed the hope of continuing to work for the same spirit of unity shown by Assaad and Hisham with the help of MRA - Initiatives of Change.

The conference was greatly stirred by Matthew Wale and Henry Tobani from the Solomon Islands who spoke of the need to bring reconciliation, forgiveness and an end to corruption. (The Australian and New Zealand Governments have since offered assistance to address the law and order crisis in their country.)

Three initiatives

Three initiatives flowing directly from the conference are:

- *Open Homes - Open Hearts* - a challenge to all Australians to invite someone from a different culture or background into their homes for a chat and a "cuppa" (see reports page 2).
- The development of interfaith/intercultural partnerships to build trust, appreciation and responsibility together in our communities.
- The formation of a Pacific Support Network in this South Pacific region to help develop integrity of leadership and build reconciliation between communities in conflict.

Journey goes international

John Bond, Secretary of the National Sorry Day Committee and the Journey of Healing, writes:

The Journey of Healing is based on a simple idea - that all of us can play a part in healing the effects of misguided past policies. On 26 May - Sorry Day - we saw that happening all over the country.

The Sydney Opera House invited the stolen generations of New South Wales to present an evening of their poetry, songs and stories. People who were cruelly maltreated because their culture was seen as worthless are welcomed onto the best stage in the country, the NSW Governor attends, and the evening is broadcast nationally by the ABC. That is how the Australian community is helping to heal the wounds.

Similar stories could be told from every capital city, and many country towns, Aboriginal communities, schools and universities. In Adelaide 3,500 people visited a 'tent city' (each tent representing an institution to which removed children were taken) at Tarndanyangga (Victoria Square).

"Healing is happening" ...

In Brisbane there were dawn services at places to which removed children were taken. In Perth the State's Chief Justice addressed a rally, committing himself to the healing process. In Canberra former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and Doris Pilkington, author of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, spoke to 600 people in the Great Hall of Parliament. Philip Ruddock, Minister for Indigenous Affairs, welcomed them. "The Government has always said that the separation of indigenous children from their families is a tragic and terrible part of Australia's history," he said. "The trauma and suffering that has been caused by these past actions is immense. I understand that healing is needed. I also see that healing is happening."

Across the country, radio stations interviewed stolen generations people, giving them the chance to tell their story to the people of their city, town or rural area. Many of these people have lived in isolation for years, unable to feel part of either the Aboriginal or the non-Aboriginal community. Now that their local communities are reaching out to them, despair is giving way to hope.

Canadians, indigenous and non-indigenous, have watched this process, and together launched a Day of Healing and Reconciliation which will take place each year on 26 May. They intend this to grow into a national event which will give the wider Canadian community the chance to contribute towards healing in the way that the Journey of Healing offers the Australian community.

Open Homes - Open Hearts Day 2003

Ken and Trish Harrison of Sydney launched the idea of 'Open Homes - Open Hearts' (OHOH) at the Collaroy conference. "It is hoped that National OHOH Sunday (first Sunday in June) will become an annual event and grow year by year," writes Trish as OHOH national coordinator. They marked 1 June 2003 by sharing lunch with a new Aboriginal friend. Here are some of the other stories have reached them from around Australia, and beyond:

NSW: The Lao Buddhist Temple at Edensor Park opened its doors for afternoon tea, open dialogue and question-time - "Open Temple - Open Heart". There was a front page article advertising it in the local paper.

A Marrickville family organised a street party, attended by Lebanese, Samoan-Tongan and Chinese neighbours. It was the first time any of these neighbours had been in their home.

Marrickville Council put the OHOH package including the news release and newsletter on its website and left leaflets in the foyer of the council chambers.

A Sydney couple invited two Lebanese Muslim couples. One came on Monday night and the other came on Tuesday morning. "So we're having an OHOH Week", said the wife. Representatives of a Muslim Group in Auburn invited all in their block of housing units to come together. A dozen came representing three different faiths. A photograph was taken of the event for the local paper.

TAS: An 80-year-old physiotherapist had a "lovely afternoon" with two couples, one from Malaysia and one from Indonesia. "In typical Asian style, they arrived with gifts of food they had made and all got on so well together. I am sure it is the beginning of a new friendship."

ACT: A doctor invited several indigenous people he knew for a barbecue at his home. With family members and friends about 30 came. The doctor had been away on Sorry Day so he offered his personal "Sorry" to Aboriginal people present. This has led to a group working to create a Community Centre for indigenous people in ACT.

VIC: At Armagh, the MRA-IC national centre, all the neighbours in Kooyong Road were invited for afternoon tea. Invitations were hand delivered. Six families came and were excited to meet each other. The event was such a hit that they have decided to do it again.

Another couple invited a Polish Jewish lady for tea and heard the moving story of her life.

SA: An Adelaide woman visited a Pakistani family who live close to her. They sat around the table and drank "chai". The four-year-old presented a

portrait to her and the family wants to keep in touch.

A young woman who attended the Collaroy conference reports: "I really enjoyed my afternoon with Liz Tongerie (see conference report), hearing more about her life, and hopefully this is the start of a new friendship." Two neighbours had a morning tea to welcome new neighbours. "It went well and we will try for something similar next year," they say.

WA: The OHOH coordinator says: "Fifty people attended a wonderful launch on 1 June which pulled together many groups and themes. We started with an Aboriginal 'welcome to country' and had a large

group of friends from the Islamic community and from different Christian denominations. We brought together Labor politicians, old and new. A Federal MP told her personal story. We even had a OHOH cake. The leader of the Islamic group promised to invite us all back to an occasion very soon. Five other people offered to host future events and others signed up to tell stories."

FIJI: An e-mail advertising Open Homes - Open Hearts went out to all non-government organisations.

At an afternoon OHOH "Listening Circle" women from three different religious backgrounds and three ethnic communities gathered in a Suva home to listen to each other sharing about "landmarks that have shaped my life". "By the end everyone realised how much they had in common, despite different backgrounds and ages ranging from 25 to 57," the hostess writes.

'I decided to act immediately'

When I moved into my home four years ago, a neighbouring family showed us that they were not happy with us. Although we never had any open conflict with that family, we never had any communication with them, not even the common phrase of "Hello, how are you?"

Our relations worsened when a new family of Somalis moved to the area. Our old neighbours became very agitated and had physical and verbal conflict with the new family. Then the car of the new family had its windscreen smashed. The new family was terrified and we came to their aid with comfort and moral support. We then noticed that our old neighbours assumed that we were against them, just because we are friends of their enemy who are Somalis like us. They started to hassle us, specially the children.

At the Collaroy conference the Open Homes - Open Hearts issue particularly touched me and I decided to act on it immediately. When I came back I invited the old foe family along with two other Anglo families to have tea with us in our home.

The woman of the family was very hesitant at first and had difficulty to accept because our invitation was surprise to her. But at last, she accepted.

On 1 June 2003 at 4.15pm the three families came to our home. At the start, everything was

strange to every one of us.

My wife and my children, particularly my little son Samatar, gave a fantastic welcome. The three families shared our finger food made according to our culture. Every now and then I tried to break the ice. In 20 minutes, there was a chat and good conversation among us.

I gave them a brief introduction about MRA-IC and told them I got this idea from a special program called Open Homes - Open Hearts. They were very satisfied with the idea and we continued our conversation.

We all acknowledged that the main obstacle between us was lack of communication, which created unnecessary suspicion and mistrust. One of the three families suggested to have this sort of gathering in future. Another suggested to organise a Neighbourhood Watch in our area.

Now we are enjoying being good neighbours and I believe we will be supportive to each other in case of need. We have all agreed to continue our communication to improve our relations. I am also in process of mending the relations between the two rival families and I am confident that I will succeed.

The mood of our neighbourhood has changed from suspicion to openness.

- Abdirahman Geyre, Melbourne

Growing teams

Mike Lowe reflects on the 'entry points' which enable new people to become part of a team:

My first visit to Caux in 1984 was a life-changing experience. There I found a new vision, gave my life to God and decided to make restitution for things I had done. On return to London I was asked to help with the monthly cut-and-paste layout of the *Industrial Pioneer*. It was an opportunity to stay involved and have fellowship with more experienced colleagues. Change, for me, was not a one-off event but is a continuing process enabled by many people being willing to walk alongside me.

Many had similar experiences - an initial life-changing encounter followed by opportunities to stay involved by helping out in some way: giving but also receiving. In my fumbling attempts to bring change to my workplace and family this fellowship was essential. I was not yet a self-starter who could simply take these ideas and apply them effectively wherever I was.

Nowadays the computer has replaced many of those simple jobs around which teams were built. Whilst people continue to find new life

through courses, conferences and personal encounters, when they look at the 'program' of MRA-IC to see how they can help, it is hard to see entry points.

I wonder how much the success of programs like *Hope in the Cities*, *Foundations for Freedom* and *Journey of Healing* is, in part, because they have clear and focussed goals. Specific programs offering immediate and tangible goals generate a sense that people are needed.

I have found that people are attracted by inadequacy. When I am up-front about the problems I face and the needs I see then people are intrigued and want to help. When I talk about the wonderful work that I am doing and how well it is going, then I get glazed looks.

A program like *Open Homes - Open Hearts* offers great opportunities to enlist people in a common task and create opportunities for fellowship. It's a chance to think beyond the box of our usual teams as we ask who else would want to be a part of this outreach. There is always the danger that programs can replace the spiritual heart of MRA-IC if they become an end in themselves. But it shouldn't be an "either/or" thing. If we continue to cherish and apply the spiritual core of our calling then programs can be an effective tool in helping teams and individuals to grow.



The season of summer conferences in Caux, Switzerland, opens on 2 July with a week-long conference on *Partnerships in Service, Responsibility and Leadership*.

It has been prepared by a team, meeting "virtually" by e-mail, working from Central and Eastern Europe,

Life Matters

The 12th *Life Matters* course will take place at Armagh in Melbourne 4-13 July. With over 20 participants it is the largest ever. Applications have come from Cambodia, Fiji, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Moldova, Solomons, Somalia/New Zealand, Ukraine, UK, Vietnam, Zimbabwe, AND Australia! Many applicants express the wish to understand themselves better, to interact with people from other cultures, and to make a contribution to the world.

from the First Nations of Canada and Russia, from Mexico, from Africa, from Switzerland and Germany. Preparation meetings were held in London in March and at the end of May in Kiev, Ukraine.

Other conferences through July and August will focus on business, media, family and home life, religions and peace, peace-building and human security.

The session on *Globalisation...as if people really mattered* will feature a conversation between José María Figueres, Managing Director of the World Economic Forum, and Ignacio Ramonet, co-founder of the World Social Forum.

A number of Australians will attend and some will help staff the conferences. David Lancaster will undergird the finance office throughout.

Copies of the Caux invitation are still available from Armagh and other centres, and the Caux website can be consulted at www.caux.ch

If you would like to receive weekly 'background' letters from Caux please contact Fiona or Viv at the Melbourne office, Tel: 03 9822 1218.

June National Gathering

"MRA's primary mission is to help each person find their part in healing and transformation in their community and nation, and within themselves, in response to the Spirit of God and moral absolutes.

"It offers a way for each Australian to be involved in creating a productive, just, honest, reconciling and compassionate society."

This MRA-Initiatives of Change mission statement, developed in 1996, was the starting point for the National Gathering held in Melbourne 6-9 June, attended by some 70 people at the weekend. One person commented that she needed to see how to marry her work life and her MRA-IC life for the sake of the integrity of each. This comment focussed one of the main themes of discussion: how to support committed people working in many areas of society, not just MRA-IC programs.

Andrew Lancaster is the new National Coordinator and convenor of the National Coordination Group (NCG) for the coming year. To carry the load and support the National Coordinator, the NCG will be made up of six people - Andrew and Margaret Lancaster, Joyce Fraser, David Lancaster, John Mills and Liz Weeks.

'People exercising their faith in daily life'

I studied in a Christian school in Hong Kong for 11 years. We had a prayer session every morning and a worship assembly every week. I knew most of the famous Bible stories. But I used to think the Bible is just a philosophy, and it is not realistic to apply it in life. I felt I had been spoon-fed with lots of theories and I had a tendency to reject all of them.

Ten days ago, I decided to believe in God and become a Christian, so as to know not only the direction to live a better life, but also the reason for living.

One catalyst to make me decide to become Christian was this Armagh family. I found it so interesting that people can actually exercise their belief and faith in daily life. Seeing is believing.

Now I pray every day in quiet time. After I pray I feel peaceful and empowered in my heart, and I get a clear direction for the following day.

- Sam Kwok studies Commerce (Actuarial Studies) at Melbourne University

Honesty - the soul and the specifics

When I began to ponder the word "honesty" the thought came to me: "The origin of honesty is in the soul."

I sat with that for a while. I had an image of a big central place inside where the accountability, the direction giving, the sorting out and the discerning in my life takes place. It is only as I've moved to this place that I've been able to notice issues like honesty.

For some time I had been aware that when I talk I can be quite capable of slightly misrepresenting the facts - the general thrust of this issue would be true, it could even be quite passionate, but there was an occasional tendency to exaggerate the detail. I noticed this tendency, I was even quite puzzled by it, but it never deeply challenged me.

I am a person deeply moved by the way the spirit of life, or God, comes to us, longs for us and as the Christian Scripture says, even "groans" for our transformation. I had experienced the invitation to transformation in many ways but still hadn't become very conscious of these little moments of what can only be called dishonesty.

I have been very strongly drawn to the concept of the 'quiet time' - time alone with the spirit or source of life. It has become the central dynamic in my life. One of the most significant questions I have learned to ask myself, and also others, is "What are you being called to?" When asked in the context of the quiet time, I find it opens us up to such a quality of listening and discerning that it can only be a gift of the Spirit.

In time for me, the answer to the question "What are you being called to?" was quite simply "honesty" -

honesty in all its forms, honesty in relationships, in attitude and in action. It was a call to become more transparent, to become more frank, to "say it how it is", to use the right word and not to block up the channels for myself and others by half submerged issues. It was a call to be vigilant about honesty - honesty before God and with God, honesty about myself and with myself and honesty about and with others.

Because the call to honesty came to me in the quiet time, I have been able to experience not only the challenge but also the blessing. I experience the spirit of God desiring this for me as an opportunity for freedom and new growth. As well as this, I've felt the grace and strength to move into this process - to persevere with opening up this new gift.

This may seem general but it has worked in very specific ways. Recently another person and I had taken opposing views on a particular issue. We both felt justified and quite passionate in our views and because we couldn't find any common ground chose to agree to differ. However in order both to maintain my stance and to avoid conflict, I began to notice a movement towards secrecy, in me. I began to be very uncomfortable about the feeling that secrecy was the only option, so with kindly encouragement took it to the spirit of God in the quiet time. Again, the call was to honesty - to be honest with the person about feeling secretive. Almost immediately, a third person was introduced to the situation that had an over-

arching view of both sides of the issue. Because the impasse had been softened by honesty, we were both able to move into a bigger space and experience not only new freedom and a resolution but amazing new opportunities as well.

My experience of honesty leads me again to believe that the spirit of God is on our side - knowing us, desiring us and always looking for ways to lead us and walk with us through our difficulties and challenges into greater fullness of life. My part of the bargain is willingness to accept the invitation, to recognise the call to ever-deeper levels of integrity and responsibility and to follow where it leads.

- **Meredith Synnot**

Putting things right

When I was working in a video shop I borrowed lots of videos without permission. When I worked in a seafood shop, I bought one shrimp box but took two boxes. But I didn't realise that was wrong, because I thought they didn't pay me enough.

When I came to Australia I decided in a quiet time to write letters putting these things right, and to pay money back to the seafood shop. After that I found peace in my mind.

My mum felt very ashamed about me because those shops are very close to our home. So I wrote a letter to my family telling honestly why I'd written the letters and apologising to them. My mum said, "It's OK. It's spilt milk. Now do your best." She couldn't understand why I did it, but she accepts what I've done.

- **Jisun Jung from Korea is a co-worker at Armagh, the MRA-IC centre in Melbourne**

Recent publications

Corruption: Who Cares? by Brian Lightowler (125pp) unmasks the crippling effects of global corruption and introduces the reader to business people and politicians whose fearless honesty has advanced integrity across their societies.

Jeremy Pope of Transparency International calls the book "a message of hope" and "a valuable contribution" to overcoming corruption.

Reduced price: \$12.50 (postage and packing an extra \$2.50) from Grosvenor Books

(PO Box 53, Burwood, Vic 3125, e-mail: tomram@optusnet.com.au) or your state Grosvenor agent. When ordered through your local bookstore: RRP \$14.95.

Also available from Grosvenor Books:

Connecting Communities ed. Robert Corcoran, National Director, Hope in the Cities, USA (128pp). Supplies limited. \$10 incl postage.

No Longer Down Under: Australians creating change by Mike Brown (299pp) \$25 incl postage.

Conference tapes

Two 90-minute tapes of speakers from the conference *Together we can make a world of difference*. Including Ginn Fourie and Letlapa Mphahlele (South Africa), Joseph Karanja (Kenya), Patricia Mukhim (India), Rob Corcoran (USA), Matthew Wale (Solomons), Ratu Meli Vesikula (Fiji), Doris Pilkington (Australia), Assaad Shaftari, Hisham Shihab and Bassam Tabchouri (Lebanon) and Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri (Malaysia). Total cost: \$10. Please pay when ordering. Available from: Wal Nuske, 81 Jacaranda Avenue, Figtree, NSW 2525.