



## Initiatives of Change



Pastor James Wuye and Imam Mohammad Ashafa. Photo courtesy of Canberra Times

## Hope from Nigeria

*Two Nigerians internationally famous for their work in interfaith reconciliation have just spent three weeks in Australia on the invitation of Initiatives of Change. They are/ Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye from the north-central city of Kaduna, where they head the Muslim-Christian Interfaith Mediation Centre.*

Nigeria is Africa's largest country with a population of 140 million. It is one of a number of African countries where Christian and Muslim populations live side by side. The new President of Nigeria says the pattern of conciliation used in Kaduna is the model for his government.

Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye began their present work 14 years ago after a period of religious violence had caused the death of many thousands of Nigerians. Having previously led militias fighting on the side of their own religious communities, and having each suffered personal loss in this social tragedy, they discovered a radically different approach in their own religious teachings. Now they say that the true Muslim forgives and that the Christian cannot preach hatred.

Their work came to the attention of FLT Films in London. The resulting documentary, *The Imam and the Pastor*, won the first prize at the 2007 Africa Documentary Film Festival in the short

documentary section. The film's co-producer, Dr Imad Karam from Gaza, Palestine, travelled with them as they visited Perth, Melbourne, Brisbane, Canberra and Sydney, from 24 October to 14 November. Local teams prepared and hosted each visit. In each city they showed the film (DVD), then spoke and answered questions. Many copies of the DVD were sold, the proceeds going to support their continuing work in Nigeria.

A wide audience was reached through the media. Phillip Adams interviewed them for 30 minutes on his popular Radio National program *Late Night Live*. As he listened to their story he said: "You are two of the most important people in the world."

In Perth an audience of 140 at the University of Western Australia took part in an occasion co-hosted by Initiatives of Change and the Centre for Muslim States & Societies of UWA. There was a standing ovation. A young Muslim mother said she had been empowered by the evening.

The Imam of the Mirrabooka Mosque, when welcoming the visitors to evening prayers at his Mosque said, "I was moved to tears when I saw the film. We are all children of Abraham. We are honoured to see Imam and Pastor walking the same road. You are sending a very powerful message to humanity".

The visitors were given a lunch in the WA Parliament and welcomed in family homes.

One host, Prof David Allbrook, wrote afterwards: "Perhaps the most moving time for me was when they first came to a planning session for the Sunday morning worship service at Kalamunda Uniting Church. The sharing and deep fellowship fed my soul. Then they planned a truly informative and inspiring Service in record time!! They are such fun as well as having a deeply moving and relevant ministry."

The Melbourne visit had the backing of the Islamic Council of Victoria, the Victorian Council of Churches and the Victorian Multicultural Commission. 50 guests from diverse faith communities joined the Imam and the pastor for a dinner at the IofC centre, Armagh. *The Age* published an interview by Geoff Strong under the headline "Imam and Pastor unite for message of peace, tolerance".

At an evening hosted by the Maya Healing Centre – an Aboriginal centre in Northcote – a white South African asked to speak. He said that through the apartheid period people like himself had had a taking attitude rather than a giving one. He apologised for the way he had lived and embraced the two Nigerians.

In a live interview on ABC Radio's *The Conversation Hour* they were joined by Waleed Aly, star of *Salaam Cafe*. At the Melbourne Central Mosque Imam Ashafa gave the Friday Khutba (sermon), followed by a meeting for both men with leaders of the Islamic Council of Victoria. They spoke at a public forum at Melbourne University, hosted by the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies, attended by about 100.

A public forum co-hosted by Victoria University in the multicultural suburb of Footscray drew many local Africans,

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## ***Hope from Nigeria continued***

including Ethiopian youth leaders who were inspired to tackle divisions in their own community. A TV crew appeared and filmed a 3-minute report for the ABC TV news that evening. An event in Vermont co-hosted by the the Whitehorse Interfaith Network drew nearly 300 people. Afterwards a young man waited in a long queue of people wanting to talk to Imam Ashafa. Later the Imam was moved to report that the young man told him: "I hated your people. I hated Muslims so much. You changed my world today. Please forgive me."

A 25-minute interview for the community TV programme *Visions* will be screened in a few weeks' time.

180 people attended **Brisbane's** Riverglenn Conference Centre to hear the Imam and the Pastor. Some came armed with scripture to find fault with Muslims and Christians working together. Asked what in each of their religions challenged them to end their enmity and work for reconciliation, they said, "We don't have full agreement on beliefs and values of course, but we are children of Abraham and sons of Adam and as such have a duty to each other as fellow humans."

"It is not about compromise. It is about creating a space for the other. 'The earth is the Lord's'. Let us make space for others in it," both men kept reiterating in the six community and University events conducted in Brisbane and **Toowoomba** where they addressed about 500 people.

Says Imam Ashafa, "Peace-building has been hard. We are held in suspicion in some parts of our communities. The biggest enemy we have to overcome is ignorance."

"The Koran teaches that Islam is inclusive and acknowledges other religions. All those who believe in God have their reward. Mischievous religious leaders with the help of political interference have led people to follow hate and twisted the teachings. We hope people move their thinking from us OR them to us IN them and them IN us."

Pastor Wuye responded, "The Bible says to pursue peace with all men, and holiness without which we cannot see God. When Ashafa sought to show respect and compassion and seek forgiveness I was troubled and wept, 'How can I forgive this enemy of mine who has killed my countrymen and

caused the loss of my right hand in the fighting?' Just as his prophet had led him to forgiveness, so did Jesus challenge me.

"Before we had programmed people to train and to kill as militia. Now we had to go back to our true teaching and reprogram people again. We are teaching people through radio broadcasts and mediation meetings. This has brought a huge reduction in violence."

"Men of God demonstrate the power of healing" was the headline for the five-column photograph and article by Graham Downie on page three of *The Canberra Times*.

The two Nigerians were special guest speakers at the seminar for 200 people following the 22nd annual National Prayer Breakfast in Parliament House. Never before had a Muslim taken such a prominent part in this event. The two men were asked what each had had to compromise in order to work with the other. Both replied with an emphatic "nothing at all" which drew spontaneous applause. They went on to say that they were not creating "Chrislam" but setting a pattern of how people of different beliefs can work together. The way to defeat your enemy, they said, is to turn him into your friend. They finished to a prolonged standing ovation.

### **Genuine reconciliation**

90 people came to a public event sponsored jointly by the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (ACC&C) and the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) as well as IofC. A member of the audience asked for 20 copies of the DVD to sell at a high level interfaith event in Canberra a few days later. A Sudanese youth leader said that it "was very important for me and my colleagues to hear from the Imam and the Pastor. I hope we apply the essence of the story into our lives in Sudan one day."

The Nigerian High Commissioner invited the Nigerians and Imad Karam to dinner, with his staff, at his residence.

ABC Radio South East NSW did a telephone interview for the *Mornings* program and SBS Radio interviewed Imad Karam for its Arabic program.

In **Sydney** the Hon Barbara Perry, NSW Minister for Local Government, hosted an occasion for Pastor James and Imam Ashafa in the NSW State

Parliament Theatre, attended by MPs, diplomats and community leaders.

"I feel honoured to have been able to hear them speak," commented one woman afterwards. "The questions on the whole came from people genuinely interested to learn how to follow their example of living peace; the one that seemed directed to seeking 'to blame other' was answered superbly and simply."

David Mills from IofC who moderated the occasion said that the Nigerians had been invited because their message was universal: "Paying the price of genuine reconciliation, starting with oneself; healing the resentment of generations; going beyond tolerance, even acceptance, to the beginnings of appreciation. Every community has something to appreciate about another. The prosperity of one depends on the prosperity of the other."

Pastor James and Imam Ashafa spoke to 30 community leaders in the multicultural suburb of Auburn; to a group of 50 young peace-building trainees from around the Pacific and Africa; and to 60 heads of interfaith organizations.

At a public event in Blacktown, an area of western Sydney where people from 180 nations live, 520 people crowded into the main civic hall to see the *The Imam and the Pastor* and to meet the two men in person. Introducing the film, media personality Mike Bailey said, "It brings together all of human emotions. We haven't seen that level of violence in Australia. However in the heart there is sometimes that feeling of hatred."

"Australia is a fortunate nation," said Imam Ashafa. "You recently acknowledged the past to the Aborigines. If you can acknowledge your past, you set a record. You have the courage to take a risk and create an open space for the other person. Conquer fear of the unknown - there are no strangers, just friends we have not yet met."

Pastor James added, "You have to carry the gospel of apology to every house. Once you do that in Blacktown - neighbour to neighbour - then you can export (this) to other countries. In Kenya we used the idea of Australia's Sorry Books to bring reconciliation."

*Reports from Gordon Ashman, Lindsay Cartwright, David Allbrook, Mike Lowe, Rob Wood, Adele Dingle, Margaret Lancaster, David Mills*



## Meeting with the Soroptimists

Soroptimists International is an Organisation for professional women. It aims "to provide a global voice for women and girls to achieve their potential and have an equal voice in creating strong and peaceful communities worldwide."

Barbara Lawler, a member of the Sydney Club, gave a talk after her visit to Indonesia to attend the International Youth Forum in August, of which IofC was a co-sponsor with the Centre for Religion and Civilization in Jakarta.

In November, Trish McDonald-Harrison and Christina DeAngelis were invited to the Sydney Club to show excerpts from the DVD *The Imam and the Pastor*. They spoke from their experience in Conflict Resolution, using the Creators of Peace Circles as models and informing the women about the up-coming conference in September 2009.

Trish says, "I shared about my realisation of my own part in Aboriginal people's suffering and subsequent decision to work for restoring respect for Aboriginal people." The audience was animated. Some women bought DVDs and others expressed interest in being part of a CoP Circle in the future.

## Third basketball camp (November)

25 participants were led by 12 core group members through basketball drills, healthy living education and leadership life skills. We talked about making decisions in life and what it means to stand up for what we believe in times of bullying and peer pressure.



Some comments from participants:  
"I learnt to shoot hoops effectively for the first time in my life."

"I have gained a new perspective on my family."

"I will call my cousin and share what I have been really feeling."

"I have made a decision not to smoke weed anymore."

"When my actions are leading me away from my goals, I know I need to change."

"I want to live a life towards my

## Caux 2008 – first impressions

Prompted by a forceful call from my inner voice early in the year I found myself travelling up the mountain from Montreux to Caux in Switzerland:

Clicking noisily over the ratchets on the railway track in the final minutes of a long journey from Australia I was assailed by the trepidation of a diver mounting the ladder to the ten metre platform. Having felt intrigued with this place for many years, the moment had arrived and I was on the threshold of Mountain House.

After passing through the huge entrance doors to the comfortable foyer and discovering the sanctuary of my room, I knew in my core being there was no mistake. I stepped on to the balcony, my shoulders relaxed, my head cleared and my heart flew.... How rich was my prayer of thanks and gratitude.

Caux is a gathering place during six weeks of the European summer for people with a common earnest intent for a happy and peaceful life for all on this planet. A collection of people who are prepared to give, take and compromise to achieve this - it recognises we all have talents to contribute so that all emerge

strengthened by the collective benefit.

The programme is full, with a new theme each week. The day begins at 7 a.m., if one desires, and continues through until late in the evening, usually with choices at each time slot. During the two weeks of my visit it was full house with more than 400 people from over 50 nations and languages.

There are gatherings, classes, addresses, work groups, concerts, discussions, meditations, contemplations, entertainments and beautiful people – this year aged from 3 months to 92 years – communicating in every way. How could we best carry a little of all this wonder down the mountain when we return home? To change the world we need to change people. Caux had done its job, could we do ours?

I met a 22 year old German student looking lost in the entrance hall. She had just arrived having packed her bags after listening to someone describe Caux on the radio earlier in the week. "It just sounded what I was searching for," she told me.

Virginia Andrew

## Sydney is divided by a bridge, not a wall!

*42 women gathered at the Tramshed Community Centre, Narrabeen, on Saturday 11 October for a celebration of the 20 Creators of Peace circles which have taken place all over Sydney in the past three years and are continuing:*

Travelling from the Hills District, Sutherland Shire, Lakemba, the eastern suburbs and the inner west, as well as suburbs on the north shore, we realised how often we live in our own areas of the city. As one remarked, "I have often thought the Harbour Bridge was like the Berlin Wall - but it is not a wall, it is a bridge, and we can travel across it!"

Creators of Peace circles draw together women of all faiths, cultures and ages. We workshop practical peace-making skills and share something of our own personal stories.

Local Aboriginal artist Jessica Birk began the day with an Acknowledgement of Country. She came with her mother, Lois, and other

Aboriginal friends. They contributed greatly to the occasion and are now interested to experience a CoP circle along with some of the others who signed up on the day.

Jessica has allowed her eye-catching illustration "Coastal Shoreline" to be featured on the invitation for an international Creators of Peace conference to be held at the Collaroy Conference Centre 30 September – 4 October 2009. Several women wish to join the conference planning. Rainbow coloured balloons released over Narrabeen Lake marked the launching of the conference.

*(Information about Creators of Peace and conference updates: [www.iofc.org/creators-of-peace](http://www.iofc.org/creators-of-peace))*

Jane Mills, Sandra Blamey, Prasanthi Hagare

goals, this means exercising three times a week."

"I want to start caring for my little brother."

"It was really fun - when is the next

one?"

*The Basketball Camp Coordinating team included: David Coles, Xiao-Nan Ding, Aketch Manyiel, Rob Wood, Chris James*

# Expanding our spiritual family

(From a speech at Mountain House, Caux, 12 August 2008)

I remember realising quite vividly when I was at university that the IofC/MRA community that I knew felt very much like an extension of my family. It contained many real friends of various ages. It was international, with a global perspective that I found very exciting. Beyond that, it was based on deeply held values - something that is fundamental in a relationship.

So this group of committed people became my wider spiritual family. But there was another experience.

At about the same time I started to discover another kind of spiritual relationship through the books I was studying. My course was in German and Russian literature. We read Nietzsche and I was confronted with his passionate challenge to religious belief. In the same year I read Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* and found in Dostoyevsky a kind of spiritual father figure who powerfully answered the challenge of thinkers like Nietzsche with his (Dostoyevsky's) extraordinary humanity. The overarching faith expressed in Dostoyevsky's work gave me something I needed at a formative time and I have ever since felt I was a member of Dostoyevsky's spiritual family.

It is a family with many other members. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who died in August, felt himself part of it. Another is Grigory Pomerants who gave this year's final Caux Lecture on

Buchman's aphorism: One person plus God is a majority. Pomerants' 50-year path as a dissident in the Soviet intellectual world began when his undergraduate thesis on Dostoyevsky was condemned as "anti-Marxist".

Dostoyevsky is special but not alone. Tolstoy too carries some of the special depth of the Russian spirit. Of the German writers, Friedrich Schiller with his noble moral humanism particularly inspired me. His last play, *William Tell* is a vision of true political freedom.

## What is the significance of a spiritual family?

We are all stirred by family stories, happy or unhappy, because among our deepest human desires is the wish to BELONG, and that starts in our families. The family is where we first look for a zone of comfort and safety - though not all find it there.

It has been truly pointed out that comfort zones can become smaller and smaller and can make us small too when they are used out of fear - as a refuge where I can feel more in control. But when our motive is altruistic and we reach outside our comfort zone, perhaps to get to know a new, unfamiliar person, the comfort zone itself grows and we grow too.

So I am arguing now that we need deliberately to aim, as we grow in

maturity, to extend the borders of our spiritual family.

Because the family experience is universal it can be one of the great bonds of understanding between countries and cultures.

Inter-cultural dialogue can start at the level of knowledge, giving us valuable new facts and external information. But we must also aim for the heart-to-heart dialogue which melts the cultural boundaries between individuals. Here Initiatives of Change offers a special way.

The doorway that IofC offers to pass naturally between cultures is the universally recognised doorway of moral striving and faith. These are experienced in some way by people of every culture, including those of secular beliefs.

People who have worked with IofC over the years have experienced a deep comradeship between people of different cultural and religious backgrounds, through responding to the same calling of moral and spiritual striving to create a better world. A Buddhist friend once said to me: "We come from different faiths but we belong to the same morality." In her mind a shared "morality" created a spiritual relationship.

In 1958 Gabriel Marcel, the great French Catholic thinker, wrote this about his visit to Caux (in the introduction to his book *Fresh Hope for the World*): "We saw, before our eyes, this /world, this vast world, becoming a family."

Peter Thwaites

## Book talk two new titles

### *The Worldwide Legacy of Frank*

*Buchman*, compiled by Archie Mackenzie and David Young, traces Buchmans's initial experience of change a hundred years ago and integrates it with additional insights, from the Oxford Group to Moral Re-Armament and Initiatives of Change, as his work is known today. Chapters are by different writers and they each tell of the impact of change in their own country. A fascinating read as you are taken from Switzerland, to Japan, the African

continent and beyond. (320 pp Price: \$15)

Cheryl Wood

### *Fear or faith: you can choose.*

Compilers John and Jeanne Faber have collected experiences, stories and poems of people who have overcome fears of separation, illness or death. Mingled with the deep and profound are humorous anecdotes. It has been so popular in the UK that a second printing is imminent after only a short time since publication. A gem of a book. (Price: \$15)

Joyce Fraser

Books available from Grosvenor Books, 226 Kooyong Road, Toorak Victoria 3142. Tel. (03)98221218

## Life Matters Course

Life Matters, a nine-day residential course for young adults "to shape a purpose and path for living" starts on 30th January 2009 in Melbourne. Application forms available from [lifematters@au.iofc.org](mailto:lifematters@au.iofc.org). Don't miss out! Scholarships available.

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