



Initiatives of Change

Truth and reconciliation in Solomon Islands

A team from Initiatives of Change Australia has just spent four weeks in Solomon Islands. At the request of Solomons Education Minister Matthew Wale and the Solomons Winds of Change team they assisted in the organisation of a three-day regional conference in Honiara, held in conjunction with the state visit of South African Nobel Peace Laureate, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, and the Solomons Government's launching on 29 April of a national Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

They also helped to run a three-day reconciliation workshop for a group which included former combatants in the civil strife pre-2003. Funding for the conference and workshop came from the Solomon Islands Government, AusAID, European Union, IofC Australia and donations from local companies. **John Mills**, who was one of the team, reports:

as well as Malaita, and included ex-combatants and militia commanders as well as victims of the tensions. One man paddled a canoe for seven hours to come. Many came by boat. A party of five came from Fiji, representing that country's multiracial society. The conference was opened by the Chief Justice, Sir Albert Palmer.

Your suffering is also my suffering

In introducing Archbishop Tutu, Hon Matthew Wale, Minister of Education, read excerpts of painful stories by people who had lost loved ones in the tensions. "Let us listen with the attitude that your suffering is also my suffering, your loss my loss," said Mr Wale.

Archbishop Tutu, who was listened to with great expectation and hope, recounted experiences from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, explaining how perpetrators and victims found release. "It was a spiritual thing", he said. "It was a commission that opened wounds, but it was wounds that were festering. It was painful to open the wounds, to wipe them clean, pour oil on them. And they healed. And we had some extraordinary examples of people asking for forgiveness."

The Archbishop was followed by speakers who had been involved in the ethnic tensions. A number of women spoke of husbands who had been killed and of their readiness to forgive the perpetrators. Former Malaitan Eagle Force founder and commander, Andrew Fioga, spoke of wanting to reconcile with those who killed his father. He was "now a changed man and ready to forgive. In a few months I and my family will be reconciling with my brothers and sisters from Guadalcanal and during the reconciliation ceremony they will return the remains of my father. Since I and

others started the war, I will also start the healing process," he concluded.

Ishmael Idu told of courageous reconciliation work he had done in the Weather Coast and said attending the Australian IofC Life Matters Course had helped to equip him for this task.

Speakers from overseas included Niketu Iralu, convener of Naga Churches Coordination Committee for Healing and Reconciliation in Nagaland, India. He told of work in his village to heal the wounds caused by fighting between the underground factions. "Hurts and wounds that are not transformed are always transferred," he said.

Rev Professor James Haire, Director, Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, spoke of effective work to bring healing to Muslim - Christian divisions in Ambon, Indonesia, where some years back 80,000 people died and 500,000 were made homeless. While both peace and justice were needed they decided to go for peace initially and take up the justice issues later.

Former Kenyan newspaper editor, Bedan Mbugua, told how he was imprisoned for six months for challenging a Presidential election result as corrupt. He found that he grew stronger as he stood for the truth. "Faith is the basis of courage," he said.

Media reports included an extensive TV and newspaper interview with Didacienne Mukahabeshimana, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide. As a victim she had decided to look towards the future instead of remaining locked in the past. "Those who have suffered the most have the most to give and are the ones who must take the first step," she said. She, Bedan Mbugua and Joseph Karanja (Kenya) were received by Prime Minister Dr Derek Sikua following the conference.



Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu speaking at the Winds of Change conference in Honiara. Minister of Education, Hon. Matthew Wale, in the background.

The Solomon Islands Government and the people of Guadalcanal and the other islands continue to search for reconciliation and healing following the many deaths and the displacement of over 20,000 people in the ethnic tensions at the turn of the century. Two events took place in Honiara recently aimed at moving forward the process of reconciliation.

On 29 April the Government launched a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) with celebrated South African Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu in attendance. Archbishop Tutu is known worldwide for his fearless and outspoken moral and spiritual campaign against apartheid and for chairing the South African TRC following the end of the apartheid regime.

The following day Archbishop Tutu addressed a three-day regional conference, "Reconciliation - The Way Forward" convened by Winds of Change (the Solomons chapter of Initiatives of Change) to coincide with the TRC launch.

The 300 delegates came from Honiara and all around the island of Guadalcanal,

Three-day reconciliation workshop

A week after the conference 30 men and women participated in a three-day reconciliation workshop. Stanley Vutiande, who had attended the February Life Matters Course in Melbourne, was the key person in gathering the participants and in liaising with the Ministry of National Reconciliation who supported it financially. David and Jane Mills, Christina DeAngelis and John Mills were part of the Australia/Solomons facilitation team.

PHOTO: Charles Kadamana - Solomons Star



Former rival militants from Guadalcanal have pledged to pursue peace after attending a Winds of Change workshop. From left, Patrick Haukare, Michael Vutiande, Reginald Billy, Jonathan Vani, Justin Pascal and Derol Kikolo.

Daniel Sade told how after attending the conference he had gone home to be honest with his wife about the sort of person he really was. At the final session he spoke of forgiving the groups from two sides in the tensions who had attacked him and made him fear for his life. He asked to shake hands with any present from those

two sides. Immediately two men stepped forward to shake his hand and to join in a prayer of forgiveness.

The following day under the heading "Making Peace" the front page of the *Solomons Star* was filled with a smiling picture of six workshop participants, "former rival militants" shaking hands. The story inside was headed, "Winds of

Change brings former rivals face to face". Justin Paskal, a former Isatabu Freedom Movement commander, said "I had a chance to meet the former commander of the Marau Eagle Force. This is important in our efforts for reconciliation and peace building."

A Marau Eagle Force commander, Patrick Haukare, told how in the workshop "we have found real peace because we revealed all our secrets and accepted forgiveness. We will now go out to our respective places and preach the good news to our people," he added.

A widow who lost her husband during the tensions, Sentica Joash, said:

"We have experienced a very hard life during the tensions... When I attended the workshop, it helped me to forgive and to want to reconcile with those who murdered my husband."

A former commander, Derol Kikolo, commented: "I have come to understand that real peace comes from the heart." Reginald Billy, from another group, said he had found that "reconciliation can come about if we change personally".

A four-page conference report is in preparation. Please apply to: ArmaghOffice@dodo.com.au

A trend-setter conference in Malaysia

The Tools for Change (T4C) Conference in Malaysia in February this year was an opportunity to witness a new trend-setting partnership initiative in IofC.

How do we bring people not familiar with the depth of transformational stories of IofC to a place where they can listen and absorb these stories? How do we engage with the corporate world and other NGOs, including professional trainers?

At the first glance, T4C seemed very much a "regular" IofC conference. The morning sessions were packed with experiences of powerful transformations and outcomes that covered personal, family, social, business and national life.

The visible impact of Malaysian logger Joseph Wong's story on some of the participants was inspiring. Nandor

Lim's was another powerful Malaysian story of mending things with his mother and stepping out of "fear of the other". He is now leading a program for families who are finding healing and unity in the home.

There was an initial resistance in me to walk into the afternoon workshops. I prefer to stay with the spirit. Going into mainstream professional programs seemed different. A gentle pause and a quick "check in" affirmed for me that the magic was in the learning and the fellowship and all opportunities had wings to deliver for the benefit of all.

So I stayed with my chosen workshop

for the rest of the afternoons. Our professional trainer's personal sharing with us was enough material for another conference theme! New friendships for a lifetime were made and innovative ideas shared.

Reflecting later, it did dawn on me that the professional workshops and other presentation styles opened a new vista for all of us to interface at a comfort level with the corporate and business world. It did create a new platform to pitch the integration and intention of the work of IofC – making it a marketable model.

- Daya Bhagwandas

Two young women from Africa and one from Russia come to Australia

Joanita Nabanja from Uganda and Ann Njeri from Kenya arrive here in July. They have been part of the Action for Life group.

Joanita Nabanja has worked as Office Manager with World Vision in Uganda and is a trained group facilitator. She says: "I hope to use my experience during my stay in the preparation and running of the conference. I believe what I learn will be of significance in my work."

Ann Njeri, who has led programmes with "Kenya I Care" and the Clean Election Campaign, writes: "I have a special interest in women and peace building. Creators of Peace Circles have been a great tool for me to use. It was during one of these meetings that I realised my hatred towards one of the tribes in my country, and I decided to take steps of reconciliation which have now gone beyond me."

Zhanna Petrukovich is a lawyer from Siberia. She writes:

"It's been two months since I came and it is hard not to see the differences between Australia and the other two countries which I know, my home Russia and India where I spent last year."

"My first impression of Australia was of a place which became a home for many people, a generous, open, diverse and beautiful country which is loved by those who live in it. I also saw that many people are grateful to Australia and want to work and do their best to build their new life here."

"In the Sydney Botanical Gardens, one of the signs said 'Please walk on the grass'. I laughed because in Russia parks have signs: 'Don't walk on the lawn!'. That sign stayed with me and I think it says exactly how I feel about life in Australia and also a lot about how different it is back home."

"Witnessing life in a developed country, after India and Russia, made me a bit sad at first. I saw the comfort in which people live: almost everybody lives in a house; services are good; working conditions are good; medical care; government is more a friend than an obstacle; rules are plenty but they are thought through so that they help people; the question of personal survival is not

an issue."

"So is this fair when others have so much from the start; some work more but have less - not even basic things?"

"A friend of mine said once that the country you come from (as other things we are given, including problems of the world which we are born into) is a quest, a puzzle, you need to do something about it. Another friend suggested: 'Use your imagination.' These two gifts together with gratitude bring a lot of meaning to life."

Anyone wishing to help with the cost of their stay in Australia can send contributions to: The Treasurer, Finance Office, 226 Kooyong Road, Toorak, Vic 3142.

On a roll



The Creators of Peace (CoP) conference "Creating a Culture of Peace - what will it take?" (30 September - 4 October 2009) in Sydney is on a roll.

140 people have already registered for the whole event. A further group have declared firm interest and are about to put their money down.

Anyone is welcome as a day visitor and can register their names later.

Invitation, registration form and a draft of the lively programme are on the web at: www.iofc.org/creators-of-peace

Email: conferencecop@au.iofc.org

Tel: +61 2 99906640 (message only)

Conference Preparations... Finance!



the DVD about the Imam and the Pastor provided extra interest.

One occasion included silk-scarf painting, the sale of cards, home-made baking, preserves, freshly picked strawberries, bric a brac, potted plants - and lively interactions with other community groups in neighbouring stalls. With five sellers representing five countries and a large banner displaying the CoP logo there was plenty of interest in what the stall was all about.

Outside a country supermarket, locals stopped by for a chat and to give support. Funds raised will enable four women to

In South Australia a church hall, a community fair, and a country town street stall were the venues for fundraising for the conference. Speakers and

attend the conference in Sydney in late September, and aid others from overseas with their travel expenses. Another fundraiser is planned in a few weeks to assist Aboriginal women from the Coorong to go. - *Helen Mills*

On a balmy Autumn night in Perth, 50 people gathered for a bushland banquet to raise funds for the conference. Flags from around the world added to the festive spirit as people shared their cultural heritage through different dishes and the fun and games that followed. Many who came have been participants of the CoP Circles which have taken place over the past months and so it was an opportunity to reconnect and catch up. The six women going to the conference from WA shared what they were hoping for. Over \$1500 was raised to help those delegates and for overseas participants as well. - *Penny Herd*

At an African fair in Sydney's most multicultural suburb of Auburn, there was a CoP information and fundraising stall. A further fundraising evening will take place in a private home on Sydney's North Shore, in June.

Two Australian families put new goals into practice at Asia Plateau

Last year Adam and I decided that we wanted to move at a slower pace, to be more intentional about the lives we were living and the decisions we were making. We wanted our five year old daughter to be surrounded by people who speak a different language and for all of us to live into a culture that is radically different to our own.

So we quit our jobs in Melbourne and made the journey to Asia Plateau, the Initiatives of Change conference centre in Panchgani, India. We were part of the support team for a five month Internship Program which engaged 10 young people from around the world.

One of our lasting impressions will be of the challenges and rewards of living in such a tight but varied community. We are only a newly formed family and at times it was difficult to maintain the intimacy of that relationship while sharing each day with so many people. Context was the gift of this environment, giving us a sense of our family within the world. The more people we met and the more cultures we were exposed to, the wider our field of vision became. We were stretched beyond ourselves and our little family.

I was able to apply my skills as a teacher with regular English lessons. As an architect, Adam contributed to the design and development of the centre's facilities. Anabelle trooped off to a local school in Panchgani each day.

We went to India because we felt we had something to give and in the process we learnt a thing or two about what it means to serve. The truth is that the beating heart of Asia Plateau is servanthood and unless you get that you will never get what makes Asia Plateau so unique.

Yes, it's a place to discover your potential, to learn life skills such as leadership and to grow and be stretched, but more than that it's a place that thrives when people put others before themselves - be it by serving them dinner or doing the washing up or sharing their story. You literally see people expand.



Zoe (centre) and Aaron Thomas with friend Belle Brown on the shoulders of Asia Plateau interns Jakka, Jayang and Pempa

How are we different because of our time at Asia Plateau? Three months on, it is the people of Asia Plateau that we carry the most in our thoughts. People who are serious about making a positive difference in the world, who are committed to living lives of integrity. We will never think of places like Sudan or Tibet or Korea in the same way, instead we will think of the specific individuals who represented those places with such dignity. We will carry those individuals with us, wherever we go.

- Bek Brown

The bus seemed to take an age as it groaned its way up the hill towards Panchgani and we were not entirely sure what we were getting ourselves into.

We had just arrived in India from Africa - part of a 6-month journey around the world. Our goal was to introduce our children, Aaron and Zoe, to a range of rich cultures and traditions, to make friends from many lands, for them to recognise poverty and its many faces, and to enable them to develop some kind of compassionate response to these things as they grow.

Dragging our bags through the gates at Asia Plateau, we quickly found

ourselves immersed in another vital community, involved principally with the students of the Intern program.

This diverse group of people had a common focus for their time there: to learn how to serve. Examining our own ideologies, cultural traits and traditions through the eyes of others is an illuminating and often challenging experience. We were able to invest our own experience, but drew from the Intern students a wealth of perceptions and different approaches to common struggles that people from other cultures and faiths have.

Aaron and Zoe quickly found their way into people's hearts - as children do - and in that beautiful, organic way served alongside us.

We forged a bond with people and felt a burden of interest for their countries that we had not had before: Zhanna - Russia; HeeWan - Korea; Gazeem - Sudan; Niyima, Pempa, Jayang and TensingJordan - Tibet; Jakka - Vietnam; Steven - Kenya; and TiaoMin - Taiwan; Penuo and Sushma - India.

They helped fulfil the goal for our journey.

- Mark and Judy Thomas