



IofC Australia ponders its past and prepares for its future

Appointing a new full-time executive officer and opening up the membership of its official Association were two significant steps 48 people from across Australia resolved to take at the National Gathering of IofC Australia in Melbourne, 10-13 October. Both steps are a result of the process of Cultural and Structural Change to which IofC committed itself at a similar meeting one year ago (see page 2 for more on the executive officer).

"We are being given a toolkit of fresh ideas to move us forward from where we've felt stuck," said John Mills, a member of the Council of Management and one of the 14 people meeting in two-day workshops each month to advance the process. "We are not there yet, but we are on the road."

"It is changing the habits of a lifetime," added Liz Weeks of the National Coordination Group, referring to the shift from informal, organic and often confusing ways of working to clearly defined and accountable roles, processes and decision-making.

Jonathan Klugman, the process consultant who is guiding the process, said he was interested in the "spiritual dynamics" of social change and how they apply in change management. The challenge, he said, is "how to translate all the thinking about change into change on the ground. And that takes time."

Also attending the National Gathering at Armagh, the Australia-Pacific centre for IofC, was Dr Omnia Marzouk, President of IofC International. A consultant paediatrician in emergency medicine at UK's largest children's hospital, Dr Marzouk first encountered IofC (then Moral Re-Armament) as a student in Australia when her father was Egyptian ambassador. At the

gathering in Melbourne she spoke about IofC's global outreach while assessing its shortcomings.

Around 100 people crowded into Armagh to hear Dr Marzouk answer questions, that ranged from her ethics in professional life to radicalization amongst Muslim youth. "Islam is about service where you are," she said, calling for an "alternative discourse" by religious leaders to help guide young people "to sort out the issues where you live first", rather than in far countries. She cited the "courageous leadership" of a young woman in Damascus who is using Creators of Peace Circles "to stand up for peace". She ran through other examples of IofC's outreach: trust-building in Burundi, training peace mobilizers in South Sudan, getting Ukrainians and Russians into honest dialogue in Switzerland, expanding ethical governance in India, and so on.

But alongside examples of IofC's positive impact, Dr Marzouk was ready to admit its failings and weaknesses. At a Global Assembly of IofC two years ago, she acknowledged that "behind the public stories of audacity and achievement sometimes lay hidden, painful ones". (See www.iofc.org/acknowledgement-statement-dr-omnia-marzouk)

She had come to Australia to support the current process of Cultural and Structural Change within IofC. She had also come on a "listening visit" to meet some 20 people in Perth, Melbourne and Sydney who have had difficult experiences during their past involvement with MRA/IofC. "How can we think about the future if the past is still with us?" she asked the Melbourne gathering.

Under the theme "Towards Learning and Healing", some 70 Australians who have served MRA/IofC over past



Dr Omnia Marzouk (right) meets medical students in Melbourne. Credit: Jonathan Lancaster

decades have shared their experiences, many of them challenging. "IofC is blessed and burdened with a great vision. People who have been captured by that vision have been unable to forget it and it has given a purpose to many lives," said Peter Thwaites, one of those guiding the process. "The problem with a great vision is that it is enormously difficult to achieve. What do we do when we fall short?"

"Since the founding days we have learned that MRA/IofC is neither unique nor infallible... (Its) greatest stories have been where a person has found a deeper insight into his or her own nature which leads inevitably to some change, through the very act of transparency. What we have lacked... was a similar transparency about MRA's corporate performance. Honesty is the great bridge of the gap between our cherished ideals and our flawed practice. The act of telling the truth, whatever that truth is, is empowering and faith-giving."

A prayer by Yousif Suliman from Sydney brought past and future together: "We seek God's forgiveness for our sins and mistakes which are committed in the course of establishing good over evil... and to shed His pure light on the full picture ahead of us."

Introducing the new Executive Officer

In May, the Council of Management and National Coordination Group wrote directly to four people, all below 40, who by their living and service have demonstrated an active commitment to IofC. The letter invited expressions of interest for a capable, qualified person to apply for the position of Executive Officer. Athalia Zwartz has been selected for the position, initially for one year. She spoke at the National Gathering of what brought her to this point, and outlined some expectations:

In 2011 an acquaintance sent me a link to the website of Caux, the centre in Switzerland. I remember thinking, "Wow, that looks just like what we do at the Australian Multicultural Foundation." For about six years, I had been working there in research, program development and management. So I decided to give it a go and went to Caux as an intern.

I really resonated with what I learnt there. *Initiatives of Change* was trying to tackle the big issues but doing it holistically with the added awareness of the spiritual side of things. There was an integrity I hadn't experienced professionally before.

On my return to Australia I got more involved with IofC and have returned three times to Caux as a trainer with the interns program.

That year I also went to work for "Sports Without Borders", an NGO that uses sport particularly with refugee and migrant young people, as a way of talking about their issues. There had been a breakdown in trust and project delivery so I had to work hard to rebuild relationships amongst all the stakeholders.

After one year I became Executive Director, responsible for managing the programs, developing strategic direction, ensuring sustainability with funding and building partnerships. I loved this job but for some time had a feeling that it wasn't for me.

I finally found the courage to resign and embarked on a "Year of living differently", an IofC program which involves working out what a year of living differently would look like for you personally, and then living that intentionally with the support of mentors. It also involves working alongside IofC teams in other places.



Athalia Zwartz. Credit: Mike Brown

My purpose was to deepen my spiritual practices and to see how I could live them without the security of home. I also wanted to get a better sense of what IofC means in different places and for different people. The year began with the Caux interns in 2013; then time spent at the IofC centre in India, where I got a much stronger sense of the roots and heart of IofC.

Then I went to Lebanon for three months. It was wonderful and an important learning for me: letting go of a particular kind of busyness to focus on people, getting myself out of the way to be able to just listen and share with them, their lives and their families. Hospitality is sacred in Arab culture, what I experienced of it was humbling.

I went on to Moldova and Ukraine meeting IofC teams, and the needs they are trying to address. A week in the Taizé community in France then prepared me for the 2014 Caux Interns Program. My year was over!

I took advantage of being in Europe to connect with family I had never met: my Dutch Jewish grandfather and surviving relatives of my Scottish grandmother. During this time, and a meditation course in Greece, I was grappling with what to do next. I had received the letter from the Council of Management (of IofC Australia) about this Executive Officer position. I took

into a lot of reflection and ultimately got a clear sense of "yes".

I acknowledge the enormity of this experiment for IofC Australia. The role has two key priorities – firstly, to work with the management groups, to embed and deepen the Cultural and Structural Change process in their daily practice. Secondly, it is to work with the wider network around the country, sharing the process with them.

Other aspects will include exploring new partnerships and how people can engage better with IofC. We can start to assemble a vision based on what's currently happening and what we want to have happen, bottom up and top down, harnessing IofC's unique potential in meeting the country's needs.

I have many apprehensions about taking on this role, personally questioning my capacity, patience, sensitivity and all the other things required. I'm much younger than most of the team, with far less life experience. This is a very complex job, with very different dynamics and very diverse relationships; and, to be perfectly honest, I have been baffled by how things happen or don't happen!

So why would I consciously choose to work in such an environment?

I applied for this job because it represents something pretty special. Any workplace is a frustrating environment, and we are all flawed beings full of delusion and blindness. Here, I have been inspired and challenged by the commitment people have to working with Cultural and Structural Change, though I have seen the discomfort some have endured as part of this process. Furthermore (and this is priceless), no matter how I interpret things, I genuinely trust the intentions of people in IofC Australia in their commitment to personal and global change. I am as aware as I can be of what I'm undertaking and take full responsibility for my choice, come what may.



Chief Inspector Bob Fitzgerald from the Blacktown Police with indigenous young people at the final session; Assefa Bekele is on the left. Credit: Melissa Chittasy

Life Matters for Blacktown youth

Assefa Bekele was born in Ethiopia. That's not unusual in Blacktown, where he works as a Multicultural Community Liaison Officer for the NSW Police Force. Some 37 percent of local residents were born overseas.

In 2009 and 2010, Assefa led a joint initiative with IofC to organize Life Matters Workshops in Western Sydney. Ever since, he has been hoping for more, to continue developing community leaders with integrity who can help build positive relationships in that area.

In August Assefa got his long-awaited workshop, hosted by IofC with partner organisations, SydWest Multicultural Services and the NSW Police. Held down the coast at Gerringong, 14 young people of various ethnic backgrounds went from Blacktown along with three members of the Rotaract Club of Macquarie University. A team of 12 facilitators from Sydney and Melbourne was joined by three Blacktown youth workers, who had helped with the selection process.

Identity, relationships, forgiveness, creative solutions to conflict, change and commitment... these were some of the themes packed into the weekend workshop. A poignant moment came when a participant asked what he could do to resolve a conflict with his brother, to whom he had

not spoken since they clashed. He resolved to fix things up with his brother (and has since done it).

One of the Melbourne facilitators, Daniel Haile Michael, told of the action he and five friends of African descent had taken in response to racism they had experienced at the hands of the Victorian Police. Widely reported in the media and warmly commended by Victoria's Chief Commissioner of Police, their initiative has led to the creation of a new department focusing on relationship-building with multi-cultural communities.

Five indigenous young people were brought to the workshop by Darren Ivey, Community Engagement Officer at the Aboriginal Child and Family Centre. For him, the weekend had underlined the importance of indigenous and other ethnic communities connecting and working together for the needed change of attitudes in Australia.

In acknowledging all those who had made the event possible, Assefa Bekele gave thanks to God "for bringing us to this point" and expressed his hope for further workshops. He has already written the Life Matters coordinators asking for two in 2015, involving African and Aboriginal youth.

-- Rob Wood, Melbourne

'This sense of knowing that I've found...'

Leonor Gumabon was one of 22 who took part in the Life Matters Workshop in Melbourne last January. Since then she and her boyfriend went through a Training of Trainers workshop in Armagh, Melbourne, to prepare them to assist Life Matters programs in the future. At the National Gathering of IofC, they described the impact on their lives:

Leonor: Not knowing what it was, I agreed with a university mate to come to a weekend workshop called "Life Matters". Little did I know that my life, my purpose in it and my relationships would never be the same.

The workshop showed me how to channel my own inner peace and sparked an undeniable conviction to positively contribute to my world. This sense of knowing what I've now found is so deep that, even almost 10 months later, I would not dare steer away from this path. A path that has been made so abundantly clear through the practice of "quiet time": a simple act of sitting silently in your own thoughts. The more time you allow yourself in silence, the louder your inner voice becomes. A tool so simple, yet so

powerful, has become such an important part of my day. And I can't wait to find out where it'll lead me.

Joseph Grant: Before I left New Zealand a year ago, life had kind of died. The hopes, dreams and ambitions that had marked my twenties had all but gone. Not knowing who I was, what I was doing, or where I was going had brought on a fear that seemed to grow stronger with each passing day. With the fear came depression. Depression had always been alien to me but I could now feel it tugging at the edges of each day.

Then I moved to Australia. I began to find hope again. I had my work, my family and an amazing girlfriend. Life was great. But in quiet moments I still felt lost. One day Leo came home from a Life Matters workshop and the change in her was evident. I was intrigued and questioned her about everything. She introduced me to quiet times and from that point on life began to not only be great but have meaning. I know now what I want to do with my life and I am thankful to her for showing me how to find my direction.

In 30 languages, 'peace' becomes real

"Peace resonates in Hebrew, Arabic and English as women form a circle of understanding in the Hills," was the headline for an article by Bev Jordan in the The Hills edition of the Daily Telegraph, Sydney, on 19 September, reporting the 10th annual gathering of the "Creators of Peace" network in Sydney.

"The event started with word 'Peace' said in 30 languages, including Arabic and Hebrew, as more than 80 women, from more than 20 different ethnic backgrounds and many different faiths talked about how change

started with them," the newspaper reported.

Zohra Aly, who organised the Creators of Peace annual celebration, was quoted: "Muslims are also scared of the extremists portrayed in the media, because they do not represent us or our values, or true Islamic values... I feel people are ready to be open and listen to 'the other' if given the opportunity... Having dialogue with each other, even if it means going out of your comfort zone, is really crucial in enhancing the community's understanding of these issues."

In South Australia, a fundraising screening of a peace initiative from women in Liberia raised funds to support two South Sudanese women to fly to Johannesburg to join Creators of Peace facilitators from nine African nations meeting in September. Two Australians, Shoshana Faire and Jean Brown, helped facilitate the retreat in preparation for the expansion of the program in Africa. In Kenya a series of 20 Peace Circles are being run this year, reaching various ethnic communities.

Happenings at Armagh

FaceBook fans can find what's happening through a renewed "Armagh-IofC" page. A scan of events in the last few weeks includes:

Teresa Thomson speaking about her work with CBM to develop training programs and employment for people with disabilities in India, people who are overcoming enormous challenges to live productive lives.

A "Sri Lankan Hopper Night" brought about 100 people to raise funds for Bridging Lanka's work in northern Sri Lanka, particularly to support widows of the long-running civil war. They were served "hoppers" (Sri Lankan pancakes) and curry,

along with a survey of projects being undertaken in the country.

Dr Peter Lewis, the National President of ANTaR (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation), a national advocacy organisation that works in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, spoke on "Reconciliation - where to from here?"

On the UN International Day of Peace, 21 September, the chords of a Celtic harpist mingled with Angami Naga Chants from north-east India and the meditations of an Israeli "sound healing" musician, when the Interfaith Centre of Melbourne

offered an "inter-spiritual gathering for peace". Murshida Nuria, representing the international Sufi movement, urged that "to have a peaceful and harmonious society, we ourselves must take responsibility for ourselves and for our own evolution."

Thirteen potential facilitators of Life Matters courses went through a Training of Trainers program in early September and returned to demonstrate their skills in presenting modules from the Course. Further follow-up sessions in October.

Click the "Armagh-IofC" page of FaceBook to keep up-to-date.

What was Frank Buchman like?

Dr Philip Boobbyer's recent book, "The Spiritual Vision of Frank Buchman" (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), has a wealth of research on the founder of Moral Re-Armament, now Initiatives of Change (See *Newsbriefs*, February 2014).

John Lovering, a *Newsbriefs* reader from Canberra, sent these impressions of Buchman from people he who knew him:

Kim Beazley, Snr., former Minister for Education: "Frank didn't say

much. A delegation arrived at Caux and he greeted them with 'The Arab World, oh my, oh my', which I thought was intellectual hogwash. But it won their hearts."

My dad was a waiter at Frank's table and eaves-dropped the conversation. He noticed that Buchman was mostly quiet and seemed interested in the future.

Peter Phelps from Britain told me he thought that Buchman was probably a saint.

Jim Coulter, who worked with Buchman for many years, on hearing this said: "Frank was no saint. He was an American who loved circuses, street parades and bands." Then after some thought added, "His special gift was bringing the best out in people."

Finn-Harald Wetterfors, who spent time with Buchman in America, said: "Frank was really interested in what God was saying to other people."

I have found these little insights helpful. Hope you do too.

IofC Australia has a new upgraded website. Check it out: www.au.iofc.org
To request email alerts for Newsbriefs online, please contact Viv at E-mail: armaghoffice@dodo.com.au

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