

## Muslims and Christians sharing common values

*David Mills reports on an event in Sydney on 17 October chaired by well-known ABC TV and Radio personality Geraldine Doogue, who described it as a first for Australia:*

"Muslims and Christians sharing common values" was the subject of an open dialogue held in the large and beautiful new hall of St Paul's Catholic College in Greystanes near Parramatta. Over 400 people – from the Muslim and non-Muslim communities equally – flocked to the occasion, which included wonderful food prepared by the Muslim women, music, speakers, prayers, a brief time to converse with one's neighbour in the audience and a question time. Speakers included Kevin Manning (Catholic Bishop of Parramatta), Keysar Trad, from the

Lebanese Muslim Community, Wendie Wilkie, Associate General Secretary of the Uniting Church General Assembly, and Suzan Meguid, a pharmacist and young mother – a Muslim living in a predominantly Christian community. Local radio and papers carried publicity for the event, while a printer gave 2,000 magnificent colour A4 leaflets for free. In a press release Keysar Trad said, "Identifying the social and spiritual challenges facing society is of equal concern for Muslims and Christians. We must work together if we ever wish to succeed as one Australian community."

The idea for this occasion initially came from Keysar Trad after he spoke at the MRA - Initiatives of Change conference in April. He and I then met with Bishop Manning who agreed to be part of it and arranged the venue. The response exceeded all expectations and included many people who clearly had mixed feelings about "the other". But perhaps the comment of one person of Egyptian Christian background reflected at least a little of the change also being felt by others when he apologised openly for the negative attitudes he had nurtured towards Muslims. "This evening has changed me," he said.

Speaking first, Bishop Manning said, "When I examine the Five Pillars of Islam, I can see immediately that elements of these Five Pillars are present in Christianity: belief in one God, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and (even) pilgrimage. The Catholic Church encourages its members to dialogue with Muslims. Such dialogues can take place in many ways: living room dialogues in neighbourhoods and communities; dialogues that lead to cooperative efforts, in particular projects to assist the needy; dialogues

of specialists where religious beliefs are examined and compared; and the dialogue of religious experience where we share more deeply of ourselves, our prayers and our understanding of living a life devoted to God."

Describing her feelings after the events of September 11 two years ago, Suzan Meguid said, "I was for the first time in my life scared to go down to the shops. I wanted to cry out to everyone in my area 'I am the same person you saw as a friend yesterday and I – like you – am appalled at this

gross act of terror.' After a day of sitting at home, which is quite unlike me, I finally mustered the courage and ventured down to Castle Hill Shops. To my astonishment people went about their business as per normal. The shop assistants were just as friendly, people still made chitchat with me while waiting in line and mothers still came up and adored my girls. I felt ashamed that I made the same mistake as the media. I had committed the crime that I begged others not to commit. I had prejudged that many would fall victim to the media hysteria, when in fact my community proved to me what I have always known and experienced, that they are open minded, accepting, and caring people. They are Australians."

Wendie Wilkie spoke of her visit to Ambon in Indonesia earlier this year at the invitation of a unique group of women. "Muslim and Christian women had come together to commit themselves to work for peace in a very troubled and divided community. They were tired of the killing and the violence, and told stories of what it had been like for their families and their communities. As one Muslim woman said, 'We have all suffered.' This remarkable group of women committed themselves to work on joint community projects and to continue to demonstrate by their commitment to each other that peace was possible for the sake of the whole community. It reminded me that real peace involves risk and courage – risk to go beyond what we know, what we feel secure in, to be open to learn new things about ourselves and our communities as well as about others. It may also lead us to challenge our own communities and some of their attitudes and practices."

Possibilities for having similar events in other places are now being explored.

### And also in the West

On 15 November a group of Muslims and Christians gathered in the Floreat Park Uniting Church to build friendship and share their common values. The speakers were Dr Samina Yasmeen, Senior Lecturer in International Politics at the University of Western Australia, Mr Mohammad Safdar, journalist and author, Canon John Dunnill, Anglican priest and lecturer at Murdoch University, and Brother Gerry Faulkner, a Christian Brother working in Secondary Education. As it was Ramadan season a room was set aside for the breaking of the fast

and special prayers before an evening meal enjoyed by all.

The occasion was chaired by Dr Hassan Al-Kaisi, a Muslim, and his wife Kathy, who is a Christian. They identified for us the values they hold dear in their family life and their common belief in service and social justice within the community at large.

At the end of the evening it was clear that the fundamental belief that binds us together and on which our community can be built, is a belief in the one true God.

*Doreen Walters*



## With friends in Indonesia

*Barbara Lawler, Chris James and Rob Wood visited Indonesia from 20-30 September in response to a request from the newly formed Initiatives of Change team in Jakarta for help with a number of outreach programs they had arranged. They were joined there by Hiroshi Ishida from Japan. Rob writes:*

Our friends in Jakarta – mostly university students in their early twenties – were generous and caring hosts throughout our stay. The newly-vented centre for MRA-IC, where Chris, Hiroshi and I stayed, is a simple but functional establishment and very adequate for current needs.

Every day in Jakarta was eventful and if we weren't in the midst of one program or another we were sitting in a traffic jam trying to get there! Under the leadership of various members of the local team, we had a chance to give workshops and presentations in two universities, an Islamic boarding school and two English language classes. We also had a significant discussion with some Chinese Confucianist community leaders about their community's experiences during the riots a few years back and what could be done to heal the scars of that time. An afternoon at the University of Indonesia was co-hosted by two lecturers – one of whom had recently taken a courageous and costly stand against corruption in his workplace. As a follow-up to these activities, a two-day leadership program for 35 young people was held at Puncak, a mountainous area near Jakarta.

### Key to spiritual strength

Everywhere we went the response was extremely positive, and many of those we spoke to decided to take steps to change their lives and heal relationships. It was encouraging to realise that these mainstream Indonesians seemed really to want a good relation-

ship with Australia and are very strongly opposed to events like the Bali bombing. They also seemed quite clear on the need for transformation in their own society.

Each morning at the centre we began with an early morning run, followed by a time of quiet reflection and sharing. A feature of these sessions was the honesty with which people spoke about what they were learning, or apologies they wanted to make. As one of them commented, "The key to spiritual strength is the day-by-day growing, and through this we will see changes." Another, evaluating the approach of MRA-IC said, "It's a unique organisation. We are not looking at how to gain power but how to increase our spirit of morality and community." It's good to know that they have continued to start their day this way since our return to Australia.

A highlight of our visit to Jakarta was when two of us were taken to meet an elderly couple whose lives had been changed through MRA many years ago, and who had tried to pioneer this way of thinking in Indonesia. We had a lively discussion with them and realised that, although no longer so mobile physically, they still have a key role to play in encouraging the younger team to stay on the spiritual path – whatever challenges and difficulties may occur. During the conversation one subject raised was the need for more literature articulating the "how" and "why" of change from an Islamic perspective. We spoke of Jim Coulter's recently published book and

encouraged the husband to consider writing some of his life experiences. He really warmed to this idea and said, "Perhaps I should see what I can do about it before I turn 80" (in 18 months' time). We have since sent a copy of *Met Along the Way* as a gentle reminder.

During a time of evaluation and planning at the end of

our visit, our hosts expressed a wish to send at least one of their number to the next *Life Matters* course. They also said they would like to host some of the *Action for Life 2* group during their stay in South-East Asia, and to send representatives to the next Asia-Pacific Youth Conference. Other ideas emerged for continuing development in their own country.

Each of us who visited Indonesia found it an enriching and rewarding experience. Chris James often asked forgiveness of those we spoke to for his previous negative view of Indonesia. Later he e-mailed our hosts, "You taught me to open up more, to make the effort to invite people I would not usually invite, to activities I would not usually organise. You have given me inspiration to spend more time challenging people to change their attitudes towards other cultures." He also wrote several poems. One of them reads, "Sometimes change seems too hard. We all have so far to go and so little time to do it in. This is how I know that change is impossible by man alone. It is only through God's grace, mercy and love that we are given that second chance, a renewed life of love, hope and faith."

**Barbara adds:** With media reports and government travel warnings, it was a challenge to be true to my sense of leading from the Almighty that it was right to go. Having overcome my fears and made the decision, eventually my nervous system caught up with my spirit and I felt God gave me a real love for Indonesia. It was one of the most spiritually refreshing times I have ever experienced and I feel I've made friends for life. I am beginning to learn what it means to be a good neighbour. Indonesia has a major bridge-building role to play in the world. It was a privilege to play a part.



# Life Matters

*The thirteenth Life Matters course will take place from 6-15 February 2004. Already there is keen interest from a diverse Australian and international group of potential participants. Mike Lowe writes:*

"How do we bring healing when there is hurt and hostility? How do we form deep and lasting relationships?"

These are two of the questions posed on the brochure for the next *Life Matters* course, described as a "nine-day course for young adults to shape a path and purpose for living".

The extent to which the course is able to answer these questions is borne out by the enthusiastic response of previous participants – some of whom have gone onto further involvement with MRA-Initiatives of Change around the world – and who are usually the best "salespeople" for getting new participants onto the course. Indeed, it is a testament to the effectiveness of "word of mouth" advertising that so many have already applied for the February 2004 course.

Several of the applicants are from overseas where there are real challenges in raising the travel and

course costs. Four hope to come from Indonesia following the recent visit there by Australians (see page 2). Two of these are Islamic students and two are from the Chinese Confucianist community and their participation would greatly strengthen the important and developing work in that country. Two others applying are from Cambodia and North-East India, where their participation will similarly build into local teams.

Fetu Paulo from Samoa, who has spent many years in Australia supporting the Armagh community (and has been an invaluable anchor person to successive courses) has encouraged two colleagues from Samoa to apply. Fetu plans to return to Samoa in March to prepare for an international conference to take place



Some participants of the June 2003 *Life Matters* course

there in October. To have "trained" team-mates would be invaluable to Fetu in this endeavour.

For those coming from overseas there will be an extended training program after the course, and so we are encouraging them to come for three weeks. The cost for each person's stay (including course costs but not including travel) is \$700. At the moment most of this has still to be raised. For anyone who wants to make a contribution, details are given in the article "Money Matters" on page 4.

## The most enriching experience in my life

*Karen Bambonye was born in Burundi but has lived in Canada most of her life. Her mother is French-Canadian and Italian and her father is Burundian. She is 26 years old, has a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and recently completed a Masters of Education. She sent us the following:*

My involvement with Initiatives of Change has been the most enriching experience in my life so far. I came across IC by coincidence on my trip to Australia while visiting my father in April. Laurent Gagnon met my father in Montreal on a few occasions and, once he heard that my father was working in Australia, he put him into contact with Mike and Jean Brown – IC colleagues who live there. We were invited to their house for lunch and they showed us the pamphlet of the forthcoming IC conference that was going to be held in Sydney, Australia. I was interested and I felt compelled to participate, yet I didn't know much about IC until I went.

The conference was the beginning of a new adventure and personal growth for me. The people that I met were extraordinary, full of commitment, moral convictions and kindness. The

energy and the ambience of this conference is one that I will never forget. People of all races, religions or other beliefs were sharing their life stories of suffering so openly that one couldn't help but change personally. Also, people whom I met for the first time saw something in me that I hadn't discovered yet. They saw that I could have a valuable part in various projects of IC. They invited me to help with different activities of IC, one can almost say around the world. Returning to the African continent was a dream come true!

My experience with IC continued in Accra, Ghana, where I was an English and French interpreter for the IC Pan African conference called *Africa in search of good governance*. After that I went to South Africa to visit family, but I also had the pleasure to meet and speak with the IC team in that country

and to see some friends that I made in Australia and in Ghana. I continued my journey by going to Kenya, where I helped on the *Clean Africa Campaign* (CAC) and translated documents related to it to be available for the francophone countries of Africa. Finally I ended my travelling by completing a 3-week internship in Caux during the *Peace Building and Reconciliation* sessions. I had the opportunity to be secretary during the Round Table dialogue with the Great Lakes of Africa, listen to some interesting seminars and help out around the Caux centre.

I have learned a few things and improved certain aspects of myself through these months with IC. I am very grateful for this wonderful experience, for the help and support of family and friends. My interest and passion for international development, especially for Africa, has deepened after my journey there. More has to be done to help African countries out of their desolate situation. I would like to be involved in this positive change that I have seen other Africans do!

Back in Montreal since the end of August, while looking for work I took part in several IC occasions of dialogue between Africans from different political views searching for solutions for their countries based on the principles of IC.

# Money matters

*Jonathan Lancaster reports how the ups and downs of the financial world have impacted the resourcing of MRA -Initiatives of Change, and what we can do to help.*

In the last issue of *Newsbriefs* we painted a picture of the wide range of resources that fuel the work of MRA-IC in Australia. We emphasised that the resourcing of MRA-IC's work flows from a response at many different levels to God's call on our lives: it's not just about money.

In order not to undercut that important note, we delayed until this issue a brief general update of the state of MRA-IC's finances, last focused on in the annual report *Moral Re-Armament 2002-2003* (distributed with the Colaroy Conference report to *Newsbriefs* readers in June).

The Council of Management (board) of MRA-IC, which I serve as treasurer, has among other things a responsibility for stewardship of the assets that have resulted from the commitments of hundreds of people around the country. In particular our finance committee and investments working group have the task of stewarding the money part. Since the sale of some land from Armagh, so miraculously given by the McKay family in 1956, the interest on investments has been an important new factor in enabling the work of MRA-IC.

We have always tried to approach our work in a careful and prayerful way. But perhaps at no point in the past have we been more conscious of the need for divine inspiration and leading than during the months following our annual accounting and audit processes earlier in the year, when we reported substantial losses arising from the severe downturn on the national investment scene.

With enhanced investment guidelines in place, and in tune with a general lift on the Australian investment scene, we are able to report a most encouraging upturn in that area of MRA's accounts in the first eight months of our new financial year. So great has been the pickup that it has boosted to 7.8 per cent the average annual yield since we first invested most of the proceeds of the sale of Armagh land in 1998, compared with the disappointing figure of 4.1 per cent at 31 March this year.

Our efforts to make our funds "work" in this way will continue, always seeking a right balance between maximum yield and security.

However, we believe that the work of MRA-IC needs to grow at a much higher rate than even the most wildly optimistic interest-rate forecasts, and so such exercises will always just complement the sacrificial and inspirational personal giving which has been the hallmark of the Oxford Group/Moral Re-Armament/Initiatives of Change. Around the world through the decades, money, along with manpower and other resources, has come in to match the needs of the time as men, women and young people have listened for God's leading in all areas of life.

If you have a feeling that the time is ripe for you to contribute financially in a new or different way, here are several avenues to consider:

- Sending a once-off contribution to an initiative that you hear about in *Newsbriefs* or elsewhere. Cheques should be made out to **Moral Re-Armament** or **MRA-IC**. If you are comfortable with Internet banking, you may wish to make a direct deposit into the MRA-IC account and notify us. The details are *Account name: Moral Re-Armament*;

*Bank: National; BSB number: 083-427; Account number: 51-509-4958.*

- Setting up a **regular contribution** towards a specific area of operation, or to our General Fund. One faithful giver still conveys a fortnightly general donation to our office after not missing a beat in about 20 years! If you use Internet banking, your institution should be able to facilitate the setting up of an automatic periodic transfer to suit your wishes.
- Sending \$15 every 12 months to cover the cost of producing and posting *Newsbriefs* 10 times.
- Becoming a **Friend of Armagh** to help the development and maintenance of the MRA-IC Australia-Pacific Centre in Melbourne.
- Lending capital to the **MRA Income Fund** either interest free (effectively making tax-deductible donations) or at the deeming rate. This fund is to be re-launched and a brochure will become available.
- Making **provision in your Will** (write to "The Treasurer" for correct wording) for a bequest of money, securities or property to MRA-IC, following innumerable moving examples over many decades.

I welcome all enquiries about these suggestions, as well as ideas about other funding opportunities. Please contact me at Armagh at any time on (03) 9822 1218, by e-mail at [treasurer@mra.org.au](mailto:treasurer@mra.org.au) or by post at the Toorak address below.

## Being drawn Godwards

*Ted Holmes' latest collection of poems was launched in Melbourne last month. It is available from the Toorak address below for the special Christmas price of \$20 plus postage (RRP \$25).*



## Listening

*Have you ever listened to the voice of God apart who speaks within: not prayer nor praise but list'ning in the heart?*

*Your prayer, your praise, the written word important: they inform, express the way you think and feel, the burdens you have borne.*

*But guidance through the Inner Voice: God's spirit interacting with you, his holy special child, fine detail now illuming.*

*A clear decision of the will to wait on Him in silence and God, his presence surely comes to cheer, lead – if persistent.*

*February 2003*