

Come and see the stranger at your door

A Kenyan woman in Sydney has an idea to bring women of different faiths and cultures to the South Coast; a Kiama parish Social Justice group announces in the bulletin their intent to pursue the U.N Millenium Goal of "gender equity and empowering women". And someone who knows both sides is willing to bring the two together.

The result – a Cultural Exchange Weekend! And what a weekend it was, beginning on Friday 11 November with a civic reception led by Mayor Sandra McCarthy at Kiama Council Chambers to welcome some 35 women, Muslim and Christian, from Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Congo, Samoa and Iraq.

Maria Baden writes: After a visit to the Blow Hole, host families and the women met at a nearby farm to enjoy afternoon tea and a getting-to-know-you session led by Kenyan refugee Rosemary Kariuki-Fyfe. Rosemary, who works as Community Liaison Officer for Holroyd Council, developed this Cultural Exchange idea when refugees who had been living in Sydney for several years, told her they had never been invited into an Australian home. Thirteen generous host families from the area took two, three or four women into their homes for the weekend.

Saturday morning was spent at the Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal

Cultural Studio where the women learnt about weaving, painting and bush-tucker. Meanwhile at Seven-Mile Beach, host families busily prepared food under a brilliant blue sky. The women, some of whom have never been out of the Sydney suburbs, were able to enjoy a real Aussie BBQ. Then a walk along the breath-taking expanse of Seven Mile Beach – sea, sand, shells and smiles and memories, for some of the women, of their homelands' coastlines.

The women then returned to their "homes" to prepare traditional dishes and get ready for the Saturday evening social. This was an opportunity for the wider community to come and meet the women and share food. The Rusty Hinges, a local band, provided some Aussie-style music. The highlight of the evening was each cultural group showing us their traditional costumes along with song and dance. A beautiful African woman, Michelle Mbendo, from Wollongong, performed a series of brilliant dances expressing Kenyan stories.

On Sunday morning, those women who wanted to were taken by host families to church. Then we all met at the Town Hall for the famous Gerringong Quilt and Craft Show to admire the skills of the local Aussie women and enjoy a country-style



Cultural exchange over a picnic at Gerroa.
Photo by Maria Baden.

morning tea. The Social Justice group prepared our final meal together in the Catholic Church hall at Gerringong. The most poignant part of the weekend followed: speeches, tears and expressions of deep gratitude, on both sides, for what had been experienced. This had become more than just a cultural exchange. People had been genuinely moved, their hearts and minds expanded, friendships formed.

In the words of singer-songwriter, David Mills –

*Turn away all the fears 'cross the
boarders of our mind*

*As the old world disappears there's a
richer one to find*

*Come and see the stranger at your door,
welcome them inside...*

Sydney reunion of Creators of Peace facilitators

On Saturday 26th November 15 women from the far north to the deep south of Sydney met midway in the lovely home of Shoshana Faire. Was it coincidence, or did the mention of Creators of Peace (CoP) circles coax the clouds to clear and let sun shine prevail on a wonderful lunch, some quiet reflection, and plenty of new developments?

Susanna Rix, just back from Nepal, told of her and Shoshana's CoP circle workshop there. She hopes that the NGO they worked with, "Search for Common Ground", which is active in almost 40 countries where there has been recent conflict, might be open to promoting CoP programs worldwide. She also commended the possibility



Continued on Page 2

New President of IofC International



Dr Marzouk. Photo by Edward Peters.

Ms Omnia Marzouk, UK based paediatrician has been appointed the new President of Initiatives of Change International.

Dr Marzouk is the first woman to hold this post. She succeeds Professor Rajmohan Gandhi, a historian journalist and writer, author of a recent major biography of his grandfather Mahatma Gandhi. Past Presidents include Ambassador Mohamed Sahnoun from Algeria, former special advisor to the United Nations Secretary General on Africa; and Mr Cornelio Sommaruga from Switzerland, former President of the International Committee of the

Red Cross and presently Honorary President of IofC International.

Dr Marzouk was born in Madrid, and spent her formative early school years in Egypt. She moved to Australia as a teenager and studied medicine at Sydney University while her father served as Egyptian Ambassador. At university she was the first woman to be awarded the Hamilton Mott Scholarship at Wesley College for all round contribution to College life. She obtained her MD thesis, with distinction, from Liverpool University and is a Fellow of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (FRCPC) and a Fellow of the College of Emergency Medicine (FCEM). She has been working as Consultant in Paediatric Emergency Medicine for 15 years at UK's busiest Children's Emergency Department – Alder Hey Children's NHS Foundation Trust in Liverpool. She was Clinical Director of the Emergency Department for 7 years and is currently Associate Medical Director.

Dr Marzouk is an accredited mentor, and has a Diploma in Medical Education and in Advanced Medical Management. She is active in many educational roles serving locally on the executive of the School of Paediatrics as RCPCH Regional advisor. She is currently RCPCH National Chair for Paediatric Emergency Medicine training and has taken part in two RCPCH "Train

the Trainers" delegations to Jordan and Kurdistan. She has received local, regional and national awards in recognition of her different roles. Dr Marzouk speaks Arabic, English and French.

Dr Marzouk met IofC while at school in Australia and has been actively involved since. For many years, she has been particularly involved in intercultural and interfaith dialogue within the UK as well as taking part in similar initiatives in countries in Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa. She is committed to building bridges of understanding between the west and the Muslim/Arab world.

"With an Arab Spring still unfolding to an unpredictable endpoint, an economy in crisis and many societies holding pluralism, conflict, and extremism in tension," says Dr Marzouk, "nothing lasting can be built without solid moral foundations and a desire by people to live differently and exemplify the changes they want to see in society."

In January IofC will host a Dialogue on Making Democracy Real at its centre in Panchgani, Western India, bringing together many of those involved in the Arab Spring movement, as well as leaders from emerging democracies in Africa and Asia.

continued from Page 1

of a CoP weekend (rather than six individual sessions) which she felt had worked very well in the Blue Mountains, before she left for Nepal.

Rosemary Kariuki-Fyfe spoke of how a CoP friend helped organise a group visit for nearly 40 African/Iraqi/Samoan women for a weekend on the south coast in Australian homes. Sandra Blamey, who is President of the NSW Oral History Association, underlined the power of stories. Tanya Fox, who experienced her first CoP circle this year, said she was amazed to attend a reunion in August, and see the ripples of CoP in the wider community. A facilitators'

training and refresher course with Jean Brown is planned in Wilton, on Sydney's outskirts, on 24-26 February 2012. Trish Harrison outlined the creation of a five year strategic plan, a six page publication which will inform and hopefully raise funds for CoP worldwide.

A number of us had been involved with the "Discover The Other" workshop in October (see the last issue of *Newsbriefs*), and there are possibilities for further workshops in the City of Sydney and Baulkham Hills during Harmony Week 2012. Mariam Hijazi leaves for Lebanon this week, and expects to connect with Lina and Maria (who have done CoP training in Caux) to encourage a CoP

program there. Soma Das visits India in December/January and hopes to find a way to introduce CoP circles in Assam. There are several ideas for new Sydney CoP circles in the coming year, and at least two Sydney CoP ladies are hoping to make their first visit to the international conference centre for Initiatives of Change in Caux, Switzerland.

A lovely afternoon of sharing stories and laughter was summed up by Margaret Bacon when she said, 'I feel inspired and glad to be part of such a special group of women.'

Putting faith in Durban



Mike Lowe.
Photo by Blair Cummock.

As the nations gathered in Durban for another round of talks on climate change, Mike Lowe asks what can the world's religions bring to the table.

Another year, another meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Combatting

Climate Change (UNFCCC) otherwise known as COP 17 (the 17th Conference of Parties). In the two years since COP 15 in Copenhagen the scientific evidence tells us that the situation is getting more dire. Figures for 2009-10 show that global output of the greenhouse gas CO₂ jumped by the biggest amount on record, exceeding the worst case scenario outlined by climate experts just four years ago. Meanwhile the world continues to warm, and a report by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation says that 25% of the world's farmland is now "highly degraded" as a result of climate change and poor farming practices. Oxfam, reports that, already, the extreme weather events associated with climate change have pushed tens of millions of people into hunger and poverty. Yet despite all the evidence, this year's COP meeting in Durban, South Africa, didn't generate anything like the same kind of urgency that Copenhagen did.

On Sunday, the day before the talks started, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu hosted a mass rally to highlight the voices of the world's diverse faith communities including a petition signed by over 40,000 calling for "neighbours to treat the earth with respect" and to embrace a legally binding climate change treaty. Pope Benedict sent a message urging conference delegates to reach agreement on a responsible, credible response which takes into account the needs of the poorest and of future generations.

What can the world's faith communities bring to the table?

First, they can emphasise that this is a moral issue. Some of the arguments

against strong action sound like the arguments used to defend the slave trade in the 1800s: "If we do this then there will be economic collapse" or "if our country stops doing this, it won't make any difference because other countries will continue to do it anyway."

In response, Archbishop Tutu likened climate change to the battle against apartheid. "Now we are facing another huge, huge enemy, and no one nation can face this particular enemy on its own," he said, adding that, like apartheid, climate change "cannot be defeated in isolation".

This calls for massive trust-building – something which lends itself to a spiritual approach. Elements of this approach might include:

- » a recognition that we are an interdependent community, not a bunch of separate individuals. If the ship goes down we all sink together regardless of whether we are in first class cabins or in third class down in the hold.
- » the Golden Rule – "do to others as you would like them to do to you" – is common to all religions. This means not expecting other countries to make sacrifices that you would not be prepared to make yourself.
- » the principle of taking responsibility, being prepared to do "what is right" regardless of whether it's easy, popular, or whether anyone else is also doing the right thing. All too often politicians make excuses instead of making changes, saying "we will not make a change until everybody else changes". The principle of "starting with yourself" is not only more honourable, but it

takes away the excuses of others.
» an alternative to materialism.

Study after study has shown that increasing material wealth only leads to happiness up to a certain point. Once people achieve a basic level of material comfort, buying more stuff doesn't make them any happier. But those of us who live in "developed" countries face a daily bombardment of advertising messages telling us that our happiness depends on buying this or that product. Perhaps that partly explains why there is a correlation between time spent watching TV and levels of unhappiness. The world's spiritual traditions teach something else – that happiness and fulfilment come from what we give more than from what we get, and from the quality of our relationships with others.

A delegation from Initiatives of Change was on the ground in Durban working to build trust and to offer the support of the Caux Forum for Human Security. You can read their reflections on the process in the IofC environment blog (<http://iofcenvironment.wordpress.com>).

At this point in history, many lack faith and hope in a better future. The world's religions certainly have an important role to play in offering faith and hope to the world. But when St Paul wrote 2,000 years ago about the three "gifts" of the spirit – faith, hope and love – he said that "the greatest of these is love". If those representatives of the world's religions can find a way to bring the quality of love into the ongoing negotiations, that may be the greatest gift they can bring the world.



Photo by UNFCCC.

From Afghanistan to Nigeria



Imam Ashafa (back row 5th from left) with Harambee participants. Mohammad Khalid is front row, centre.

Over three weeks in November, the Harambee Leadership Training Programme took place in Nigeria, organized by Initiatives of Change. Harambee is a Swahili word which means pulling together. Its mission is to “awaken, develop and connect a network of new African leaders who will be relentless in applying moral standards and selfless service in their personal lives”.

At the heart of this training was an opportunity to work with Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye from the Muslim-Christian Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna. These former sworn enemies led rival militias during clashes in the 1990s which led to thousands of deaths. The story of how they reconciled and now work for peace is told in the documentary film *The Imam and the Pastor*. A more recent film, *An African Answer*, documents their interventions in Kenya's Rift Valley following the post-election violence of 2007-2008. Both films are available from IofC Australia.

Thanks to funds raised in partnership between IofC Australia and Mahboba's Promise (<http://www.mahbobaspromise.org>), two young men from Afghanistan: Mohammad Khalid Mohammadi and Javed Oria were able to take part.

Mohammad Khalid writes:

‘Before this program I thought that a leader is someone who runs a government or a factory etc. It never occurred to me that I could be a good leader. In fact I discovered that I am already a leader: a man who runs his own life and tries to bring the kind of change that my society really needs. I believe that transforming the wrong things in society must be based on a change in individuals. The one thing that my society needs is peace. This is the only path I want to walk on for the rest of my life.

‘One of the things that inspired me is meeting the greatest leaders in this world, Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye. They are the most amazing people I ever met. You see it in the way that they work, and the way they talk to each other.

‘I learnt so many things about peace. As Imam Ashafa said, there is nothing hopeful without peace and nothing painful without violence. In peace we love all and in violence we fear all.

‘By going to a church and standing beside non-Muslims I was able to take out the hatred from my own heart that I had toward them. Now I can call them my brothers and sisters. I learnt that forgiveness is a personal journey each person must make.’

Beyond politics – the moral imperatives of human security

Over the last four years, many Australians have participated in the annual Caux Forum for Human Security at the IofC centre in Caux, Switzerland.

These conferences aim to address the root causes of conflict by drawing together initiatives tackling governance and corruption, inclusive economics, the healing of “wounded memories”, intercultural dialogue, and sustainability. (See <http://cauxforum.net>) for more information

Now IofC Australia is in the early stages of developing a regional Human Security initiative. This builds on work in recent years:

- » to build relationships of trust between Australia and its neighbours and between Australia's diverse communities
- » towards reconciliation and justice between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians
- » connecting farmers worldwide through the International Farmers' Dialogue
- » training young leaders in ethical servant leadership

The aim of this initiative is to create a ‘coalition of conscience’ among people across the political and national divides who can focus the moral imperatives of human security and establish the trust to work together for solutions. Mosese Waqa has been appointed as the local coordinator for this programme, which is open to anyone who wants to move beyond divisive debates and take responsibility for human security in this region. Mosese can be reached at moapyc@gmail.com

By Mike Lowe