



A wonderful journey into the heart of Initiatives of Change

Elisse Higginbotham writes as coordinator of the Life Matters workshop which took place over the Australia Day weekend in Armagh, the IofC Australia Pacific centre in Melbourne:

For 10 years or so, I've floated around the edges of Initiatives of Change, attended meetings from time to time and last year took the Life Matters workshop. For the first time, as the coordinator of the Life Matters 2015, I feel like I finally "get it" – get what it means to be the change you want to see in the world. Some of us I guess are slow learners, and it takes many iterations and reminders to finally listen to the message you've been hearing for some time. It has been a wonderful experience for me. I have learned a lot and got to know some terrific people.

I had a team of about 15 helpers, the guidance of (IofC workers) Rob and Cheryl Wood, and the spirit of Armagh all on my side while I attempted to wrangle the "rascally" details into submission. So now, numerous meetings, emails, SMSs, hugs, laughs and an occasional tear later, we can look back on Life Matters 2015 and reflect on the journey.

This year drew a record number of participants – 27 from many (17 or so) national backgrounds, African, Asian, Middle Eastern, Anglo-Australian, and more. Some had been in Australia for as little as eight months, others their whole life. They came to discuss identity, forgiveness, relationships and change-making. They learned from us, and all of us from each other.

As the workshop was held over the Australia Day long weekend, our "family groups" were named after Australian birds like cockatoo, kookaburra, brolga, rosella, emu and pelican (I resisted naming any

"galahs"). As birds of a feather will do, they flocked together and formed some pretty strong bonds through story-sharing, domestic chores and team-building sessions.

A number of speakers, either on panels or individually, came in to talk about turning points in their lives, courageous actions they have taken and projects where they had persistently chipped away until it all came to fruition. A particular highlight of the weekend was entertainment night, with music, poems and mime from participants, facilitators and other IofC friends. We ended with *Goobaree*, a traditional Assyrian dance, usually danced at the end of a wedding.

At our final session, on Australia Day, participants spoke of the changes they wished to make in their lives, homes and communities, and the first steps they plan to take. Some of these included really listening to colleagues at work, helping out at the Dojo

(martial arts centre) and mending bridges within families and between communities.

It was very inspiring to hear that all the work leading up to the workshop had paid off and that the participants felt inspired to make changes, continue quiet times (for inner reflection) and serve their families and communities more effectively.

We look forward to meeting in a week to reconnect after re-entry into "real life", as well as at further workshops and initiative planning sessions over the next three months. Strong support emerged for another Life Matters workshop, perhaps later this year, with many of these participants actively taking up roles.

For me, it has been a wonderful journey into the heart of Initiatives of Change, and the minds and souls of 40 fantastic people. I can't wait for more.

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Credit: Kevisato Sanyü

Building trust instead of terrorism

Sydney was united in grief after the Martin Place hostage siege. Two million poured through Paris streets, defiantly supporting “fraternity” and freedom of speech. Pakistan was in shock at the mass slaughter of school children; Nigeria is confronted by Boko Haram’s deadly agenda; Japan reels from the execution of its citizens... Who has an adequate answer for fanaticism and hatred? This issue of Newsbriefs samples a few messages from readers giving examples of “building trust across the world’s divides”. We invite readers to contribute any such experiences in coming issues:

Off the top of her head

Tanya Fox, Sydney, was having her hair done:

My hairdresser shared how distressed she was at all the anti-Muslim remarks that women are saying while having their hair done. She finds it so difficult to listen when people unfairly generalise their accusations against all Muslims. She never knows what to say.

I replied that derogatory and disrespectful remarks would inflame anyone, especially a brainwashed misguided radical fundamentalist. And I suggested she could say something like: “We need to get to know more Muslim people before we condemn them all in this way.” One thing we can each do is to “be the peace we want to see”. She identified with this, and was really grateful.

By the way, I went on to tell her about Creators of Peace and she’s interested to do a Peace Circle.” (Editor’s note: the Australia Coordinator of Creators of Peace is Zohra Aly, a Muslim living in the western suburbs of Sydney).

Reparations for creating anxiety

Nivanka Bhagwandas reflects on her visit to the home of a Muslim couple in Melbourne:

I was experiencing their generosity and warmth over a shared meal when the conversation touched on recent events. Building trust and finding answers to hatred, anger and violence are much on people’s hearts and minds.

While many Muslims do not condone the violence, they feel a deep hurt at the lack of respect for their Prophet shown in the name of free speech. No shootings or hostage-takings are justifiable. Yet perhaps the West needs to understand what Muslims, indeed people of all faiths, consider sacred and holy.

As Leunig writes in the preface to his little book, *A Common Prayer*: “I was originally asked to draw a weekly cartoon for the (Sunday Age) but found it difficult to be enthused... The boom in humour and satire I found somewhat oppressive. It seemed to me that newspapers might carry some small spiritual message of consolation as a tiny reparation for the enormous anxiety and distress I believe they can create... I also wanted to gently foster the notion that the mass media might take on a spiritual responsibility. I learned much as I proceeded.”

The world would reap a different harvest if the media chose to play this constructive role.

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Chenai Mupotsa, second from left, with some of the Life Matters participants. Credit: Kevisato Sanyü

Bursting with love

Chenai Mupotsa, a Youth Support and Program Officer with the Victorian City of Boroondara, is of Zimbabwean background. Initially anxious in a room full of new people and introduced to new and challenging themes, she felt some resistance “to growth and change”. The day after the Life Matters workshop she wrote this poem describing how the experience left her:

*My heart is bursting with love,
Each one of its beats is like the thump of a drum,
Air dances across my rib cage as if it were a xylophone,
And then exits my nostrils with the whistle of a flute.
My body makes the soundtrack for my love.
The garden of love that grows inside it,
Seeds planted by God,
Fertilized by the love of others,
And cultivated by the goodness of the world.
My heart is bursting with love,
May the pollen I have been gifted spread,
So many gardens of love may grow,
And we can all be bursting with love.*

Together at the Indo-Pak border

Melbourne educator Margaret Hepworth has returned from a 34 day program set up by an IofC India team of teachers to facilitate 25 workshops in four cities with 1,200 teachers and over 1000 student from 65 schools:

The IofC India team of educators, working through *Education Today, Society Tomorrow*, believes that change will come through education. When taking this message across India last October-November through peace-building workshops in schools, something extraordinary happened: I found myself connected with a team of Indian educators and others working towards building peace bridges between India and Pakistan. My own vision began to form: of Pakistani and Indian children coming together at the Wagah border to which I was taken while running workshops in Amritsar.



Margaret Hepworth on the Indo-Pak border at Wagah

Unexpectedly, I met Chintan Girish Modi, in Mumbai. Chintan is a joy-filled, tenacious character, whose community initiative, *Friendships Across Borders*, is a testimony to his life-long dream of bridging the divide between India and Pakistan. Through it, Chintan and his team create email-pals between the separated peoples of these tense and wounded nations. When the massacre of school children took place in Peshawar, their immediate call for letters of love and support to the people of Pakistan from India generated a flood.

What grew from my visions has taken flight with an initiative called *'When the Sword becomes Words'*. We are creating a music video that incorporates school children from Pakistan, India, Australia, Fiji and China united in singing the inspiring song *One Day*.

Yesterday I received my first email from a Pakistani teacher confirming that the dream has begun. Our intention is that Indian and Pakistani children will "come from their hearts", to use Chintan's words, so that when they finally meet, hatred and ignorance will unravel.

Bridging the next great divide

Rob and Lyn Pattison build their home and relationships at the same time.

Growing up in Britain I did not meet many Muslims. But in the 1980s I was teaching in a school in Fiji where we tried to support a Muslim girl, an orphan who was dux of

the school and wanted to go to university. But her uncle, with whom she lived, prevented her, wanting her to marry. In 2007 we visited her in San Francisco. Just before this last Christmas she came to see us in Adelaide.

After teaching for six years in Fiji we moved to Adelaide in 1987, with two children we had adopted, and started looking for work while building a house for ourselves. At the stage where we could move from the garage into the house, we asked ourselves, "What else are we doing in Adelaide?"

It was just after the Berlin wall had come down and the idea entered our minds that the next great divide would be between the West and Islam. We had met a Russian family who came to live in Adelaide from Kazan. Through them, we met many Muslims who had immigrated to Adelaide, particularly Tatars from the west of China and from the east of Russia. We also knew some from Fiji who had fled after the coups there.

As we began to get to know these people, we learned of their history. One journalist, a Uighur from East Turkestan whom I interviewed at the Adelaide Mosque told how he had been imprisoned for nine years by the Chinese with a 25kg ball chained round his ankle, working as a slave labourer in a coal mine. He showed me the scars on his legs. He told us countless Muslims had been killed from his community there, but "no one does anything about it". Another man had been in solitary confinement for 18 years.

In 1997 we were the among the few local people attending the first Sabantoi in Adelaide, a Tatarstan celebration of the plough prior to harvest time. In Fiji we had often joined Muslims for Eid-al fitr after Ramadan. So we did the same in Adelaide. One year, during Eid-al Fitir, we visited 13 homes and were satiated with the delicious foods – but from the look on the faces of the women, for whom we were often the only non-Muslim visitors, the discomfort was well worth it!

For the last three years we have hosted 21 Muslim teachers and students from West Java who have come to Adelaide to further their teaching skills and experience. It is a privilege to sit around the dinner table discussing educational ideas and stories. Many still keep in touch, some almost daily, and we look forward to learning from many other Muslim friends.

Courageous commentaries

The staff of IofC France – who run an "Initiative Dialogue" in refugee communities and "Education for Peace" among schoolchildren – issued a press release expressing their "deep pain and condemnation of this horrible deed". See www.iofc.org/

The IofC-International website has carried three courageous commentaries – by a controversial Imam in London, a woman who volunteered to mentor refugees, and a once "fanatical Christian" – in response to the terrorist attacks. Visit www.iofc.org/global-voices

Marrying accountable organisation and inspired initiative

When Ron Lawler left the public service after 22 years, his colleagues pooled comments about him. 'Reliable, thoughtful, considerate and overly fair,' said one. Others added: 'Continuously unflappable'... 'He convinces you with his virtues – not words – an inner quality.' 'I have only heard him swear twice ... a really good bloke.' Now treasurer for IofC Australia, and also for IofC International, Ron is not your average bureaucrat:

As I left the building I had worked in as a public sector manager for 22 years, poignant feelings of release and loss, extremely rich when taken together, cut deeply. The staff in my Wagga Wagga office had formed a guard of honour as I walked out of the building for the last time. Their generous gesture, along with their words of appreciation at my farewell barbeque earlier that day in November gave me evidence that this has been a worthwhile period of my career but not just for my benefit.

I held myself together until I got home... when my eyes couldn't remain dry any longer.

The Chair and the CEO of the Tirkandi Inaburra, an Aboriginal NGO, were also present. I had helped establish the organisation, to develop and maintain its funding support through a succession of head office managers who were often on the lookout for funds to plug holes in other programs. The Chair gave me one of her paintings which she had created especially for me, acknowledging my role.

The sense of loss was about friends whom I won't be working with every day, including those from the NGO sector and our own Child Protection teams, relentlessly confronting huge challenges to strengthen families and protect children from harm. We are so conscious of terrorism around the world, but the terror of many children where they ought to be safe at home is arguably a larger threat. The silent

pain and bullying of children exposed in the current Royal Commission into child sexual abuse is evidence.

Thinking back to 1987 I recall my wife, Cynthia, telling me I was an administrator. This was not a welcome message! Administration sounded so dry and soulless, not something I wanted to be good at. Only later I saw that I had begun to drift over a couple of years, restless for a new challenge. But I lacked confidence about how I might go beyond an IofC "career" in which I was a little too comfortable.

Until then I had worked 15 years as a volunteer with IofC. It had equipped and shaped me in extraordinary ways; above all, clarifying a sense of vocation. I had always wanted to live with a purpose but my aspirations for making a difference to the world seemed a long way from the realities of my simple background.

Clarity came one day 40 years ago in India when I felt a calling that I would be used to build bridges between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia. This inner sense followed closely after recognising my failure to surrender resentments against my father and one of my brothers. I took action to make amends. The realisation came to me that reconciliation was of one piece, whether it was within a family or between racial groups.

I had known Aboriginal people since I was a boy but this new perspective gave new impetus. In 1988 we stepped out of IofC full time work and I took up a position in an Aboriginal NGO in remote northern Australia. We spent four years there with our two young children.

Then I joined the Commonwealth public sector working in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) as a Deputy Manager of a large region of NSW. That gave an opportunity to bring new approaches to strategic planning, advocacy, capacity-building for services that could be run by

Aboriginal people and communities.

Tirkandi Inaburra, meaning "to learn to dream", was one fruit of that time. Hundreds of Aboriginal boys have participated in this program since 2005. It has built their resilience based on individual, cultural and family strengthening, productive school engagement, significantly increased literacy and numeracy. The result is diversion from the criminal justice system which is ironically the crucible of injustice to Aboriginal people. More than half of those in juvenile justice institutions are Aboriginal and the vast majority of those go onto incarceration.

In March 2014 I accepted to be Treasurer IofC Australia for two years in order to assist the change process in financial administration and governance. As of January 2015 I am also the Treasurer and a member of the International Council. At both Australian and international levels we are undergoing significant change as we marry the need for accountable, transparent organisation and the IofC genius for personal and team inspired initiative.

My years in the public bureaucracy convince me that both are fundamentally important. If you don't do organisation well it undermines your credibility and therefore your effectiveness in the long run. I am hopeful that taking up these challenges together in both areas now will lay sure foundations for the next 50 years.

Initiatives of Change Australia has a new, upgraded website. Check it out:
www.au.iofc.org

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