

## ***With the First Lady in Kampala***

*In January Jean Brown from Adelaide spent ten days in Uganda. It was her first visit to Africa. "What a privilege", her letter begins:*

Six of us, from Rwanda, Nigeria, Jamaica, Sudan, Switzerland and Australia, gathered to stay with Ugandan friend Dorothy Tingu in her simple home among the slums on the outskirts of the city. We met to plan a conference (*Creators of Peace: a women's initiative*) there in April 2005, and specifically to meet with the First Lady, wife of the President, Mama Janet Museveni.

Steamed green bananas, dried fish in groundnut sauce, cattle with candelabra horns streaming up the red dirt road outside the house. Meeting outside "The Blessed Unisex Salon", cooking over an assortment of wood fires behind the house, bathing from an electric kettle's worth of water, an endless stream of guests visiting and accompanying us on dates all saying "welcome", "welcome"! The church with wood-planked walls and tin roof where the pastor's voice laced with gravel terrorised some demons out of two convulsing women who continued convulsing as we entered and were stereophonically welcomed with clapping and ululating. Speeches required without warning, a college visit, meeting with City Councillors, women's groups, radio interview, feature on the TV news, newspaper article etc following our meeting with Mama Janet. All a little distorted.

### ***Alarm cock***

An alarm "cock" went off outside my window every morning without fail around 5.30, just as the Muslim calls to prayer wafted through my mosquito net from a nearby mosque. Yellow fever vaccination at the tiny, dark, dank municipal clinic (a new needle) – mostly having to deal with cases of malaria and STDs. AIDS down to six per cent: the best performance in all Africa due to the President's up-front, no-denial, public addressing of the issue and nationwide education strategies.

A horrific war continues in the north where the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) continues to abduct children and train them to kill their own families. One of our friends, now Minister for Youth Affairs, himself only in his 20s, comes from that area. He was abducted and was last in line to be killed. The killers got tired and he escaped.

The rest of the country has known peace and stability for the past 10-15 years under Museveni. They are going to have a referendum about changing the constitution to allow him to stand for a third term, but pro-democratic voices, while appreciating his leadership, are loudly opposing any such change. If defeated it will signal the start of a multi-party system. Fears of chaos vie with a desire to do the constitutionally, democratically honourable thing. Everywhere memories of Idi Amin were pointed out. Every family I met cares for and has cared for children other than their own: orphans through war or AIDS.

### ***Moved to tears***

We went to meet the First Lady crammed into a rusty jeep that squealed its way past three roadblocks and scores of rotund, heavily armed soldiers before depositing us outside the final gateway to the Presidential residence. First Ladies in Africa have potentially a significant role, and this one plays it to the full with great integrity, leading the fight against AIDS and caring personally for orphans. She sat on an elevated chair, but her manner was humble and accessible. A couple of times she was moved to tears. She has prayed for Australia's Aboriginal people for more than ten years after being deeply touched by a documentary she saw on their situation. She was overwhelmed to hear about our National Sorry Day. Our Sudanese colleague, whose husband is one of the South's military

leaders, thanked her for Uganda's role in helping with the peace talks. This touched her. At the end of an hour I was honoured to be asked to pray. She will be patron of our conference and will carry the costs of the facilities.

Didacienne, the colleague from Rwanda, is a Tutsi married to a Hutu, who only escaped murder while her husband tried to buy off the killers. Her father with two of his grandchildren were killed in front of her mother, and her two sisters and brother were later also killed. She now works on rehabilitating Hutu killers back into the community while also looking after her orphaned nieces and nephews. She is a Catholic with profound and intelligent faith and a deep peacefulness. Somehow the closeness of all this violence and also the legacy of colonialism, more than in India, made me very thoughtful and more mindful of my way of operating and attitudes. I am grateful to my long departed English aunt whose legacy came in time to make this trip possible.

*Jean Brown and her husband Mike are currently with Action for Life in India.*

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## ***"Narrowing the gap between ideals and interests"***

The program for Caux 2004 (with application form) is now available from MRA-IC offices and centres:

### **Main conferences this year are:**

#### **8-14 July**

#### ***Service, responsibility, leadership***

Planned by an East/Central European core team

*Focus:* Developing leadership for the future.

#### **16-21 July**

#### ***Globalization: closing the gaps***

*Focus:* Economy and society, business and industry.

#### **24-30 July**

#### ***Transforming the way things are***

*Focus:* Role of the arts.

#### **4-10 August**

#### ***Human security through good governance***

(*Agenda for Reconciliation*)

*Focus:* The right of all people to live in security.

#### **13-19 August**

#### ***Peace-building initiatives***

(*Agenda for Reconciliation*)

*Focus:* Better ways than violence.

# Action for life anecdotes

*Despatches from Action for Life, now operating in three teams in the East, North and South of India, are full of incident and drama. More happens than can be reported and sometimes we have to read between the lines. Here are a few selected highlights from the last three letters. People interested in the full email reports can apply to Action for Life at [afflicmra@yahoo.com.sg](mailto:afflicmra@yahoo.com.sg)*

## **South team, Yercaud, Tamil Nadu:**

We are having a much desired few days' break after presentations at seven schools, 13 colleges, four Rotary clubs, sleeping in 11 different beds and visiting eight temples in 24 days.

The journey continues within the team as well. Team spirit and co-operation have been amazing – from caring about each other in difficulties to planning a presentation in five minutes.

## **Individual experiences**

A recurring thought had come that I should spend longer on my quiet time in the mornings. I wondered why I had been jealous very suddenly the night before. I realised that I had been relying on certain people to make me feel worthy, and when they paid attention to others I became jealous. This pang of jealousy came because I was unsure about the next outreach and had not been in touch with certain people. Three names came to mind. I rang one directly and some steps for the next month became clearer.  
(Nigel Heywood, Australia)

## **Breakthrough**

The breakthrough for me was finally being able to identify the scared and clumsy three-foot-tall four-year-old inside me. This helped me articulate insecurities from childhood that have been ruling my life. I appreciate this nine-month-long chance to reflect.  
(Katia Zirjanova, Russia)

Last November I wrote three letters to my father to ask for apology and to express my feelings of love. I phoned my family on Chinese New Year's Eve, and spoke to him. He appreciated what I had written him and would like to get together with me when I get back to Malaysia. This will be the first step in our family reconciliation.  
(Nandor Lim, Malaysia)

*Christina DeAngelis, Peter Heyes, Nigel Heywood, Aparna Khatri, Kim Vuth, Chris Lancaster, Ngan Le, Nandor Lim, Ren-Jou and Grace Liu, Wambui Nguyo, Naro Thiek, Laura Trevelyan, Peter and Glenys Wood, Katia Zirjanova*

## **East team, Jamshedpur:**

Tata Motors is among the ten top producers of commercial vehicles in the world. Thirteen of us are staying at the TATA Engineers Hall with some of the young engineers and graduate trainees. The security guard, from the Adivasi (Tribal) community, after a discussion with one of our members said, "I have been observing this group of foreigners. There is something different in them; they don't smoke or drink." He came to one of the regular meetings which the Jamshedpur MRA/IC team has been having for the last 25 years. Since then he has attended nearly all our meetings, including some planning meetings, and took us to his home to meet others of his community.

There was an emotional exchange between Mr Raina, Managing Director of Tinplate, a Kashmiri Pundit (Hindu) whose family had to flee from Kashmir under traumatic circumstances, and Altaf Khan and Shabeen Hussain, as they reminisced in the Kashmiri language about their common heritage. He then invited the whole *AfL* group for dinner.

We had a meeting with a group of NGOs. As they left, one of them said, "Some of us may have come here today thinking that we could get some funding from foreigners for our NGO work, but what we have received today from examples of living out the four moral values and listening to the Inner Voice is much more precious for us."

*Ilze Gutmane, Kofi Bassaw, Fredric and Pilar Griffin, Liliana Botnaru, Dilena Freire, Min Hui Na, Shabeen Hussain, Violeta Frimu, Hsaio Yun Liu, Altaf Khan, Suresh and Leena Khatri*

## **North team, New Delhi:**

Since leaving Asia Plateau on 12 January, we have:

- survived a freezing early-morning arrival by train into Delhi with the help of hot masala dosas and a warm welcome by Tania Chatterjee, from *AfL*;
- linked up with former NASA scientist, now Gandhian worker, Sandeep Pandey, who has welcomed us later this week to his ashram near Lucknow where he is mobilising villagers to tackle corruption;
- delved into communal issues from a Muslim perspective with the editor of *Muslim Nation* and met the Vice-Chancellor of Jamia Milia Islamia University;
- were enthused by a businessman who is building "the best public toilets in the world" in New Delhi;
- were no less excited by the non-violent action of young workers of *Parivarten* (change) to make municipal and state government accountable in slum resettlement areas;
- found ourselves invited to a Global Convention on Peace & Non-violence opened by the Indian PM, meeting people from places like Bali, Kashmir, Uzbekistan, USA, and of course many khadi-clad Gandhians from India.

The Convention opened with speeches by Prime Minister Vajpayee, former President Weizsaecker of Germany and former President Abdurrahman Wahid of Indonesia. Then, to our surprise we were introduced to Wahid's wife and daughter, sitting just in front of us. Acharya Ramamurthy challenged us all to "go beyond Gandhi" and fearlessly experiment ourselves with truth the way Gandhi did, and to apply it.

*Keith Last, Jisun Jung, Clara Cheong, Natasha Davis, Zoriana Borbulevych, John Freebury, Mike and Jean Brown*

## **Report reprinted**

The pictorial report of the 2003 Sydney conference *Together we can make a world of difference* has just been reprinted and made available.

The report is the best current introduction to the global work of MRA-Initiatives of Change from an Australian perspective. It will be useful in preparing events such as the conference planned in the Solomons in June.

It contains striking examples of

reconciliation and change from Lebanon, South Africa, North America as well as Australia and countries of the Pacific.

The core ideas and practical approaches of MRA-IC are set out on two pages, and the context of global needs is powerfully outlined in the keynote address of Cornelio Sommaruga, President of the Initiatives of Change International Association.

*Newsbriefs* readers are invited to make liberal use of the 3,000 reprints.

# ***A vision for my future ... and my nation***

*The just-finished 13th Life Matters Course ran from 6 to 15 February, with 13 participants from seven countries. The leadership faculty included four former course participants, Chris James, David MacLaurin and William Nguyen (Australia) and Cristina Cojocar (Moldova). Cristina has sent participants' concluding comments, from which we quote:*

"Life Matters is linking me up with amazing individuals who collectively are determined to change themselves, and in doing so empower others to change themselves and our world." (Australia)

"The best course I ever took part in. Today I have a vision for my future and my nation. I have a goal to help and serve the young people in my country who have a problem with drugs and alcohol addiction." (Indonesia)

"I discovered so many useful tools for my life!" (Samoa)

"Life Matters is about understanding and knowing others. One of the most exciting things was discovering and learning about different cultures, languages, races. I have learned about MRA-IC, its four moral standards, how to live in a good community, and how to create good relationships with people." (Samoa)

"Life Matters really changed my point of view and way of thinking. Love, unselfishness, purity and honesty are the foundations to make a better future." (Indonesia)

"This course has taught me to not be afraid of speaking to others, not to be so closed and hidden. My heart is a bit bigger than before." (Australia/S. Africa)

"I discovered quiet time, life plan, inner voice. This course educated me to be a patient person. If all people could commit to honesty, purity, love and unselfishness we would live peacefully and happily." (Cambodia)

"I hope I can be a bridge for China, Australia and the world." (China)

"My life was flowing like a calm river and I wanted to change. This course taught me how to deal with difficult issues, relationships and conflicts. It helped me listen to my inner voice. I have learned so much that it is going to take a while to organise my thoughts. But I am sure that my life will change. I would like to take on some community work. (Australia/New Zealand/India)

## ***Moral absolutes for post-moderns***

*Mike Lowe takes up a theme from last month and suggests three stages to bridge the comprehension gap:*

The concept of absolute (as opposed to relative) morality is central to the MRA-IC philosophy. However, it takes hard work to get it across, and we have to understand our audience.

In today's post-modern culture there are no standards except those which we create for ourselves in each moment and for each situation. There is an acceptance that there need to be standards in the work-place, standards in school, standards of behaviour when I am with this group of people and different standards when I am with that group of people. The claim that there might be some objective, or "absolute", standards is viewed with suspicion – it is taken to mean someone is trying to impose their standards onto me.

To answer this I think there are three stages. The first is to introduce the idea that there are some basic values which are universal to all peoples, cultures and religions. This is important so as to get beyond the notion that all moral values

are created individually. *The Principles of a Global Ethic* declared by the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions points to this fact.

The second stage is to say that these common values can be summarised as "honesty, purity, unselfishness and love". These have been tried and tested across different religions and cultures for many years and found valid. A summary is important as we can use it from time to time to check how we are doing (the eight-page *The Principles of a Global Ethic* is valuable but cumbersome).

The third stage is to introduce the idea of "absolute", without which these values become meaningless because we can all say to ourselves that "I am as honest as the next guy". It is always important to stress that these are not rules and that we will never attain them. Rather they are a compass to give us the direction for moving forward.

# ***Learning to stay strong***

Before I took the *Life Matters* course in July 2003 I was a Christian who didn't practise what I preached. I went to church weekly with the family, while falling into the typical Uni life of drinking, smoking and other physical impurities. My main purpose for acting was to become a huge star.

At that course I came to various understandings: that the world is in need of help; that most young Australians are selfish in our purpose for living – while having everything, we are still unhappy and lonely; that everything that I do influences others; and that God has a purpose for our lives!! As my mind began to open I became more humble and my perspective changed. I felt myself becoming more sensitive, which increased my acting ability.

## ***Culture shock***

Not long after, my spirit began to weaken and my mind thought that this world really is not that bad for us. I began drinking again and falling into fulfilling my sexual desires. Then I was asked to go to Indonesia to help present a training course. I humbly accepted with a clear thought that it was meant to happen. It was a great culture shock and I once again became aware of the effects on others of my positive or negative choices. I realised how much care people can actually have for each other when the focus is right. If only we Australians could find that community spirit again!

I was later invited to travel with a group to Wilcannia where I saw a forgotten community. Beautiful people who desire to feel that care and love for each other again.

After helping with the February 2004 *Life Matters* course, and reaffirming my values and morals, I am asking: how can I use my skills and my passion for acting to empower others? I have a great desire to open the hearts of forgotten people to care for each other and make God the centre of their lives. I am learning to stay strong even when no-one acknowledges me, but to know it within myself and acknowledge others.

With MRA-IC we are lucky to have a great human networking resource which connects people all over the world with a common goal of healing.

*Chris James studies Creative Arts at Wollongong University*

# Religion: clan or conscience

by Antony Fernando, ThD, PhD.

*Dr Antony Fernando is the founder of the Inter-Cultural School in rural Sri Lanka which teaches local students English language as well as character skills and leadership. In 2003 an MRA-Initiatives of Change team ran a six-day course there and made a video, "Visions and Values", about the school's work and philosophy. Last month Dr Fernando addressed an inter-religious conference at Melbourne University on "Managing Muslim Christian Relations" and also spoke at Armagh, the Australia-Pacific MRA-IC centre. Below are edited excerpts from his conference presentation, entitled "The Better Way to Teach Christianity and Islam":*

I inherited my religion from my Roman Catholic parents, and with everybody else in my community I upheld that we Roman Catholics were superior not just to Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, but even to non-Roman Catholic Christians. I was sure that we Roman Catholics alone had the real truth and the whole truth.

I would have continued with that "We are superior" assumption to this day, if I hadn't got an opportunity to go a little deeper into the reality of what we call "religion". A combination of circumstances led me to study at depth not just one religion but two. I studied Christianity up to a doctorate in theology and Buddhism up to a doctorate in philosophy.

## Clan religion

There are at least two senses to the word "religion". The religion we take pride in adhering to and usually hail as the best religion in the world is something that each of us has got as accidentally as the colour of our skin. I am Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim simply because my parents were so. For the religion we are born to, I find the name "clan religion" suitable. "Clan" is any community that is racially, regionally or culturally distinct from other communities.

Inherited religion however is not the only reality. There is a religion that one grows up to or is mentally awakened to. Jesus of Nazareth did not preach the "born-to" type of religion. He referred to the one to which a person is "reborn". Prophet Mohammed was 40 when he was awakened to what true religion was. For him, as for Jesus, the essence of religion was total submission to God. Religion was a way of right living in

conformity with one's conscience. I find the term "conscience religion" appropriate. Conscience is what helps human beings find out the obligations they have to fulfil to be genuinely human.

Twenty five years ago, unexpectedly, I got an invitation from a state university in my country to take charge of its new Department of Christianity. Though the staff and students were predominantly Buddhist, this university had decided to include Christianity in its program of teaching world religions. With training in theology I felt qualified for the task and so accepted the invitation. After my appointment the vice-chancellor told me my appointment was to teach Christianity but not theology.

Quite naturally I was baffled. It compelled me to go back to the Bible and find out what Jesus taught. To my relief, I realised that Jesus did not teach theology. He did not defend any particular tradition of doctrines and rituals. All he did was to show human beings their obligations in day-to-day

life. The fulfilment of those obligations brought them into close union with God and made them enjoy a life of the spirit that was eternal and immortal. It was Christianity of that "conscience" form that I decided to present to my largely non-Christian students.

Of all the obligations there is one that expresses true religion better than any other. Jesus brought that out through his parable on the last judgement:

## True piety

"Come, enter and possess the Kingdom that has been prepared for you since the world was made. For when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty you gave me drink; when I was a stranger, you took me home; when naked you clothed me; when I was ill, you came to my help; and when in prison, you visited me." (Matt. 25:34-36)

Prophet Mohammed's understanding of true religion was no different:

"True piety is this: to believe in God and the Last Day, the angels, the Book and the Prophets, to give of one's substance, however cherished, to kinsmen, and orphans, the needy, the traveller, beggars, and to ransom the slave, to perform the prayer (*salat*) to pay the alms (*zakat*)." (Sura 2, verse 171-3)

According to both Jesus and Mohammed the most authentic way for any human being to profess faith in God is to be human to other human beings.

## Staring down corruption

The quarterly journal of Transparency International Papua New Guinea has devoted its front page to *Corruption: Who Cares?* by Brian Lightowler.

"How much money in need of laundering is circulating the globe? How much money is paid in foreign bribes each year? How much profit do the drug lords make each year?" the journal writes. *"Corruption: Who Cares?"* by Brian Lightowler answers these questions and more ... It is a book of hope."

Meanwhile Rod Ellis writes in *Insights* (the Uniting Church paper in NSW): "We think we've got it made in Australia. I cannot recall being asked for a bribe, but we also know that there is an undercurrent of corruption in Australia and it gives us a collective, cultural irritation that can be felt ... Brian Lightowler details the culture of corruption and how it sounds and feels to those around it, through examples written by people who have stared it down. We are not good at whistleblowing in Australia. It's considered un-natural, un-Australian. Let's also call keeping quiet what it is: conspiracy. The book is only 125 pages. Much of it will make you squirm."

Available from Grosvenor Books, \$14.95 +p&p.