



Initiatives of Change

From simple shallowness to deep simplicity

Glennis Johnston, a Uniting Church minister in Queensland, gave a talk on 'What are the needs and how are we responding to them', to the National Gathering of Initiatives of Change in Melbourne, November. This is an extract from her talk.

In his book, *Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Massachusetts, Hendrickson, 2006), Michael Frost says that the Western world is obsessed with hyper-reality: mass-produced products that, though artificial, purport to be better than the real thing. "Freshly squeezed" orange juice made from concentrate that's been stored for 12 months, and packed with vitamins; talk show hosts who speak to us as though we were close personal friends; tanning studios; banana flavoured desserts that haven't had anything like a banana anywhere near them.

So much of our world is designed to look and feel real without ever being so.

Reality TV has produced short-lived, artificial relationships in a world of counterfeit reality. Producers have cashed in on the current appetite for shallow nonsense. Everything is reduced to stereotypes. There are good guys and bad guys. Jealousy, affection, anger and humour are reduced to sound bytes because the messiness of real life has more grey areas and doesn't make for good television.

But when the television show is over, it isn't long before the contestants are forgotten. What happens to a culture that can so quickly relate to real people and then so quickly dispense with them? Does this impact upon their expectations of real relationships?

In a culture of fakery and phoniness we need a community of people who will demonstrate authenticity and honesty, not just talk about it.

There is a backlash against this hyper-realism. It is a cultural phenomenon known as the New Realism – a search for the authentic. In David Boyle's book, *Authenticity: Brands, Fakes, Spin and the Lust for Real Life* (London, Flamingo, 2004), he says this new group want to know where their food comes from and what's in it; they want politicians to come clean about the lies they've told, and musicians to play and not mime at their concerts; they want to speak to a person rather than a machine; they seek out local produce and farmers markets; they are serious about the environment; they place heavy emphasis upon relationships; they value spirituality and psychological development.

'In a culture of fakery and phoniness we need a community of people who will demonstrate authenticity and honesty, not just talk about it.'

What unites them is a shared assumption that there is something wrong with the way things are being done in our world and that the way to fix it is to strive for greater authenticity. The deep inner longing that is often not even understood or recognised is the need for real, authentic lifestyles, relationships and spirituality.

Which brings me to the other cultural

trend that I want to comment on – the search for authenticity in the world of religion and faith.

More and more people have become jaded with the often narrow framework and concerns of institutional churches. Many churches are in survival mode. What that means is: come join us, think like us, act like us and help us survive. When faith communities speak of serving the world, but underneath are driven by the hope of swelling their own numbers, they lose the spiritual authority to critique and transform the world around them.

When there is an integrity gap in the institutions that represent faith in the nation, the search for authentic spiritual significance becomes almost desperate.

Any movement, network or initiative that wants to be taken seriously in a needy and suspicious society such as ours, will have to get past concern for its own survival and be willing to embrace transformation itself as it engages with what is real.

I long for a movement within our society to inspire Australians to move from simple shallowness towards deep simplicity.

IofC already has a part in answering that need and will continue to do so if we

- * let go of concerns about our survival,
- * demonstrate integrity in our operational practices,
- * don't fear transformation of ourselves,
- * listen to the voices of those ignored by the Empire of materialism and power,
- * have a communal life based on deep authentic relationships and
- * resist the tendency to institutionalisation.

An African Answer

This 40 minute DVD is a sequel to The Imam and the Pastor.

Shot in Kenya and premiered earlier this year in Nairobi, it was described by Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations as "...a very important film.

We need to learn, indeed, from Imam Ashafa and Pastor James and multiply in a thousand places their experiences of healing and reconciliation."

**Launched last month in London it is now available in Australia.
\$20 + \$2 p&p from Grosvenor Books, 226 Kooyong Road,
TOORAK Victoria 3142
grosvenor.books@au.iofc.org**

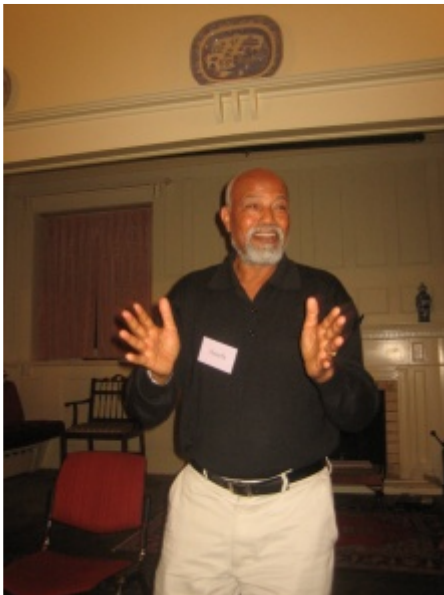
Life Still Matters

Rob and Cheryl Wood, Barbara Williams, Paul Ntoumos and Judy Greenberg report on the **"Life Still Matters"** Workshop held at Armagh, 19-22 November



Some of the participants and faculty of the "Life Still Matters" Workshop

The workshop was a response to several requests that we should conduct a *Life Matters* style program for people of more senior years. It brought together people from different states – Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia – and from a variety of cultural backgrounds and professions.



Interactive sessions meant everyone spoke

The group included two university lecturers, a medical specialist, a former Consul General of Philippines, the Manager of Youth Justice in Gippsland, Victoria and a Multicultural Liaison Officer with the New South Wales Police Force. Two of the contributors at a

session on the theme, "Everyone can be a change-maker" were Rainsy Sam, Leader of the Opposition in Cambodia and Shanaka Fernando, the founder of the "Lentil As Anything" restaurants.

For a number of those who came to participate, the workshop seemed to have come at just the right time and had a profound impact. One of them wrote in

"This training gave me the opportunity to enrich my strengths and work on my weaknesses."

his evaluation that whilst he is already an influential person, being an agent of change requires him to be more purposeful about the change factor. With that in mind he said he wants to commit himself to seeking inner direction about the areas where he needs to be less busy and what challenge he needs to pick up

in order to effect change. Another mentioned, "I know that inner reflection and sharing are essential to give me a sense of coherence and purpose and I will



Cambodian Opposition leader, Rainsy Sam

be continuing these 'habits'". A third said, "I have gained spiritual support that is nourishing and sustaining. I have been inspired to go on further and not give up." Another commented, "This training gave me the opportunity to enrich my strengths and work on my weaknesses."

It will be very interesting to see what develops from this workshop. Numerous others wanted to join the event but were unable to because of prior commitments. Clearly we need to have more of these!



Participants in the workshop listening in with interest

Creators of Peace in Brisbane

Trish McDonald Harrison generously traveled from her home in Sydney to Brisbane to facilitate the first Brisbane Creators of Peace Circle (12-14 November).

Creators of Peace circles are small, localised community gatherings of women who together work through material especially designed to deepen their friendship and understanding of each other and their peace creating capabilities. One aim of these Peace

Circles is to identify issues in the community with a potential for conflict and then resolve to take common action. Local organiser Lesley Bryant writes: *The weekend format worked well and all seven participants found it challenging and valuable. Most participants were*

from similar backgrounds so we were honoured to have one participant, a refugee from Africa, whose participation enriched our sharing and challenged us all to value family connections and welcome others to our families.

Staying on the ball

Rob Wood reports on the 7th Staying on the Ball Basketball and Life Skills Camp, held at Phillip Island from 3-5 December.

Like its predecessors, this camp brought together youth from a range of ages (14-29) and backgrounds (twelve different communities and nationalities) – a wonderful reflection of the diversity of Australia. The camp offered basic training and also skills development even for those who had never handled a basketball before.

A movie was screened on the life of Michael Jordan and his many achievements as one of basketballs all-time greats. The message of the movie was clear – to give your best in every situation and keep going even when things are very tough. This same spirit was witnessed during the exciting tournament that climaxed the basketball section of the camp.

The "Change" session included the DVD of one of the camp leaders about his journey from the negative lifestyle of drugs to a positive one of basketball. It also featured a fascinating account of the change-making initiatives engaged in by another of those responsible for the camp. He spoke of the many volunteer activities he has been involved in – camps for those with disability, visits to asylum seekers in a local detention centre and a recent trip to Africa where he was one of a group working in slum areas in Kenya and South Africa.

Story sharing among the participants was once again a high point of the camp. A sixteen-year-old Sudanese spoke for nearly an hour relating the incredible experiences he had been through on his journey to freedom – including being shot at several times, escaping life-threatening

encounters with wild animals and overcoming illnesses which had brought him to death's door. At the end of his sharing we all felt he had helped put our lives and the small difficulties we often

grumble about into perspective.

Another who spoke was of Vietnamese background. He has only been in Australia for four years. He said he felt grateful because the camp had provided him with another family that he could relate and belong to.

A short DVD of the camp is being produced and will include interviews with some of those who took part. A fuller report will be written and sent to the National Australia Bank who provided a generous grant in support of the camp.



Story sharing among the participants



Camp participants in action

The camp also provided participants with sessions on the themes – Challenge, Choice, and Change – to equip with them with life tools in order to respond to the issues many live with on a day to day basis.



Training and exercise where a part of the camp

Oases of Hope

by David Mills

What could be of greater contrast? 2009 was an adrenalin rush – a year of stimulating activities here and abroad. 2010 has been a year spending many hours with doctors, “confined to quarters” because of a medical condition. Consequently there have been many hours to do little but reflect and try to feel normal.

With opportunities to be active curtailed, it has also been time to review one’s life without fretting that old age might be setting in. “There is still lots to do”, I think to myself. Mind and spirit are saying “Yes”. The body is saying “Whoa, let’s just see how you pull up from this little adventure.” And having no hair (because of chemotherapy) may be trendy these days but it doesn’t add to the energy level.

For sure, this year has been different. But as I reflected on why, I expanded my thoughts to look again at what led me to spend my life in the way I have. In my younger years, there were no shortage of global conflicts and worthy causes.

What I saw that caught my imagination was people doing something about these things – creating oases of hope. They were stories of individuals who had experienced a deep inner intervention which had turned the problems around them on their heads. Recognisable change in their lives had led to an unpredictable and exciting chain of events. It was deeper than goodwill and more solidly based than political compromise. The key elements were trust and transformation.

As a teenager at school, I tried to model this approach by withdrawing from my circle of sports friends when the smutty jokes began to dominate our conversation. A friend with real problems – of which none of us were aware – had noticed my quiet redirection. He sought me out to talk about them, which – amongst other things - reaffirmed for me the validity of this model. On a very small scale, it was another little oasis of hope.

I learnt to listen for God’s guidance each day. And as I am presently aware

of how precious, yet precarious, life can be, I am reminded of the day I nearly lost it on a bus I knew I shouldn’t have been on in the Ethiopian mountains. A colleague, who was with me, and I had both had the clear thought to travel another way. We were persuaded otherwise. The brakes of the bus failed on a hairpin bend of the mountain’s most notorious escarpment. The bus hurtled over the edge but stopped short of the tipping point. Panic ensued as the locals stampeded out the back door. Our lives were saved but I was deeply chastened by such an experience. Though my demise at that point might not have rated a blip on earth’s tragedy radar, it left me more conscious that the small details of life are important in heaven.

There are times when life seems trying or meaningless. However on reflection, creating heaven on earth may only happen bit by bit. To this end, we can all contribute little oases of hope.

Soirée Musicale



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A **Soirée Musicale** at Armagh, the Initiatives of Change centre in Melbourne, was held on Saturday 27 November, raising around **\$950** for Friends of Armagh. All the young performers generously gave their time and talents to create a wonderful afternoon of music-making.

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