

Initiatives of Change Conference:

"AUSTRALIA AS A NEIGHBOUR"

International House, Melbourne, Australia, 12-16 January 2007

Public Forum, 13 January 2007

David Mills:

As more and more we become part of a global village, one of the greatest challenges Australians face is our relationship with our neighbours, both within the country and in the region.

The purpose of this conference is to see how we can make those relationships better, the possibilities that can flow when they are better, and what is already being done to make them better. Participants in this conference include people from many different backgrounds who are involved in practical peace building. They have attempted to learn from the wrongs of the past as well as working towards present opportunities.

Frank Buchman, who in 1938 initiated Moral Re-Armament (now known as Initiatives of Change), use to say that you can plan a new world on paper, but you have to build it with people - that the real key to peace, justice and prosperity lies not just in political and economic systems, but in the attitudes, aims and motivations of people. This is the hallmark of IofC - change in the hearts and minds of people, starting with ourselves. "Be the change you want to see in the world", as Mahatma Gandhi put it.

On a personal note, I might say that my wife, Jane, and I a few years back decided we should take a peace offering to our neighbours next door, after our two families nearly got into a rather nasty conflict. I am glad to say that we are now quite good friends but I realise how different it could have been. Sometimes the business of being the right kind of neighbour gets pretty close to home.

It's been said that love is blind but the neighbours ain't. We may see ourselves in one way, but the neighbours may see us differently. Many Australians would probably see themselves as good neighbourly types, and certainly we have the capacity to be very generous in helping others during national or international disasters.

But the history of the way we have treated our neighbours and the New Australians who have come to make their home here, is a very mixed bag. Australia has struggled to be inclusive of its minorities, most specially with the Aboriginal people. We struggled to leave behind the White Australia Policy, and when the fear button is pressed we can quickly revert back to the "them and us" attitudes. There was clearly a strong element of this in the Cronulla riots in Sydney a year ago, and in the last 12 months I have personally been involved in programs attempting to address that issue and with the communities most affected.

David Mills is a singer/songwriter. As a full-time worker with Initiatives of Change he has recently helped organise a series of Muslim-Christian community dialogues around Sydney involving some hundreds of participants.