

Initiatives of Change Conference:

## "AUSTRALIA AS A NEIGHBOUR"

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

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Opening Dinner, 12 January 2007

### **Visier Sanyü:**

Tonight I am honoured to stand on this sacred land - the land of the Wurundjeri people. Thank you, Reg Blow, for welcoming us. You are the oldest Australian and your people speak the most ancient language. I am the newest Australian and speak the latest addition to the hundreds of Australian languages that are spoken today.

My Naga language is originally a Tibeto-Burman language and is spoken in North East India and Burma. When we greet each other we say: "Mhacü lie temo?" which properly translated would mean: "Come into my house and have food with me." This greeting says something about the culture of the people. But our neighbours, the Hindus, who have developed a higher level of spirituality than us say "Namaste" when they greet each other, which means: "I salute the divine you." The Jews, especially in Israel, greet each other with "Shalom" and you reply "Shalom." In most Christian traditions we say: "Peace be with you," and the reply is: "And also with you." Recently, I am told, a bishop went to a very important meeting. As it happens the PA system did not work well. The Bishop was a little embarrassed, so he pointed to the mike and said: "There is something wrong with this," and the congregation replied: "And also with you."

Well, we all think there is something wrong with our neighbours but our neighbours think there is something wrong with us. Many Australians think there is something wrong with Indonesia, especially with their religion and their legal system, something we cannot understand. The Indonesian think there is something is wrong with Australia's morality and moral values. One of the first things that I learned when I met Initiatives of Change was: "When I point my finger at my neighbour there are three more pointing back at me." This simple truth led me to apologise to my Assamese neighbour for my jealousy and my hatred for his language and his people.

We all have some elements of xenophobia in us. Thanks to Pauline Hanson, we all know the meaning of xenophobia very well but what we often forget is that we all also have some elements of *filoxenia* which is the opposite of xenophobia: a person attracted to that which is foreign, especially to foreign peoples, manners, or cultures. I am not trying to exhibit my knowledge of Greek. This love of strangers and neighbours is in every culture. I have an uncle whose name is Sovizo, which means: "he who will have many strangers in his home". I thought it was an unusual name, but yes - we all have that side in us. People go crazy when they go to a street where there are lots of foreign foods and culture. This is where this conference can help us to "discover the other".

White Australia has a black history, they say, but the present Australia is multicoloured. The future Australia will be place where a person will valued not by the colour of his or her skin, not by his or her religion or ethnic background, but valued and respected for the quality of his or her character.

When we think of Australia as a neighbour, there are two fears that appear to be real. The

first one is the fear that foreigners, particularly Muslims will pour into this country and that we will be swamped by refugees and immigrants who will take away our jobs. This fear becomes more acute during an election. This fear is real, as ordinary people are fearful of Islam and also are weary of immigrants and refugees. Ordinary people understand that Australia does not have enough water to accommodate every one. This is myth number one. This will not happen. And we must demystify this in order to become a good neighbour.

There is another fear by Australia's neighbours: Pacific islands and Asian nations. They fear that this Christian, white, Anglo Australia may have some sinister plan to take control of the region. With her big brother America, her mother England and her little sister New Zealand and with a historical culture of conquer and control, divide and rule - is Australia more than a neighbour? After all, the British Empire is fresh in people's memories.

It will be foolish to suggest that any one is trying to revive the British Empire, but with globalisation, multinationals, the world becoming more flat with technology and the internet - is there a sinister design to take control again? These fears are real. This is myth number two. I have worked with white Anglos all my adult life and there is no such design. Australia may not be a perfect neighbour but this will not happen.

With the ancient wisdom and spirituality of our indigenous people, with the precision and details and a tested western civilization of the Anglos, and with the hardworking Asians, other immigrants and resilient refugees, Australia can become a good neighbour. A caring and a compassionate neighbour. A nation that cares for her neighbours has a healthy spiritual life.

When Gandhi visited England a journalist asked him what he thought of western civilization. Gandhi quickly replied: "It is a good idea". I have been associated with Initiatives of Change for over three decades. I have come to the conclusion that IofC is a very good idea. In this conference we will put some of these ideas into practice. Frank Buchman, the man who initiated the ideas of Initiatives of Change said: " When men listen God speaks, when men obey God acts, when men change nations change." What he meant was that when men and women listen to God for direction it can lead to great personal changes which can change national policies.

***Dr Visier Sanyü** works with the Refugee and Displaced Peoples Program, Christian World Service (Victoria), National Council of Churches in Australia. He was formerly Associate Professor and Head of the History and Archaeology Department, Nagaland University. He is Honorary President of the World Foundation for the Safeguard of Indigenous Cultures (Paris, France).*