



## Parliament of the World's Religions



Mike Lowe

Lion dancers at the Parliament of the World's Religions

The fifth Parliament of the World's Religions took place in Melbourne, 3–9 December 2009, with over 6,000 from 200 countries representing all the world's major faiths. Part religious festival, part pageant, the Parliament was above all a massive conference and meeting of hearts, minds and spirits. Major themes were discussed: the role of religions in resolving conflicts; how to get moral and spiritual values into economic life; the insights of indigenous peoples; climate change and more.

In the words of Martin Frick, Director of the Global Humanitarian Forum, 'it is the world's largest gathering of grassroots organizations' – over four billion people claim allegiance to one or another religion. Frick was there to engage with faith groups over climate change, with the help of Initiatives of Change, before heading to Copenhagen. This was achieved in several ways, including a series of video interviews (available on the Initiatives of Change Environment blog <http://iofcenvironment.wordpress.com/>).

IofC also offered a Creators of Peace workshop. A session on 'Learning to forgive: healing our past, creating our future' featured IofC author Michael Henderson, and the documentary film *The Imam and the Pastor* by IofC's FLT films was screened and discussed in two separate sessions. Outside the official programme, Armagh, the IofC centre in Melbourne, hosted two occasions with speakers from the Parliament.

The first, 'Can anybody be a peacemaker?', featured Michael Henderson and Sulak Sivaraksa, Thai founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, who has worked over many decades to fight injustice and discrimination in Asia.

The second, 'Sparks of peace', featured a group of Jewish, Christian and Muslim peacemakers from the Holy Land. Ibtisam Mahamid, a Palestinian woman whose family had been dispossessed in 1948, described the emotions she had felt after being thrown off a bus for no reason other than that she

looked Palestinian Arab. She then moved from hatred to trying to understand the pain, suffering and fear which lay behind these actions. Reading about the holocaust, she said, she 'cried for a week'. Each of the group had similar experiences of reaching out to understand the pain of the other, which enabled them to work on bringing down the walls of fear and mistrust.

## Journey into hope

The world is living at a *kairos* or opportune moment in human history – a turning point in human affairs, said Professor Gerald Pillay, Vice-Chancellor of Liverpool Hope University in the UK, when he addressed an IofC forum on 'Building trust for our future' held at the university on 14 November. Terrorism and war, inequality, corruption, the global financial crisis and a loss of confidence in political institutions were symptoms of a deeper crisis of values, with roots in the philosophies which had shaped the modern secular world. This crisis was so fundamental, he said, that we can take 'a journey into despair or a journey into hope'.

'What can we do against the historic forces that shape us?' he asked. Hope breaks through history through the vision of faith. 'We can have a society that is held together by the best of the human spirit. One of the best ways of reaching our human potential is through community. The restoring of relationships is the basis of trust-building: neighbour to neighbour, strong to disenfranchised, black and white. God help us if we fail to do that. A small act of love can effect great change,' he concluded. The international forum opened the previous evening with a panel of speakers from the UK, Australia, Latvia, Somalia and Zimbabwe. In his address, Professor Pillay spoke of his dream that the forum could develop next year into a summer academy, bringing 'that great work of healing and reconciliation' which he had experienced at the annual IofC conferences in Caux, Switzerland, to Liverpool Hope University.



Peter Kaye photography

Professor Gerald Pillay addressing the forum.

# News in Brief

## Building a shared narrative



Metropolitan Richmond Day 2009

Over 300 people joined the 13th annual Metropolitan Richmond Day breakfast on 12 November, organized by IofC's Hope in the Cities programme. Rather than listening to speeches, the participants joined dialogue groups at tables focusing either on race relations, the socio-economic divides or education. Using individual response keypads, participants were able to indicate which stories/perspectives they heard most often. These responses were then cross-referenced with demographic information of the participants' locality, race/culture supplied earlier. In a commentary headed 'Building trust comes from a shared narrative', Tom Silvestri, president and publisher of the *Richmond Times Dispatch*, explained that the aim was to get beyond being different groups with differing stories

## Copenhagen summit group

A team of environmental scientists, activists and journalists who met at the 2009 Caux Forum for Human Security formed an 'Environmental and Economic Workgroup', taking as their vision: 'We at Initiatives of Change believe that there is enough in the world for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed. We live by trust rather than insecurity, built upon a foundation of moral and spiritual values and a dedication towards life with dignity for all. Change begins with the individual and as a diverse global network we work for a healthy and sustainable world.' Several of the group attended the summit on climate change in Copenhagen, trying to 'build trust across the divides between negotiators, adversaries and stakeholders, and create an environment where... fresh impulses and strategies for addressing basic human needs can emerge.' Daily blogs from their time are available on <http://iofcenvironment.wordpress.com/>.

## Farmers' Dialogue – Africa

Farmers' Dialogue – Africa was officially launched in Kampala, Uganda, on 26 November in the presence of the King

of Buganda, government representatives, foundations and farming related organizations. Among the 250 who attended were participants of previous Farmers' Dialogues in Kenya, Tanzania, Congo, Rwanda, Britain and France, who gave evidence of the effects of these exchanges over the last 15 years. Farmers' Dialogue is a programme of IofC which aims to help farmers renew their calling to feed humanity and to reduce poverty through exchanging know-how and building trust. One delegate described the programme as the fuel that allows common people to achieve uncommon results. Launching the constitution of Farmers' Dialogue – Africa, John Ntimba, former Ugandan Ambassador to India, summed up by underlining the importance of dialogue and integrity and said that policies were needed to give farmers a decent means of living.

## Call for ethics in banking

Little has changed in the banking industry since the crash of 2008, emphasized Paul Moore, former head of regulatory risk at the UK bank HBOS, speaking to a group of bankers and others convened by Caux Initiatives for Business at the IofC centre in London, 10 November. Moore, who became known as the HBOS whistleblower after testifying in the UK parliament, said that, despite calls from political leaders for an investigation, the influence of the financial industry on party political funding was proving a huge obstacle to constructive change. He made several suggestions including formal ethical training, a Hippocratic Oath for bankers and an end to self-regulation in the industry. Moore quoted Enron whistleblower Sherron Watkins, who had become convinced that a 'faith-based' change was needed to alter the ethics and mentality of the financial sector.

## Harambee leadership programme

A six-week Harambee Leadership Training Programme concluded 30 November. The 18 young participants from seven countries had started with two weeks of training in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia followed by a four-week outreach programme to schools, universities and communities in the region, as well as meeting business and political leaders. Mazuba Kanyile, a multi-media producer from South Africa,

writes: 'It is the sharing of individual stories and experiences that has touched me so deeply... I take with me a restored commitment to "being the change I want to see". The fire that once burned in the pit of my stomach longing for a greater Africa is alive once again.'

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## CALENDAR

### MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

5–14 February

Life Matters Course

### PANCHGANI, INDIA

26–28 February

Ethical Values in Healthcare

### QUEBEC, CANADA

March–April

Caravan of Dialogues for Peace

### CAUX, SWITZERLAND

Caux Conferences

see [www.caux.ch/2010](http://www.caux.ch/2010)

2–7 July

Learning to Live in a Multicultural World

9–16 July

Caux Forum for Human Security

26 July–2 August

Everybody Counts

4–10 August

Leading Change for a Sustainable World

4–10 August

IofC training courses

12–17 August

Trust and Integrity in the Global Economy

### PANCHGANI, INDIA

1 November – 30 March

Action for Life 5

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Chea Vannath and victims of a Khmer Rouge torture centre in Cambodia

## PEOPLE BUILDING TRUST

### Peacemaker from the 'killing fields'

At the recent IofC Creators of Peace conference in Sydney, Chea Vannath described her long journey home – for herself and for her wounded country. Susan Korah writes...

Like the radiant white lotus that symbolizes her Buddhist faith, Chea Vannath emerged from the deep, muddy waters of personal suffering and anguish to the bright sunshine of inner calm and a life of peace-building.

Her early life of relative privilege as a well-educated Cambodian government official married to a military doctor came to a crashing halt on a fateful day in April 1975, when the totalitarian Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot swept into power and went on a four-year orgy of murder and destruction.

**'We cannot pick and choose the things that we like, and discard things that we do not like'**

As members of Cambodia's urban elite, Chea and her family were despised by the Khmer Rouge (Communist Party of Kampuchea) who saw them as enemies of their grand scheme of turning Cambodia into an agrarian utopia. With millions of others, they were sent to forced labour camps.

'Like anybody else, I worked in the fields, planting and harvesting rice. Daily work was from 4am to 10pm. Sometimes, the Khmer Rouge called for meetings that lasted up till 1am... People had to confess any unfaithful thoughts, negative feelings or mistakes committed.

Whoever complained about the hardship disappeared without explanation.'

'The KR leaders led the country by terror, anger, hatred, illusion and delusion. Out of eight million people, five million were displaced and an estimated 1.7 million died... Many were dumped in mass graves after being deliberately killed by their torturers. Others died of overwork, disease and starvation.'

As she lay sick and starving, thinking she was dying, this gentle, soft-spoken Buddhist woman experienced her own personal 'enlightenment', accepting responsibility for her own passivity in the past when Cambodia was caught in the spillover of the Vietnam War. 'I silently prayed for mercy from my parents and the Buddha... Little by little, my mind and body became serene and calm.' She survived.

'War and peace, life and death, sorrow and joy, good and evil, disaster and harmony are intertwined. That is the law of nature. That is life!' she told the Creators of Peace conference in Australia. 'We cannot pick and choose the things that we like, and discard things that we do not like. But what we can do is to maintain our mental balance, our equilibrium to better face reality.'

In 1979 the Vietnamese army entered Cambodia, driving out the Khmer Rouge. Chea and her family returned home, but life was not safe. 'The situation was chaotic. Suspicion, accusation, hatred, revenge and distrust were widespread, so we decided to escape to Thailand', walking through forests infested by land mines and Khmer Rouge soldiers.



In a Thai refugee camp, Chea began to work for the destitute and vulnerable, becoming a women's leader and later, after being accepted into the USA, secretary-general of a Khmer organization. From a passive, self-effacing young woman, she metamorphosed into a dynamic, outspoken international activist who today works tirelessly for reconciliation, and to combat the corruption which she considers the root of her country's problems.

Her chance to return and help rehabilitate Cambodia came when she was recruited to the United Nations' mission to restore peace and democratic government in 1992-1994.

She also credits IofC for part of her personal transformation. Her first visit to the international IofC conference centre in Caux, Switzerland, in the late 1990s was the catalyst 'for pushing me into this work of reconciliation and helping me see it can be done'.

### **'We need to mobilize a force for reform greater than the force resisting reform'**

In 1999, while others – many of them outside Cambodia – were trying to organize genocide trials to bring the Khmer Rouge to justice, Chea was the first to organize forums for ordinary Cambodians to express their experiences and to say whether trials should be held. These forums were organized in different regions of the country by the Center for Social Development, a non-profit, non-political NGO which she had helped establish in 1995 and led as president until 2006. While preparing the forums, she realized 'that the trial was not an end product. What we needed was national reconciliation.'

In an unprecedented move, Chea invited Khmer Rouge intellectuals and people who had lived under them to speak their minds. Some observers were critical of the inclusion of the Khmer Rouge, as many Cambodians were unable or unwilling to confront their former oppressors.

'The forums provoked a huge response across the country. The first was broadcast on television,' Chea reported. Up to 82% of those participating felt the trials would be advantageous. 'But for us, the key thing was that public debate had taken place. Cambodians were beginning to deal with their past.' Ten years before trials began, she told the forums: 'You can't just achieve reconciliation when you want it. You have to go through all the steps: (finding) truth, justice and then reconciliation.'

In a moving statement of personal forgiveness she told the Sydney conference how, four years after Pol Pot died of natural causes in 1998, she went to visit the place where he had been cremated, at the top of a mountain on the Thai-Cambodian border. 'With equanimity, with no sadness, no joy, no hard feelings, I burned incense sticks for the liberation of his soul.'

Indeed, equanimity and inner poise in the face of external turbulence have been hallmarks of her personal credo, even as her country has struggled through radical changes in its quest for peaceful and effective government. The transition from totalitarian control to a modern constitutional monarchy has not been easy, and a free-market economy has provided more chances for corruption on a grander scale.

Chea identifies as critical the need to fight corruption and to steer Cambodia towards democratic accountability and transparency. Transparency International ranks Cambodia at 158 among 180 countries in its 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Under her leadership the Center for Social Development (CSD) produced the first national survey on corruption. A disturbing find was that young people had little awareness of the dangerous impact corruption has on education, health and social welfare. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, the CSD developed the first national curriculum on transparency, integrity and accountability. Forming a Transparency Task Force, CSD trained 6,000 teachers to deliver it in public schools across the country.

Chea and the Center for Social Development have been at the forefront of campaigning (unsuccessfully so far) for anti-corruption legislation to crack down on offenders. But 'to work for a legal framework against corruption is not enough'. CSD formed a 'Coalition for Transparency – Cambodia' drawing more than 200 members from government, military, police, students, NGOs, the media and Buddhist monks into a campaign to 'sensitize the public on how corruption affects family, society and country'. A series of seminars, also using art and literature, have followed.

'There is good and evil in all things, government, society, everywhere,' she says. 'We need to mobilize a force for reform greater than the force resisting reform.'

Chea has gained numerous national and international recognitions, and was one of those nominated among the '1,000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize' in 2005.

For her the way ahead is clear – following the Buddha's eight-fold path of right views, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right efforts, right mindfulness, right concentration and right livelihood.



Chea Vannath at the Creators of Peace conference, Sydney