



## Life Matters in Asia and the Pacific



Life Matters course participants and faculty

Three generations joined the faculty of the recent Life Matters course in Melbourne, Australia, 5-14 February. The 20 young participants from 15 ethnic and cultural backgrounds were enthralled when three-month-old Charlie Foster joined his mother and grandmother during a session on 'Exploring change'. While Charlie lay placidly on his rug surrounded by the participants, the question was posed, 'What are the values

we need to live if Charlie is to grow up in a better world?'

The relationship between the values we choose and the way people live was a focus for the daily 'Inner reflection' sessions. This nine-day residential course, run at the IofC centre in Melbourne, over 15 years has built a network of young change-makers across Asia and the Pacific. Other sessions explored included 'Identity and destiny', 'Responding to conflict creatively', 'Creating community', and 'Searching for meaning and direction'.

Speaking on the final night of the course at a public occasion, community worker Anne Gibbons said, 'Before I came to the Life Matters course I had been searching for my identity, searching for somewhere to fit in, searching for some beliefs that were mine. Here I discovered

the four values of absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. Everybody speaks of the importance of values and morals. But for me what gives these four values power is the word "absolute" that somehow holds me totally accountable for my thoughts and my actions. These values are now my values.'

## Symbolic reburials help Sierra Leone move on

Hope Sierra Leone, the Freetown based NGO affiliated to Initiatives of Change, has coordinated a series of reconciliation and symbolic reburial ceremonies around the country fulfilling recommendations from the nation's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

A decade of brutal civil war, which ended in 2002, left 50,000 dead and thousands more traumatized by torture, rape, amputations and abductions – destroying the economic and social fabric of the country. As part of the healing and rebuilding process the government's National Commission for Social Action is undertaking a national reparations programme. One part involves payments or services provided to victims. The other, coordinated by Hope Sierra Leone, addresses the emotional wounds through age-old practices rooted in the local culture.

The first ceremony took place in Bomaru, Kailahun District, where the first shots of the war were fired. The three days were packed with events to provide a sense of emotional release for war victims and empower them to help rebuild their country. Rituals, dances, soccer matches, feasting, jam sessions and the planting of peace trees helped to build bonds of trust. Muslim and Christian prayer services gave participants the opportunity to listen to messages of

forgiveness and compassion. After times of silent reflection many people came forward to share their horrific war-time experiences and then make public statements of forgiveness of their former enemies. The symbolic reburial of war victims, who had not previously been accorded the dignity of a proper funeral, proved an emotionally intense experience for most people. The event was followed by a series of similar ceremonies in other towns and districts.



John Bangura

Memorial to war victims in the town of Daru, Eastern Sierra Leone

# News in Brief

## Trustbuilding – a story from Virginia



The story of how Richmond, Virginia, USA, a former slave market and capital of the Confederacy, has become a seedbed for interracial dialogue is told in a new book, *Trustbuilding: an honest conversation on race, reconciliation and responsibility* by Rob Corcoran, founder of IofC's Hope in the Cities programme. In 1993, this conservative southern city caught the attention of the nation with a public acknowledgment of its painful history and a call for 'an honest conversation on race, reconciliation and responsibility'. City and county residents of all backgrounds launched an unprecedented and sustained effort to address the 'toxic issue of race'. Part historical narrative and part handbook for dialogue and community change, the book will be launched in the Library of Virginia on 15 March by Governor Tim Kaine, who has also written a foreword.

### Imam and Pastor in Sudan

Nigerian peacemakers, Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye, visited Sudan in January for a series of high-profile screenings of the film *The Imam and the Pastor* made by IofC's FLT films. The documentary tells the story of how these two former leaders of rival militias became reconciled and now work for peace and inter-religious understanding. Over 100 people attended the official launch in Khartoum, including government representatives, former cabinet ministers, a member of parliament, religious leaders, educators, journalists, theology students and peace activists. Their visit came at a time of heightened tensions between the Muslim north and Christian south. A peace

agreement signed in 2005 ended decades of civil war but many problems remain. Dr Farouq Albushra, Secretary-General of the Sudan Inter-Religious Council, described the visit as 'timely and very much needed to maintain peace and co-existence in Sudan'.

### Faith Climate Connect

A new global coalition of faith groups concerned about climate change and the environment was launched at the IofC centre in London on 14 January. Faith Climate Connect is a free global resource and network, bringing together an interactive forum of videos, faith and climate news, scriptural references, video conferencing, instant messaging, photographs and blogs. It is the brainchild of the Bible Society in association with Odyssey Networks, the New York based non-profit coalition of Christian, Jewish and Muslim faith groups. See [www.faithclimateconnect.com](http://www.faithclimateconnect.com)

### Students declare SAVE Indonesia

One hundred students from 50 Javanese high schools, universities, and pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) came together in December 2009 to declare



The launch of Students Against Violence and Extremism, Indonesia

the birth of SAVE Indonesia (Students Against Violence and Extremism). The students drafted a 10-point declaration, resolving to respect differences, refuse discriminatory behaviour, speak out against violence and promote a spirit of brotherhood. The declaration was the culmination of two Students' Youth Peace Camps organized by IofC Indonesia and the Center for Pesantren and Democracy Studies (CePDeS).

### Voyage of dialogue and discovery

Rajmohan Gandhi, President of Initiatives of Change International, and his wife Usha, will be undertaking a six-month 'voyage of dialogue and discovery' starting in Indonesia in March and continuing through Africa, Western and Eastern Europe, Central and South America. In each place they will work with local IofC teams 'learning from

them and joining with them to discern responses to the challenges ahead'. In the face of deep divisions in the world, Gandhi writes, our challenge is 'to become active and visible participants in "being the change we want to see in the world", seeking each day, as my grandfather [Mahatma Gandhi] did with unswerving faith, for that transcendent wisdom, the promptings of the inner voice of conscience, the divine impulse within each of us.' Their journey will be shared through regular reports, podcasts and 'tweets' via [www.iofc.org](http://www.iofc.org)

## CALENDAR

### KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

4-7 March

Tools for Change, Malaysia

### QUEBEC, CANADA

March-April

Caravan of Dialogues for Peace

### NAKURU, KENYA

12-16 May

Africa, Do I Care? conference

### 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

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José Carlos León Vargas (right) with some of the garbage pickers of Oaxaca

## PEOPLE BUILDING TRUST

**Giving something back**  
*Travels in Asia showed José Carlos León Vargas that poverty has no borders. From Mexico's educated middle classes, he has dedicated his life to solidarity with the poorest of the poor, starting with those on the outskirts of his home town. Mike Lowe reports:*

It is a sight all too familiar in developing nations. On the outskirts of the ancient city of Oaxaca – one of Mexico's premier tourist destinations – the city's refuse dump is home to some of the poorest of the poor. Unseen by the wealthy tourists or the city's urban middle classes, these families scrape together an existence by picking over what others have discarded. It is dirty and dangerous work with constant risk of cuts leading to infection.

***'I promised myself that I would commit my life to working for understanding and solidarity'***

A week before Christmas, one of them, a 64-year-old woman, became very ill with leukaemia – her condition exacerbated by malnutrition and severe anaemia as a result of her occupation. Help came from a young man, José Carlos León Vargas, who arranged medical care and persuaded the hospital to pay for otherwise unaffordable medicines.

With two Master's degrees and fluent English, León could have had his pick of well-paid careers. Returning from overseas study in 2008 he was offered a job with the Immigration Department, working to repatriate illegal

immigrants from Central and South America trying to reach the US border. He declined. 'I didn't go to good universities and travel the world, learning so much, to then use my knowledge against people who are looking for a better future. It would have been a perversion of everything I received from life.'

'I wouldn't have found a direction in my life if it wasn't for my partner, Aurelia,' he says. Together, they set up a small organization working to help those who are marginalized. Named SiKanda, meaning 'Movement' in the local indigenous language, its first project is with Oaxaca's garbage pickers, and focuses on providing them with gloves, face-masks, boots and protective clothing.

León met Aurelia in Italy while doing a Master's programme in development. Later they decided to move to León's home city, Oaxaca, to work with minorities and vulnerable groups. It wasn't easy. As an Italian, Aurelia found it hard to find a job. León struggled even to find volunteer opportunities with local organizations.

'After finding a house we only had US\$300 a month to cover the rent and other expenses. Our parents gave us a hand, but still we had a lot of bills to pay in a city that is expensive due to its tourist appeal.'

Undaunted, they considered their situation as a test of their resolve, giving them insight into 'the kind of situations thousands of poor families face every day'. Once they had accepted this, it seemed that 'the sky



suddenly opened up' for them. Aurelia found a job coordinating education and intercultural projects and León was offered work with Coffee Kids, an organization that funds poverty-reduction programmes. 'For the first time in many months, we could save a little bit, pay our debts and even get a little second-hand car.'

By working with small cooperatives and grassroots organizations in the coffee regions, Coffee Kids helps families improve their income and quality of life through micro-credit funding schemes for education, health, environment protection and small businesses.

He recalls visiting a children's education and environmental project in a remote community in Nicaragua. On paper it didn't look good – there were unexplained figures, changes introduced without notification and not much evidence of progress. 'I thought I would need to have a long talk with the person in charge.' But the moment he entered a classroom the 20 kids impressed León with a musical performance of great quality. 'None of them had touched an instrument until nine months ago. They were so happy that they didn't mind walking two hours each Sunday to attend music lessons.' Afterwards, the teachers told him that the grades of the kids in the project had improved considerably and that the whole town was cleaner thanks to their campaigns. 'So I closed my folder full of reports, sat down and allowed my soul to be enriched by some of the most resolute kids I have ever seen.'

Asked why he now chooses to work with the garbage pickers as well, León speaks about his time in Asia participating in IofC's seven-month Action for Life leadership programme. 'When we visited Tuol Sleng prison and the "killing fields" in Cambodia I promised myself that I would commit my life to working for understanding and solidarity so that these things will never happen again.'

## **'We want to challenge people to look at the poor with different eyes'**

'In the Philippines we were taken to Manila's shanty towns to meet some of the people who live in the cardboard houses next to the railways. I still remember kilometre after kilometre of improvised houses, where children played in muddy puddles and the only school was the streets. When I thought I had seen it all, our friends took us to the old Spanish cemetery where more than 1,000 families live in the mausoleums and crypts, eating and sleeping on the marble slabs. Each day the children live among the mosquitoes and sewage, facing disease and insecurity.'

'Life has certainly given me a lot. I never experienced hardship. When I visited the city dump of my hometown, I found the same smiles and hopes that I saw in the Philippines. Just as poverty has no borders, I understood that there are no borders to giving and helping. So Aurelia and I decided to use the savings



CYLLA PEREZ

from our current jobs to create SiKanda to give back at least a little of what life has given us.'

There are currently 40 families: 154 mothers, fathers and children who work for 10 hours every day sorting out carton, metal, plastic and glass. They are all exposed to accidents from the bulldozers that bury the garbage several feet under the soil, cuts from the waste or metal, dog bites, wires and toxic dust. Most of them live just metres from the waste in homes made from cardboard boxes, so a second SiKanda project aims to provide metal sheeting to improve the roofs and give some protection from the rain and sun.

Last but not least, SiKanda aims to build bridges by working with schools to show that there are people who make a living off what is discarded every day. 'We want to smash prejudices,' says León. 'If people with education and every opportunity are working with the garbage pickers then there must be something interesting there. We want to challenge people to look at the poor with different eyes.'

Shortly after starting SiKanda, a couple of Swiss film-makers offered to make a documentary about the garbage pickers' dreams, hopes and challenges. It was premièred at the landfill. 'It was moving to hear the garbage pickers' responses to being depicted as humans with dreams and not as the filthy people that society considers them to be.'

Subsequent showings have helped raise funds towards SiKanda's US\$48,000 budget. 'Many people had tears in their eyes when they saw the film – not because of the terrible conditions, but because the garbage pickers are proud of their job and smile more than any of us.'

'We know that our projects are just a band-aid over a deep wound, but we want to make this band-aid more visible and make it grow every day. There are many successful experiences of change around the world. Aurelia and I believe there can be one more here in Mexico. Since we created SiKanda, I have learnt that dreams are possible and that change is also possible but we have to commit time, planning and passion if we want to help and learn from others.'

If you would like support SiKanda or learn more, please visit the website: [www.si-kanda.org](http://www.si-kanda.org).