



## PEOPLE BUILDING TRUST

### **Bridging the divides in Sydney**

*Like Sydney's iconic Harbour Bridge, David and Jane Mills try to span the city's divides. Mike Lowe meets them...*

**L**IKE SYDNEY'S ICONIC HARBOUR BRIDGE, David and Jane Mills try to span the city's divides. When the Cronulla beaches broke out in violent confrontations last year between Anglo-Australians and young men of Lebanese Muslim origin, the images were splashed around the world. Less widely reported were the apologies of some of those involved that followed, or the series of Muslim-Christian dialogues that have been taking place in the city since 2003 which David and Jane helped initiate.

**'It's really about an ordinary person who, instead of being a spectator, decided to get into the arena and make a difference'**

The idea for the dialogues came through a meeting which David Mills facilitated between Keysar Trad, President of the Islamic Friendship Association of Australia, and Bishop Kevin Manning, Catholic Bishop of Parramatta. Seeing Trad on TV one night, David had a sense that he should meet him and invite him to speak at an IofC conference that he and Jane were organising in April 2003. After the conference Trad told David that he felt Australia was lacking a sense of spiritual values and that people of all faith traditions would need to work together if the situation was to change.

Intrigued by this vision, David offered to take Trad to see Bishop Manning. The three began to form a friendship and to think of the possibilities for a Christian-Muslim dialogue process. Well-known radio presenter Geraldine Doogue was approached to

chair the event and she suggested introducing a cultural flavour to the evening as well. The first dialogue started with a feast of Lebanese food provided by the Muslims and music from a Western string quartet. 'We began to develop a format that we used for similar dialogues over the next three years,' says David.

At that first dialogue a Christian of Egyptian background spoke about the negative attitudes he had nurtured towards Muslims, concluding 'this evening has changed me.' It was an encouragement to continue. At least nine have taken place so far, the largest involving 800 participants. Wherever possible, local committees were set up to host the events and this has been an integral part of the learning process. The Christians and Muslims involved haven't necessarily agreed with each other and the committees have seen some robust discussions. As David says, 'they have had their own journeys to make.'

One such committee was set up in Annangrove, part of Sydney's 'Bible belt' and home to many conservative Christians. When local Muslims wanted to create a prayer centre it was vigorously opposed and planning permission was initially refused by the local council – a decision that was later overturned. However, feelings still ran high and in June 2004 a pig's head was found impaled on a stake outside the centre and the walls of the centre were daubed in the pig's blood. Soon after opening, the centre hosted a dialogue on 'The greatness of Jesus for Muslims and Christians' and more recently on 'Forgiveness from a Muslim and Christian perspective' with a panel including Professor James Haire, President of the National Council of Churches in Australia and visiting British Imam, Dr Abduljalil Sajid. →



Jane Mills grew up in Kenya at the height of the Mau Mau revolution, in a society strictly divided along racial lines. Fear and hatred were never far from the surface. Her parents were involved with MRA (now Initiatives of Change). She remembers attending an MRA conference when she was ten years old and seeing a white farmer whose wife had been murdered by the Mau Mau, and a black leader who had been imprisoned and his family completely dispersed (he never found them), offer the hand of forgiveness and friendship to each other. Perhaps it was experiences such as this which led her to volunteer for a year working with MRA after her family moved to Australia, where she found herself working alongside David in a musical review.

When David asked her to marry him, 'it was such a shock I couldn't eat for a week'. It was just before Christmas. 'I still feel his timing could have been better!' Uncertain, Jane went to pray in a church, asking for some sign. Unknown to her, while she was praying the church organist came in to practise. Opening all the stops he launched at full volume into Mendelssohn's Wedding March. Jane took it as the sign she was looking for.

In October 2005 Jane took part in a women's 'peace circle' – a small, diverse group who commit to a structured series of conversations together. 'They are a wonderful way of creating deep friendships and encouraging each other to build peace in our families and communities.' Jane has since facilitated

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three peace circles in Sydney and two in the Solomon Islands. Inspired by that, David 'took a deep breath' and launched out with another brave male to create the first men's peace circle with a 'fantastic mixture of guys'. David observes that the men didn't seem to share their inner lives as readily as the girls – they would prefer to talk politics. However, several of the men did report that it was a life-changing experience.

David is an accomplished musician and songwriter – something that goes back to childhood when he discovered he could get out of washing the dishes by accompanying his siblings on the guitar while they sang around the kitchen sink. It was the late 60s, a time of idealism, causes and protest songs. Invited to Britain to work with MRA, David found himself in Liverpool where the class-war was palpable. 'From time to time there would be headlines in the local papers: "No strikes anywhere in the Port of Liverpool today". We started to get to know the workers' representatives, their wives and children, cats and dogs, and we tried to bring together people from across the divides – particularly in the car and steel industries and the port.' The experience gave David a sense that



David and Jane Mills

ANTHONY MILLS

difficult situations could be turned on their head by a change in just one person. One of the first songs he wrote was inspired by Jim Beggs, an Australian dockers' leader. 'But it's really about an ordinary person who, instead of being a spectator, decided to get into the arena and make a difference.'

In recent years David and Jane have been regular visitors to the Solomon Islands, supporting efforts to bridge divides there. In 1999 ethnic tensions spilled into violence, killing over 100 and leaving tens of thousands homeless. 'I was seeing on TV the crisis that was brewing,' says David, 'and I heard about a Christian meeting on the Pacific with a speaker from the Solomon Islands. I had a clear sense that I should go and hear him speak. It was a very cold night and I nearly didn't go.' He struck up a friendship with Matthew Wale within the first 15 minutes. Because of the friendship, continued by email, Wale and two others from the Solomon Islands came to the same IofC conference in Sydney in 2003 that Keysar Trad first attended. Impressed by the particular combination of spirituality and practical action they saw, they asked for help replicating the conference experience in Honiara, their capital. 'So we went up there and met Matthew's friends. They formed a committee and organised the conference with our support...'

The conference, named *Winds of Change*, took place in June 2004. It had a huge impact, leading to deep reconciliations which made front-page news in the local paper most days. A host of new initiatives were spawned – including a workshop for the police and a 'Clean Election Campaign'. David wrote the *Winds of Change* theme song:

*Now the storm has gone, a new day has begun,  
Healing and restoring – see that right is done.  
People living straight, make this nation great.  
Be a light that shows the way for all mankind.*

Now regularly played on Solomon Islands radio, the song expresses the values that David and Jane try to apply in their own lives.