



Welcome to the first edition of the newsletter of Believing Women for a Culture of Peace, an interfaith and intercultural women's association operating in the wider Brisbane area. Initiated towards the end of 2003, the project recently received a *Living in Harmony* grant from the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) and, as a result, is now in a position to communicate its vision, goals and activities more widely.

Launching a new project into the public arena is a mixed experience, somewhat like that of a newborn. There is the excitement associated with entry into the wider world, and an accompanying sense of uncertainty about what this exposure will entail. The hope of the members is that 'going public' will spread their vision of a harmonious, just and inclusive society, and demonstrate that women who commit to this vision from a religious or spiritual perspective have a special contribution to make towards its realisation. *Editor*

Message from the Chair of the Steering Committee

*As the dialogue sessions of the Believing Women group have made its members very aware, language plays a very important role in both creating and challenging social and cultural stereotypes. The following reflection on the Islamic word **jihad** provides an example.*

Every single day every conscious Muslim (every individual who submits to the will of God) is expected to perform their *jihad*, which literally means 'struggle'. The holy month of Ramadhan each year is an opportunity to strengthen one's capacity to practice *jihad*. During this month, every able Muslim man or woman fasts from food and drink from sunrise to sunset, as one of the many ways to restrain one's self-centred tendencies and to try to be closer to The Creator through one's good deeds.

These days the beautiful word *jihad* has lost its true meaning and become a 'dirty word' in Western societies. When people hear the word, many immediately think of armed attacks and destruction. Their immediate reactions are shock and fear and questions such as: '*Jihad* against whom? Who or what is the next target?' These reactions are understandable in the light of certain contemporary events. A more serious concern, however, is the way in which the word *jihad* is coming into common English usage in a way that is totally misleading and offensive – to signify any kind of attack by someone on somebody or something else.

The fundamental meaning of *jihad* touches on the whole way we live together in a society like Australia. It signifies a struggle against one's tendencies to greed, self-importance, excessiveness, injustice, abuse of one's power or position, prejudice, dishonesty, hatred, back-biting and so on. Resisting these tendencies benefits each individual and the community as a whole. *Jihad* is a call to acts of kindness, respect, understanding, giving, caring and justice for all. Mia Leigh

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Recent Events

Alternatives to Violence Programme (AVP), Introductory Workshop – 11 September 2004

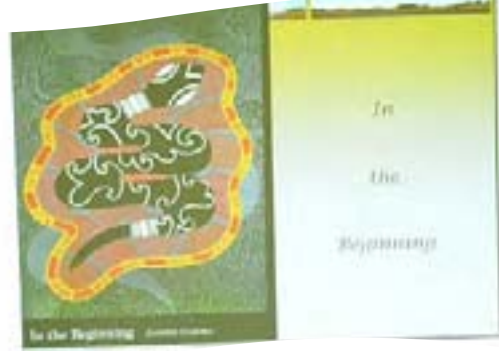
Presenters Heather Millhouse and Kathy Damm, Chair Peta Anne Molloy
Report by Wendy Flannery

As an expression of Believing Women's commitment to peace-making, eight members took advantage of this opportunity. Each participant introduced herself and spoke about her interest in the workshop. The presenters gave a brief introduction to the history of AVP, including its beginnings in a prison context, and outlined its basic principles. They then led the participants in a very creative brainstorm and discussion on 'What is violence?', in terms of actions and the feelings and values which underlie them.

In the second part of the workshop, the participants worked in pairs to identify non-violent strategies they had used to diffuse potentially violent situations. In the general sharing that followed, the facilitators provided a resume of AVP strategies in the form of a *mandala*, with 'Transforming Power' at the centre. Violence and non-violence can appear to be very similar; for example, silence can be one or the other. What makes the difference is an effort to act out of a connection with 'transforming power/spirit', requiring an ability to listen to one's inner core, the ground of one's convictions and values. Other components of the mandala are:

- look for a non-violent path
- think before reacting
- respect for self
- expect the best
- care for others

The facilitators provided brochures with information about the three levels of workshops offered by AVP, usually over a weekend. The workshops offer the opportunity for participants to work in depth and develop skills in the various dynamics/strategies for non-violent pathways to living and acting.



Mojgan Vafaei (L) and Aunty Joan Hendriks (R) beside the opening image of a slide presentation on the Creation story

Presentation & Dialogue on Australian Aboriginal Spirituality – 8 October 2004

Presenter Aunty Joan Hendriks, Chair Mojgan Vafaei
Report by Mia Leigh

After a welcome and introduction by Mojgan Vafaei, Aunty Joan Hendriks started the presentation by acknowledging the spirit of the land and reading from a book, *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, that explains about the creation of the earth and its contents. It also emphasized 57,000 years of Indigenous spiritual connectedness to the land which was expressed through word of mouth and sacred arts. Aunty Joan talked of three different stages in the historical interaction of the Indigenous Peoples of Australia with Europeans and others: the original clash of cultures, the colonial period and more recent moves towards reconciliation.

One of the challenges has been to look for common ground between the Christian Bible and Indigenous beliefs. Indigenous Christians have developed very creative ways for expressing the meetings points, and Aunty Joan illustrated this with a wonderful slide show expressing the Bible's story of Creation through Aboriginal art. The Muslim women participants sought a meeting point with beliefs expressed in the Koran.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, spirituality involves maintaining a way of life, law and language. People and places are important as well as kinship whereby clans and totemic groups have their own sacred beliefs and rituals, all related to their myths or dreaming stories. For example, songs are sacred and all ceremonies are connected to sacredness. Land is to be considered the very lifeblood of the community and land also is the teacher, therefore a good relationship to the land is essential to one's spiritual wellbeing. This seemed to be an insight that all of us could explore in a future session.

The 3R's of Learning according to 'our way'

RESPECT – for the sacredness of dreaming, language, art, spirituality
RELATIONSHIP – with nature and nurture; family, kinship, names, totems, food, spirituality of self, family, Creator Spirit
RESPONSIBILITY – for education, stories, the sacred and social, dance, music, art.

A spirituality of being an Indigenous person is closely linked to the relationship of kinship and place of belonging.

Aunty Joan Hendriks

Recent Events

Presentation & dialogue on the Baha'i faith – 30 October 2004
Presenters Kathryn Phillipe and Mugi Bennett, Chair Nooreen Harris
Report by Ganya Kordas



Mairi, Ganya, Mugi and Kathy enjoy visual resources at Baha'i presentation

This presentation on the Baha'i faith delivered at Justice Place, Woolloongabba, highlighted the history and teachings of Baha'u'llah, whose name translated in English means 'The Glory of God'. Baha'u'llah's teachings emerged in the 1850's in Persia (now Iran), having been influenced by the Bab who was a prominent Muslim teacher of that era. The foundation of this worldwide independent faith movement, and its unfolding to the present day, is belief in the process of successive revelation – of God's self-revelation 'little by little' to humanity.

I was interested to learn that meetings of believers do not take place in churches or any other buildings specifically for worship. However, the Baha'i do have a major temple and administration building located in Haifa, Israel and, on the local front, another temple and administration centre located in Sydney. Although the architectural styles of Baha'i temples differ widely, they all have nine sides and a central dome, symbolising at once the diversity of the human race and its essential oneness.

The role of women is held in high regard due to their child bearing and rearing capacity. Children born into the Baha'i faith have opportunities to come to the faith of their own choosing. At the minimum age of 15, which is considered to be an appropriate age of maturity, the Baha'i are encouraged to make a decision as to the spiritual path they wish to pursue.

Discussions also included the shift people make from the major monotheistic faith traditions to independently focused structures such as the Baha'i. This discussion helped the group of the eleven other women who attended, gain insight into the Baha'i faith. The afternoon closed at Kathy's request with the Baha'i prayer below. Our thanks to Kathy and Mugi for their willingness to share their faith with us, and respond to the many questions we had.

O God! Refresh and gladden my spirit. Purify my heart.
Illumine my powers. I lay all my affairs in Thy hand.
Thou art my Guide and my Refuge.
I will no longer be sorrowful and grieved;
I will be a happy and joyful being. O God!
I will no longer be full of anxiety,
nor will I let trouble harass me.
I will not dwell on the unpleasant things of life.

O God! Thou art more friend to me than I am to myself.
I dedicate myself to Thee, O Lord.
—'Abdu'l-Baha (Baha'i Faith)

New library

Believing Women has begun to collect and catalogue library resources, including books, articles and multi-media items. The collection is in a mobile format, and is currently housed in the Social Action Office, Justice Place, 5 Abingdon St, Woolloongabba. A draft catalogue system has been developed and the resources will soon be available for use on site (Monday – Thursday) or borrowing. Donations of books or other items are welcome.

Other activities of members

21 September: International Day of Peace: In the name of Believing Women, Wendy Flannery presented a short reflection during the Multi-Faith Prayer Service at Griffith University Queensland College of Art, to coincide with the opening of *Aftermath*, a collaborative project between the College and the Peace Art Project Cambodia.

3 October: Three members of Believing Women attended an open day at Kuraby mosque on the south side of Brisbane, the focus of a 2003/4 Harmony project. They were impressed by the welcoming and open atmosphere.

16 October: A small group of Believing Women accepted the invitation of Mojgan Vafaei to join her and her family for an *iftaar* meal (breaking the fast) of Iranian food at the end of the first day of Ramadan.

Sharing the iftaar meal with the Vafaei family



