



Gathering for Eid ul Fitr

A season of religious festivals

Among the significant events taking place at the time this newsletter is issued are commemorations in many parts of the world and at the United Nations of the 60th anniversary of the liberation in 1945 of Auschwitz, the scene of the greatest atrocity in human history, where more than a million people, most of them Jewish, were murdered under the Nazi regime. Speaking at a commemoration on the site, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder remarked that what took place in Nazi concentration camps cannot be blamed on Hitler alone; it happened, he said, because ordinary people empowered the Nazis.

Other thinkers have offered a similar analysis of how racism and related discrimination works in societies, including Australia. There may be only a tiny minority of people who will actually engage in overt abusive or other violent action directed towards those who are 'different'. However, the degree to which such people feel at liberty to do such things without being held to account depends on the 'window of tolerance' in society at large for racist attitudes and behaviour.

As we join with others around the world in remembering the horrific outcome when social, racial and religious prejudice are given free rein, members of Believing Women for a Culture of Peace recommit to their goal of narrowing the social space in which such prejudice can flourish, and of opening wider a 'window of tolerance' for difference. And more than mere tolerance: a true appreciation of diversity and the 'social capital' which it generates when we are willing to journey together along its pathways. *Editor*

Major festivals of several faiths occurred during the months of November and December. Members of Believing Women for a Culture of Peace celebrated two of these – the Muslim feast of Eid ul Fitr and the Christian feast of Christmas. As those who participated reflected on the experience, strong similarities of focus became apparent:

- both engage believers in activities of celebrating the gift of food, sharing special foods together, carefully and lovingly prepared;
- both are family occasions, and at the same time opportunities to show hospitality to those who may otherwise have nowhere to participate;
- both are times of gift-giving, of dressing up in new clothes, of experiencing personal warmth and appreciation;
- and both are times when believers find themselves called to make special efforts to settle differences and repair damaged relationships.

Above and on page 2 are some photographic highlights of these two special celebrations.

Other Recent Events

Presentation and conversation with Archbishop Fernando Capalla, Archbishop of Davao, Mindanao, Philippines, on the theme, 'Justice, Peace, Human Rights and Inter-Faith Dialogue' – 11 November 2004

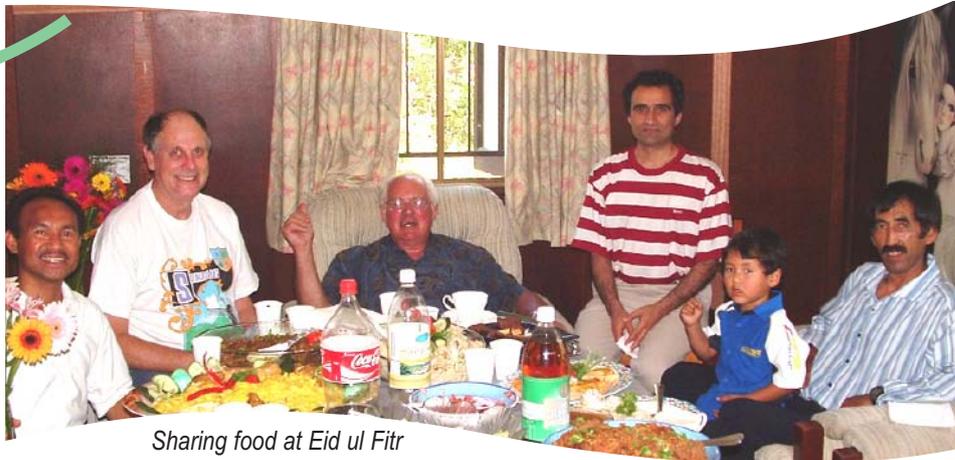
Co-hosted with the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission and the Multi-Faith Centre, Griffith University Nathan Campus.

Chair: Mia Leigh

Report by Dolores Creevey

Mindanao, the large southern island of the Philippines, is often in the news as a place of unrest and violence, particularly for Muslims. So it was refreshing to spend an evening with Archbishop Capalla who shared some of the ways the local communities have used/are using to build peace. The Archbishop made his presentation in a relaxed, informal way, and the large and diverse audience made for a very lively discussion.

One of the core elements is a week long Celebration of Peace each year, involving representatives from all sectors of society: community leaders, government officials, youth, even primary school children. The Archbishop's greatest hope is in Youth Peace Camps, where young Muslims, Christians and Indigenous people live, talk and have fun together to build relationships for the future. 'Where there have been years of war and suffering at each other's hands', he said, 'youth are important because they have fewest wounds to heal.'



Sharing food at Eid ul Fitr



Gathering for Christmas.



Sharing food at Christmas.



Chair of the event, Mia Leigh, with Archbishop Capalla

The evening was particularly important for Believing Women because of the Archbishop's special closeness to the Muslim people of Mindanao, who were by far the majority where he grew up and worked as a young priest. He believes that poverty is the basis of much of the unrest among the Muslim population, and the extra burden of discrimination on the basis of religion adds to the desire for self rule.

At the deepest level, Capalla believes that there is no peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness. 'Justice alone will not reconcile people. For all of us, locally and internationally, peace will not happen without forgiveness.'

Recent Events

Presentation and dialogue on the Ukrainian non-Latin Catholic faith and its iconic tradition – 20 November 2004

Presenters Ganya Kordas & Sr Darleane Pelechaty
Chair Wendy Flannery
Report by Mairi McKay

Ukraine as a country with a distinct culture emerged in 1024 after a long and complex history of power struggles among religious and tribal groups. The Ukrainian Catholic Church developed its identity in the 10th century, as part of the process of asserting its identity over and against attempts at Russian domination. Its expression of Christian faith was strongly influenced by 3rd century Byzantine monks and their art.

I was very impressed by the icons and beautiful books displayed by the presenters, and the explanations of how the icons were painted and their symbolic meanings, as well as the beautiful embroidered cloths traditionally hung over them for protection. We also had the opportunity to sit in silence gazing at one of the icons as part of a meditative process. According to the presenters, if we allow the image to take hold of us, there is no separation of body, mind and spirit. We are the living icon.

There was an interesting discussion of the distinction between religious and sacred art, with icons representing the latter. They are always made from natural materials, starting with dark colours and adding lighter ones. Lightness represents God as a source of grace and strength. If a mistake is made it is never scratched out but rather built on, symbolising our own lives. I very much enjoyed hearing about a faith which I knew nothing about.



*The Holy Trinity –
House of Love:
red, the earth;
blue, the heavens*

*Madonna & child with
protective cloth*



Other activities of members

20 November: Four members gave a presentation on Believing Women and led a discussion at the Annual General Meeting of Alternatives to Violence Programme Queensland (AVPQ). They used the opportunity to highlight the vision and goals of the *Living in Harmony* initiative.

29 November: Three members attended the public forum, 'Reflections on Racism' at the Brisbane City Hall, sponsored by Multicultural Affairs Queensland .

Library news

The Believing Women library received a gift of more than twenty books which are currently being catalogued and will be ready for borrowing soon. Other donations of books – new or used – and of other resources are welcome! We have also been gifted with a complimentary subscription to *The Guardian Weekly* newspaper, and have begun to receive newsletters of other relevant organisations.

Member profiles



Wendy Flannery

Born and raised in Brisbane, my life as a Sister of Mercy in the Catholic Church took me in my mid-20's to Papua New Guinea, where I first experienced the challenge and excitement of 'crossing over' to other cultures and belief systems. It eventually led me to recognise the amazing diversity of the spiritual heritage of humanity across time and place. I also developed an appreciation of how personally enriching such 'crossing over' can be.

As my work took me into an arena which encompassed the whole Pacific Island region, I developed an awareness of the struggles of Indigenous Peoples worldwide for recognition of their ancient and unique cultures and spiritualities and their vital contribution to contemporary human wisdom. Based at this time in Fiji, I also encountered people of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh faiths.

A few years working as an NGO representative at the United Nations in New York meant interacting with people of a global range of faiths and cultures, and becoming aware of the daunting task that creating 'a culture of peace' involved. I was reminded of the slogan coined by peace activists during the Cold War era: 'One World or None'. My commitment to the Believing Women 'project' is based on a passion for engagement in this task and a conviction based on experience about its value for me personally.



Nooreen Harris

I was born in Nairobi, Kenya, of a Sunni Muslim father and Shia Muslim mother, which made for interesting discourse at home. My parents always had friends from all different ethnic and religion backgrounds visiting our home, and no one ever went home hungry. So growing up we always had a very diverse range of people surrounding us.

I am married to a South African-born Australian who decided to convert to Islam 13 years ago. We have a 10-year-old daughter who inspires me to become a better and more knowledgeable Muslim.

I have never known a time when I was not proud to be a Shia Ismaili Muslim. It is a Shia branch of Islam, focusing more on the esoteric and spiritual aspect of Islam. Having always had a thirst for knowledge about different people and different religions, the events of 9/11 seemed to provide the impetus for me to get out there and meet more people and educate them about the real Islam, and make my daughter proud to be a Muslim.

My search led me to this wonderful group of women, and I leave every meeting with my spiritual tank refilled if not overflowing.

Website wisdom

At a time when we are constantly bombarded by images of the Middle East as a place of conflict and aggression, members and others may be interested to explore elements of the second Edinburgh International Festival of Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace, scheduled for 14 February – 6 March 2005. Visit www.mesp.org.uk

Upcoming events 2005

16 January: Prayer and reflection in remembrance of the victims of the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami.

Place & time: South Bank, lawn between the rainforest and Suncorp Piazza, 4.00-5.30pm.

20 January: Training workshop for interaction with the media, conducted by Phil Dickie & Susan Brown.

Place & time: All Hallows Convent, 547 Ann St, Fortitude Valley, 9.30am-1.00pm.

23 January: Review and Planning meeting for 2005.

Place & time: 25 Hooker St, Windsor, 1.30-3.30pm.

5 March: Picnic to celebrate International Women's Day.

Place & time: Brisbane Botanic Gardens, lawn near the rotunda, 12.00 midday.

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This project is proudly supported by the Australian Government's *Living in Harmony* initiative, which aims to promote community harmony. For more information, visit www.harmony.gov.au



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