

Prayers for Peace in the Middle East

In this issue

May 29th marked the beginning of the *World Week for Peace in Palestine Israel*.

(<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/events-sections/wwppi.html>) What a tragedy, then, that almost at the beginning of the Week violence erupted again in the region.

The assault on the Gaza-bound flotilla was a clear demonstration of the fragility of any efforts to build peace between the people of Israel and the Palestinians. The VCC Executive decided at its June meeting that we would write to the Israeli Ambassador and issue a public statement about the assault. The letter to the ambassador was sent on June 8th, but before this issue of *Vic Unity*, no public statement has been made.

Why would we not move with more speed on such a matter of concern? To begin, there is still a lack of clarity about precisely what happened. Then there is a sense of being overwhelmed, yet again, by the needless bloodshed which seems to mark relations in the region. Lastly, there may be some wisdom in waiting for a reply from the ambassador.

I am heartened, however, by many of the responses to this tragedy from among churches around the world, and from other ecumenical

bodies, including the World Council of Churches (<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/browse/1.html>).

It is also pleasing to hear that the President of the United States of America, Mr Barack Obama, has called on the Israeli Government to end the blockade of Gaza. This seems to signal a shift in US policy towards the conflict.

And I offer you this portion from a litany for Gaza from Sabeel – the Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre in Jerusalem.

Eternal God, arbiter of justice and champion of peace, reach into the deep pit of violence, despair, and ruthlessness that shapes the lives of so many in Palestine and Israel. The nations are in an uproar, kingdoms totter, people cry out.

You, O God, are our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Grant, O God, healing to the men and women injured during the Israeli military assault. Bring grace and consolation to those who mourn the dead.

(<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/events-sections/wwppi/pray.html>)

Theo Mackaay

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Healing Trail story and photos.

Photos below, the Rev Gail Pritchard with child of refugees from Burma and rappers from Congo.



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Tribute to Sandy Parker of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

Healing Trail

It was an electric start to Sunday's worship! A troupe of Sudanese women with heart-felt voice, colourful dress and bearing a wooden cross held high captivated us with a song of praise. Full of joy and fervour they injected a bubbly spirit of expectation and excitement into the congregation.



Sudanese Dancers at Sunday worship

Who were these people, white teeth flashing, faces shining, dark skins glowing?

They were members of the 'Healing Trail' who were guests of the City of Manningham's three Uniting Churches during the last weekend in May – one of many 'Healing Trails' throughout Victoria organized by National Council of Churches *Act for Peace*, but the first in the metropolitan area.

The dancers were among 50 refugees whose stories, song and dance were shared in a reciprocal and heart-warming community event. And surprise! Surprise! Everybody danced! Hands reached out moving to irresistible rhythms; and the movement of the Spirit!



Dancers from Congo on Saturday Night

The refugees were from Burma, Sudan, Congo, East Turkistan, Afghanistan and Eritrea and they opened themselves gladly, if often shyly, to the warm hospitality offered by the 16 families, assisted by 18 drivers, who had agreed to host them for a weekend of meeting each other and mutual enrichment.

Australian home-life ["What is a dish-washer and what is ducted heating? and "can I play with your toys"?]

Saturday's wonderful evening meal and cultural presentation was followed by Sunday's Aussie BBQ complete with swings, slides, soccer and snags.

It was an experience of grace, rich in diversity and united in God's love; a sharing embedded with deepening awareness, understanding and compassion as we listened humbly to the suffering and trauma that had brought these gentle, gracious and vulnerable people to our shores. And we heard too of hope. Hope being forged on this journey of healing; hope in a new country, in new possibilities, in the new and loving relationships being formed.



Chin Family from Burma at Sunday's Barbecue

A Healing Trail for all God's wounded people. For all of us. We are living and learning together, blessed and being made whole. We'll not forget it.

Gail Pritchard.

Aid flotilla attacks ignite the movement to end Gaza Blockade



The attacks on the Gaza aid flotilla, loaded with humanitarian supplies, has brought international attention to the plight of those living in the occupied territories, where over 70% of citizens live on less than \$1 a day under Israeli blockade.

Act for Peace has been able to support ecumenical partners in Palestine for over 20 years with humanitarian assistance and peace and justice initiatives. We are now asking for you to pray and advocate for an end to the occupation of Gaza.

- To read the Kairos Palestine document, written by Palestinian Christians and for other ways to act for peace for the people of Palestine/Israel, go to www.actforpeace.org.au/palestine

A Report from Oxford from Youth Ministry Worker, Rohan Waters.

Rohan is at Oxford for a term on a Farmington Fellowship he is there with his wife Cindy and three children.

Leading up to our adventure we saw God's hand at work in so many ways to make this experience possible that we found it hard to believe that there is not some significant reason for us to be here. Far too many coincidences in terms of financial blessings, permission granted, doors opening and details coming together for this to be an accident.

Even so, some doubt did enter our minds as a certain volcano grounded our plane for a week in Singapore. We had hoped for a good week in England settling in, instead we found ourselves in a hotel room in Singapore. However, what could have been a disaster for our trip ended as a 6 night all expenses paid holiday in Singapore, and I arrived in Oxford with 10 hours to spare before my course began!

It is now three weeks since I began. As a family we've had a few adventures and are settling into our house. On the study side of things there are numerous words that I could use to describe my experience but I will just pick a few of them to keep it contained.

The first is *inspired*. This is mainly to do with the intellectual climate. There exists here a pervasive mood of thinking and valuing intellectual pursuits. You just want to know, to understand, to think, to discover truth and explore ideas at the deepest possible level. It has shaped the architecture, the colleges and institutions and the people and it really does affect the

way you see things. Suddenly writing essays, asking complex questions and not necessarily producing practical goods seems not only virtuous but downright fashionable!

Which leads to my next word which is *humbled*. This started when I discovered that my tutor has doctorates in particle physics and Theology, and that my principal has been awarded the Templeton prize (a sort of Nobel prize for religion). It has continued as I have wandered around the university and noted the great minds of history that have been shaped here, and it has been affirmed by the high standards of thinking that people here seem to maintain. It is humbling just to be here (not to mention the fact that our kids went to Sunday school and out of 5 teachers, two had doctorates!! And I didn't even ask the other three.)

But I must add one more word, which is *delighted*. In spite of it sounding so daunting, the warmth of the place has been a highlight of the experience so far. (No comment on the weather). The whole design of the college system ensures that, even as one of 20-30 thousand students, we belong somewhere. The Harris Manchester College has about 150 students and the staff have gone out of the way to make us feel at home. A central component to this is the dining hall where we enjoy, on a daily basis, some of the best food I have had!

It is a lot of fun just getting into the traditions and activities around the college. I'm not used to a lot of formality, but I am enjoying dressing up for dinner (we wear gowns), all saying grace together and eating off nice formal dinnerware. It all adds to the sense that what you are doing is valuable.

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On the study side – the actual work I am here to do! – there are two main things to report on. The first is the actual education 'program' I'm involved in. I've been introduced to the 'Oxford Tutor System', and I have to say, it's a really logical, simple and effective way to learn.

The second is the actual project that I am working on. My original dream was to churn out a report with 'the' answers to all my key questions in the first couple of weeks, but that's been derailed by the breadth and depth of thinking and reading that my questions have led me to. The advice from my tutor and other adviser has been to use the opportunity to dig into the deeper questions, and to take whatever time is necessary to read and explore the ideas. So that's what I've been doing.

As a reminder, my project is about helping our Victorian Government Secondary schools create the space for Christian and Religious Education at the core of student learning

Without going into too much detail about the content of the report (not that there is a lot so far!), my first week's tutorial was spend discussing what it means to be human and what is the goal of human life! So somewhere between developing a comprehensive philosophy for the whole of human existence and preparing next week's lesson for year 7 students, I hope to return with something of value to our schools and churches, that will help us work together for the benefit of our kids.

Thanks again for all your prayers, support and encouragement.

Yours academically (or trying hard to be so)

News from Local Interchurch Councils

Altona-Laverton Council of Churches

again held their Mothers Days service on Sunday May 9th 2010 at the Altona North Memorial Park in conjunction with the Trustees. About 80 people attended. They also took part in the Altona Bayside Festival by joining in with other community groups by presenting themselves and their activities with banners from member churches.

Stawell Inter-Church Council

will celebrate 40 years since its inception on Saturday 7th August, 2010. Anyone interested in receiving an invitation to the celebrations, please contact either:
Roma Bennett 5358 2298
gumsdpl@bigpond.net.au or
Anne Howlett 5358 5177
studioaceramics@optusnet.com.au

Maroondah Fellowship of Churches— Ecumenical Pentecost Service

Representatives of eight churches in the Maroondah area met for a Pentecost Sunday Festival on 23 May. Few present could remember when a similar event had been held on Pentecost Sunday in this area.

The brain-child of Councillor Ann Fraser and the executive of the Maroondah Fellowship of Churches, this event attracted an estimated 150 attendees to Maroondah Federation Estate. Each church presented a song, prayer or spoken item.



Cake Cutting with Councillor Ann Fraser (centre) and church clergy and representatives

Lieut-Colonel Ian Southwell, of The Salvation Army, explained the meaning of Christian Pentecost Sunday as the birthday of the Christian church. 'We may have different names for the branches of the church to which we belong,' he said. 'We may emphasise different aspects of the Christian faith. Let us



Holy Spirit Church Vocal Vibes (a cappella) singers

remember that our essential unity is in God, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit if we allow him to work in us daily', the Colonel concluded.

Sharing in singing Christian songs and warm appreciation



**Ringwood Salvation Army
Kid's Choir**

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of each presentation clearly demonstrated the spirit of unity among those attending. Because it was a birthday celebration, all present joined in singing 'Happy birthday dear Christians!' Cutting a birthday cake decorated with the words 'Happy birthday, Christians!' brought together the clergy or a senior lay representative of the participating churches. At the conclusion of the festival, all had an opportunity to sample the birthday cake and greet their fellow believers.

Sandy Parker

It is with great sadness that I report that Sandy Parker, who represented the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) at the Heads of Churches meetings of the VCC or many year, passed away on 23 May 2010. For many months Sandy had been fighting a brain tumour, and late last year decided to return to his family and roots in the UK.

Sandy had studied theology in the UK and Melbourne. Especially important to him were theological works of John Robinson, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenzas, Paul Tillich, and Matthew Fox and the philosophy of the Quaker, John McMurray. Sandy was a teacher and taught in both Quaker and Baptist schools. In recent years he actively participated in the Our World in Crisis? Course initiated by Pax Christi, and served as a facilitator of one of the small groups.

Sandy was highly respected and took a keen interest in the work of the VCC and its multi-faith activities. He served as Clerk of Victoria Regional Meeting from 2002-2005. We will miss his presence and wise counsel.
Dale Hess