

ACTION FOR LIFE 2 NEWSLETTER #22
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Singapore and Jakarta

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Greetings, Friends.

Action for Life has completed a week-long outreach in the "FINE" city of Singapore. It seems like enormous fines for walking on grass, littering, chewing gum, eating and drinking in public transport do help to keep this city/island/state clean and beautiful. Well-maintained century-old two-storey Chinese buildings, sky-scrapers, Tamil temples, pagodas and space age looking churches make the face of the ultra modern and prosperous Singapore. However, we were lucky enough to have discovered some of its heart as well - amazing people who are contributing to making the world better.

'The first occasion on our program seemed so typically Singaporean - a Sunday-evening barbeque beside a large blue-lit pool framed by palm trees and multi-storey apartment complexes. One expects politely-interested small talk at such occasions. But we were surprised by the depth and responsiveness of every conversation that evening, from prison counselling to healing broken family relationships to corporate ethics after the Asian financial crash. Our hosts in Singapore, who also hosted that evening, typified this meaning-midst-affluence approach. Asheesh Khaneja, now a senior executive in a multinational computer company, first met MRA at a student conference in Panchgani some decades ago. His decision then to be honest about cheating in exams nearly cost him his degree. Now he can say he's way up the corporate ladder and still true to his conscience. His wife Subina has taken a year off her TV production work to explore spiritual directions. And Jit-Mun Chong, co-host of our program, is back working in Singapore after contributing a year of his career to develop IC's website with a team in Oxford, England - again with a clear faith-based and ethical commitment in his corporate life.' - Mike Brown

'Arriving in Singapore was to my surprise a huge culture shock. I was faced with the realities of a big developed city, very similar to my own hometown of Sydney, where late night drinking and partying are the main forms of entertainment for the younger generation. Initially I was quite critical of this phenomenon, but I soon realised how quick I was to judge other cultures, when this is a problem which my own hometown experiences.

I have gained a real sense of appreciation for my family members while we were in Singapore, in particular with three of my aunts who took our group out to a huge ten-course lunch and shared their stories with us. They are the family of Singapore's Father of Charity, Ee Peng Liang who is renowned for his work helping the less fortunate in Singapore. He escaped death three times during the Japanese occupation of Singapore and believed that God had saved him in order to serve his community through charity work. He has passed away, but his children are continuing in his spirit through their volunteer work counseling abused women and children.' - Clara Cheong

'In this pristine modern city which feels far removed from the most needy in the world, we were grateful to meet with young people who are engaging with those wider needs. At the United World College, many of the Year 11 students whom we met had recently joined community projects in India, Cambodia, China and elsewhere. One girl was joining in a campaign against child trafficking out of Nepal. Their teacher's job description is "Head of Global Concerns; Co-ordinator of Initiatives for Peace". Later in the week we had a lively dialogue with staff at the Singapore International Foundation, who co-ordinate an extensive programme of voluntary service projects overseas. Their aim is to help young Singaporeans learn about themselves and the world. In both places there was a strong spirit of awareness and responsibility to the wider world, which is of course also a major aim of Action for Life.' - Chris Lancaster

'I had a lot of exciting discoveries as we met people from different NGOs. The National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre and SINDA (Singapore Indian Development Association) are examples of good management and strong conviction. The first is a 'co-ordinator, catalyst and a consultant' for volunteerism in Singapore, investigating the needs and finding matching volunteers/donors. One of the Centre's recent employees shared how she gave up her career to do what her heart calls her to. She hopes to join us for the APYC in July. SINDA coordinates nearly 3500 volunteers (the youngest of them being 7!) engaged in nurturing a love for reading among children; youth and family mentoring; and other projects based on establishing caring relationships between people. This concept also lies at the heart of Initiatives of Change. I was almost moved to tears when at the end of our programme one of the SINDA volunteers, a former drug addict, thanked us for what we do; he said how important it is to care about and simply accept a person, and how it saved him earlier in his life.' - Katia Zirjanova

'One of our main aims of course is linking up and empowering new teams and new potential commitment wherever we go. A young Chinese met by Action for Life by chance in India is back at home in Singapore when we are there and helps to host us. A young Indian, met in Singapore at one function, joins us at two subsequent occasions. A woman working on intergenerational projects says after our sharing "I don't get on well with my own mother. I've never seen the connection before. I need to start listening to the inner voice". Our next aim is to see how to draw them, and others like them, together at a weekend with local hosts.' - Jean Brown

Unfortunately, one of the team members, Altaf Khan, couldn't join us in Singapore due to visa complications - he headed straight to Indonesia, where the whole team reunited on 9th of May.

'Right from the airport I felt as if I'm in India or Nepal: the resemblance between Indonesian and Hindu cultures is visible. Travelling through the city in a bus I saw tall buildings and slums facing each other and telling many stories silently. I was met by Indra and Mimi, two members of the Indonesian IC team - a group of people in their early twenties who are committed to bringing change. While staying at the State Islamic University of Indonesia, I met an American counsellor and his associate who were trying to convince students that Americans are not as bad as people think. I shared our approach to change the world for humanity and celebrating diversity. He was impressed and offered to

meet. I also met Habib Chirzin, a member of the National Human Rights Commission of Indonesia. He invited two of us to his house and cancelled all his engagements to have dinner with us. His wife, very active in building bridges between religions, shared about her life and Indonesia. I also stayed with a family and had a chance to see Indonesian life closely. I prayed in the biggest Mosque of this region, Masjid e Istaqlal. I am trying to understand what this all means to me: sometimes we try to be teachers and want to be important, however Indonesia is showing me the way that I can be me without being very important.' - Altaf Khan

Here in Jakarta our team is finally complete with Altaf and also Suresh Khatri, who has rejoined AFL after a month at home in Fiji. We were all greeted with drums and singing, surrounded by the care and enthusiasm of the young Indonesian team and looking forward to what this outreach has in store.

Mike and Jean Brown (Australia), Clara Cheong (Australia), John Freebury (Canada), Ilze Gutmane (Latvia), Altaf Khan (India), Aparna Khatri (Fiji/India), Suresh Khatri (Fiji), Chris Lancaster (Australia), Nandor Lim (Malaysia), Min-Hui Na (South Korea), Katia Zirjanova (Russia).

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