

A moral and spiritual re-awakening

A short introduction to Initiatives of Change in Britain

by Edward Peters

This booklet was written for a British audience, as a short introduction to MRA in Britain

I am the third generation of my family to be part of Initiatives of Change. In the early thirties my grandfather and father, both opticians and both Yorkshiremen, became involved in the Oxford Group, a movement for spiritual renewal led by an American, Dr Frank Buchman. In 1938 this developed into Moral Re-Armament, which became a familiar name in Britain. In 2001 MRA changed its name to Initiatives of Change.

I began working with MRA when I left school in 1970, just at the time when its public profile was diminishing. What caught my interest as a teenager still inspires me today - the idea that anybody can help to create a better world by first starting a process of change in their own lives and attitudes.

This booklet aims to answer the questions people often ask. What is Initiatives of Change in Britain today, what does it do, and what is its vision for the future? I am well aware of both its achievements and its shortcomings. And after thirty years I am as convinced as ever that Initiatives of Change has a vital contribution to offer. What is Initiatives of Change?

I would describe Initiatives of Change as a movement of the spirit, building on the goodness which can be found in everybody. The starting point is the readiness of each person to try to live according to the voice of conscience - or, for those of us who are believers, the will of God.

For me, living this way means doing the things I know I should, stopping doing things I know I shouldn't, making restoration for past wrongs and letting my life be used for an unselfish purpose. It is a continuous process which, although not easy, constantly renews my whole way of living and even my motivation. It leads me to trust in God's help, as these changes go beyond my own spiritual and moral capabilities.

This kind of living is of course also the experience of countless others. And when more and more people take it up, the effect spreads outwards in a chain reaction which knows no boundaries.

In this way Initiatives of Change works for a change in society through a moral and spiritual change in people. This has led in recent years to programmes for racial healing and justice, for reconciliation in conflict situations, and for fostering the values that support free and democratic societies.

In recent years the words 'moral re-armament' have no longer had the same resonance as in 1938. In 2001 the global campaign name for MRA was changed to Initiatives of Change. But the aim remains the same, to promote a moral and spiritual re-awakening, starting with the individual but not stopping there. To give a fuller answer to the question, 'What is Initiatives of Change?', it is necessary to tell the story briefly from the beginning. Initiatives of Change has grown from the experience of one man, has gone through downs as well as ups, and is emerging today humbler, with renewed confidence, and determined to work with others in shaping a society where each person counts irrespective of their place in society.

Frank Buchman

Who was this man Frank Buchman? And how did he emerge from small-town America to make such an impact that several governments decorated him for his contribution to peace?

He was born in 1878, into the mostly German-speaking town of Pennsburg, Pennsylvania. It was a God-fearing community, believing in hard work, honesty and generous hospitality.

Buchman's father ran the only hotel in town, next to the railway station. Every train brought a wide variety of people from whom the boy caught echoes of the outside world. He was encouraged to mix with the guests, learning from his parents to be sociable, courteous and concerned for their needs. The family enjoyed the delights of the table, though Buchman later gave up drink because he felt it unfair to expect alcoholics to do something he was not prepared to do himself. Indeed, one of the first spin-offs of his later work was Alcoholics Anonymous.

At school he was hard-working, though no more than an average student. His mother wanted him to become a local minister, and he did go on to be ordained in the Lutheran church. At seminary, he taught Sunday School and visited orphanages and hospitals. He enjoyed the social life of the college to the full, once taking 12 girls to a dance because he could not bear to disappoint any of them. Unusually for an ordinand of those days, he also went to the races with his father.

By the time he was 21, Buchman was setting his sights higher than his mother's hopes for him.

Turning point at Keswick

The experience which most marked Buchman's life came in 1908. He was on holiday in England, following the breakdown of his first major project, a hospice in Philadelphia for destitute young men. Buchman had wanted to run the hospice along the generous lines of his parents' hotel. The board wanted something altogether more frugal - and eventually, after three years' tussle, Buchman had to resign. At the age of 30, saddened and bitterly resentful, he was convinced that his life's work was over.

Whilst on this holiday he came upon a small chapel in Keswick in the Lake District, where a woman was preaching to a tiny congregation. She spoke so movingly about Christ on the Cross that Buchman was transfixed. 'She pictured the dying Christ as I had never seen Him before,' he said later. 'I knew that I had wounded Him, and there was a great distance between myself and Him. I knew that it was due to my sin of nursing ill-will.'

He realised that his resentment towards the six members of the board made him the 'seventh wrong man': 'I was the centre of my own life. That big "I" had to be crossed out. I asked God to change me.' He felt that he was being asked to put things right with those men, and immediately wrote to each one of them asking forgiveness for his ill-will. It brought him a joyful sense of release.

Characteristically, he told the other guests at his lodging place what had happened to him. Buchman's new-found freedom of spirit moved one of them so much that he asked for a private talk, which led to a new beginning in his life.

These two linked experiences convinced Buchman that no one was beyond God's reach: anyone could make a new start, and when they did, it would affect the people around them. Over the next 14 years - as YMCA secretary at Penn State University, in the mission field in China and as a lecturer at Hartford Theological Seminary - he crystallised the philosophy which lies at the heart of Initiatives of Change.

Buchman's philosophy

Frank Buchman's approach to living a life of faith was made up of three simple ideas which he drew from Christian thinkers of his day. His gift was in offering them in a way that was understandable to everyone.

The first he learnt while at Penn State, from a friend who suggested that he set aside time every morning to be silent and allow God to speak in his heart, writing down the thoughts which came. He practised this 'quiet time', as he called it, daily for the rest of his life. To guard

against self-deception he would test his thoughts by comparison with the Bible and by consulting friends.

Secondly, he adopted as guidelines moral standards of absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love, derived by Robert Speer from Christ's 'Sermon on the Mount'. He never saw these standards as a set of rules - rather as stars to steer by.

Thirdly, Buchman held that a moral life was not an end in itself. He believed that if individuals were prepared to start the process of change within themselves, the consequences would naturally ripple outwards and affect their communities and even their nations.

Like all of us, Buchman did not always manage to live up to his aspirations. Though a man of great kindness, and blessed with a strong sense of humour, he could also sometimes be authoritarian, quick-tempered and demanding, particularly as his health deteriorated towards the end of his life. But above all he was a good listener with a genuine interest in the person with whom he was talking and a readiness to go to great lengths to help. His directness and sensitive care enabled thousands of people to find meaning in their lives and to play a part in changing the world around them.

The Oxford Group

Buchman resigned his job at Hartford in 1922 to pursue a wider calling. Over the next few years he worked mostly in universities - Princeton in the United States, and both Oxford and Cambridge. During the Depression, students with a social conscience were searching for ways to make a difference. Hundreds, particularly in Oxford, responded to his approach. Many decided to set aside their career plans. Some were ordained into the Church; others gave all their time to working with him.

In 1928, when a group of Rhodes Scholars returned home to South Africa to tell what had happened in their lives through meeting Buchman, a railway employee labelled their compartment 'The Oxford Group'. The press took it up and the name stuck.

At Oxford in the early thirties some 150 undergraduates met every day for fellowship, planning and prayer. During the vacations the students took part in campaigns around the country and helped to host conferences, known then as 'house-parties'. One in 1933 drew 5,000 people and filled six colleges, with four meetings running concurrently and speakers shuttling from one to another. Meetings in other cities drew similar crowds, as did campaigns in Canada, Scandinavia and other parts of Europe.

By 1938, with the support of many church leaders and the hostility of some, the Oxford Group had become a household name, and Buchman an influential - if controversial - voice with both politicians and academics as well as with the unemployed and trade union leaders.

The launching of Moral Re-Armament

During the 1930s, Buchman increasingly saw how a change of direction in people's lives could impact their communities and countries. For instance, bitter feelings between Norway and Denmark over contested fishing rights were diffused by the unexpected change in attitude of one of the fiercest Norwegian protagonists following contact with Buchman and his colleagues.

By 1938, Frank Buchman was impatient to find new ways of expressing the wider implications of personal change for 'an age that needs it, but is desperately afraid of it'. The phrase he settled on, 'moral and spiritual re-armament', was a response to the urgent military re-armament of the day. He felt passionately that if people and their leaders accepted moral values and followed God's guidance, war might still be averted. In retrospect this might seem unrealistic, yet it received a tremendous response at the time.

In Britain, the campaign for Moral Re-Armament was launched in June 1938 at a meeting attended by 3,000 people in the East End of London, an area where Buchman had enjoyed a considerable welcome. Major events also took place in many parts of Europe. The next year

in the United States 14,000 people attended an MRA meeting in Madison Square Gardens, New York, and 30,000 packed the Hollywood Bowl.

For some of Buchman's supporters the launching of Moral Re-Armament marked a parting of the ways. They feared that he and his colleagues were becoming political and turning away from their original enthusiasm for personal spiritual renewal. But most stayed with Buchman, sharing his conviction that a personal relationship with God should naturally lead on to wider responsibility for the world around us.

World War II

Controversy surrounds Buchman's role before and during the war, as a result of both misunderstanding and misrepresentation. This is an opportunity to set the record straight.

Buchman always believed that no one was too evil to be transformed by God's power. He hoped until the eleventh hour that Hitler, or at least some of his subordinates, might repent. He made courageous efforts to meet them and held back from denouncing them, although a meeting with Himmler in 1936 convinced him that there were 'devilish forces at work'. A report in the New York press later that year led people to believe that he had said 'Thank God for Hitler' and was therefore a Nazi sympathiser. This was untrue. But it seems probable that at that stage Buchman, like other responsible figures of the day, did see Hitler as a lesser evil than Stalin. In 1940 he admitted to friends, 'Hitler fooled me. I thought Nazism would be a bulwark against Communism.' It was a serious error and it dogged him for the rest of his life.

The Nazis themselves certainly did not share the view that Buchman sympathised with them. In late 1936 the Gestapo published a document which described the Oxford Group as 'a dangerous opponent of National Socialism'. In 1941 a Nazi newspaper in occupied Holland reported, with ridiculous exaggeration, that 'all the world leaders who were anti-National Socialist... have supported the Oxford Group'.

A further misapprehension from the war years was that MRA was pacifist: a strange accusation, as over 250 of its most active workers in Britain enlisted during the first year of the war. A smaller number - among them my father, who worked as a coalminer for over two years - stayed in civilian life, with the support of the authorities, working to raise morale at home and in the United States. Many of them were later called up.

The post-war years

The focus of MRA's work in the immediate post-war years was the reconciliation and reconstruction of Europe. An international conference centre in Caux, Switzerland, made possible through the generosity of hundreds of Swiss, opened its doors in 1946 and became a place where former enemies could meet. Over the next four years more than 3,000 Germans and 2,000 French came. The healing atmosphere of Caux made it possible for many of them to start to let go of past hatreds and to envisage a common future.

As a result, a number of MRA teams toured Germany, with a series of shows and plays carrying the MRA message. Their work further contributed to the improvement in Franco-German relations, helping to break down some of the emotional barriers to European reconciliation. Both governments later decorated Buchman for his work - while he considered it the work of God.

MRA also made an impact in the areas of Germany, France and Britain where strained industrial relations were threatening post-war development. In a Yorkshire coalfield, for example, a dictatorial manager known as 'the pocket battleship' apologised to his men after seeing an MRA play. This led to such an improved spirit that the following week one of the largest pits reported production up from 10,000 to 16,000 tons. 'Somebody last week threw a pebble into the pond that is industrial England,' wrote the Doncaster Free Press, 'and the ripples will reach far.'

Caux, and a similar MRA conference centre at Mackinac Island in the United States, also played a significant role in the gradual restoration of relations between Japan and the countries she had occupied.

Worldwide expansion

During this post-war period the work of MRA expanded into Africa, Asia and Latin America. Leaders from countries seeking independence found a platform at Caux. Some nationalists, responding to changes of attitude among colonialists, laid aside personal bitterness which had distorted their independence struggles and embraced new values which they felt their nations needed. MRA had a particularly strong influence on some of the nationalist leaders of Morocco, and of Tunisia where, according to one of them, it 'prevented a war without mercy against France'.

In Brazil, rival dockers' leaders in Rio de Janeiro agreed to work together to revive their port which had been paralysed by unofficial strikes, gang warfare and corruption. As a result, cargo theft on a grand scale declined and many personal vendettas were healed. The port enjoyed its first free union elections in 1957. The new spirit spilled over into the city's shanty towns, where a spiritual revival in the 1960s fuelled an explosion of self-help projects, installing electricity, water and sanitation, paving roads and rebuilding houses.

During this period, people of Christian background made up the majority of those working with MRA. But as it expanded, they increasingly found themselves working in partnership with Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists, who found in MRA a common ground. As early as 1915, Buchman had visited India and met Mahatma Gandhi, with whom he subsequently formed a friendship based on their shared belief in moral and spiritual values. He never saw difference of religion as a barrier to cooperation and, while declaring freely the source of his own faith, strove to express his message in terms that were universally comprehensible. Over the years, an increasing number of people of different religions have made MRA's and now Initiatives of Change's work their own, alongside their Christian colleagues.

The Cold War

During the 1950s, hundreds of MRA workers were travelling the world, often using drama as a means of encouraging people to take a fresh look at themselves and their societies. Productions included *The Forgotten Factor*, a play about family and industrial relations, and *The Vanishing Island*, a Gilbert and Sullivan style satire on the communist and capitalist worlds, pointing up the need for change in both.

At a time when the Soviet Union had swallowed up so many countries just freed from Nazism, it was easy to see Communism as the main threat to worldwide freedom - and Buchman seems to have shared this view. At the same time, he believed that the materialism and hedonism of the West were themselves ungodly. He began to express MRA's message as an 'ideology for democracy', calling on people and governments to make a radical commitment to living and ruling by God's standards and obeying His will.

Among those who responded were some communists who had become disillusioned with Soviet Marxism. The Communist Party which dominated works' councils in Germany's industrial heartland, the Ruhr, was split down the middle in 1949 when some of its local leadership proposed that it should adopt the ideas of MRA as a true basis for the brotherhood of man. Moscow was not amused and on several occasions denounced MRA on radio.

Some of those who took part in MRA's campaigns were not always as clear-sighted about the abuses of the right as they were about those of the left. With hindsight it is probably true that MRA did at times cross the line from legitimate concern over the danger of communist ideas into an anti-communist position.

Sometimes, however, the boot was on the other foot. When *The Vanishing Island* was touring Asia and Africa, a cable sent from the US State Department to the embassies on its route stated incorrectly that the play 'emphasised neutralism and represented an overall net gain for the Soviet concept'.

MRA in crisis

During the last years of Buchman's life MRA expanded dramatically, in spite of the fact that he had been partially paralysed by a stroke in 1942 and was often unwell as he drew towards his

eighties. The movement had hundreds of full-time workers, especially in Britain and the United States.

One consequence of expansion was that the needs of individuals were sometimes overridden in the interests of the task in hand. A certain harshness came into some personal relationships, particularly when people tried to imitate Buchman's methods without his sensitivity, warmth and humour. While most of the opposition MRA has run into over the years has come from people who have been challenged by what it stands for, or from misunderstanding, some has arisen from such instances of over-zealousness which have left a bitter taste. We have learnt from this.

Buchman died in 1961, aged 83. He was succeeded by Peter Howard, a vigorous and outspoken former Sunday Express columnist in his early fifties. Howard, who had captained England at rugby, was a man of strong faith, and a compelling writer and speaker. He had been trained by Buchman for his role, and had the respect and authority to hold MRA together. So it was a shock when, only four years later, he died suddenly of viral pneumonia.

Howard's death plunged MRA into crisis. With no obvious successor, his colleagues settled for 'collective leadership', exercised by a group of people who had worked with Buchman since the early 1930s. Without a clearly identified leader to ensure cohesion, unresolved differences began to surface.

In the United States a group of younger people decided to make reaching their generation a priority. They experimented with new structures and broke with some of the rigidities of Buchman's last years, as well as with some of the rigour of his basic principles. Their initiatives later evolved into Up With People, a global educational programme which still continues.

Many MRA supporters around the world responded with enthusiasm to this new approach and copied it. Others resisted the exclusive emphasis on youth and saw Up With People as a watering down of MRA's message. Without any agreed process for resolving such difficulties, resentment crept in; communications broke down; families and close colleagues became divided. MRA in Britain, faithfully though with a degree of self-righteousness, held firm and batted down the hatches. MRA work continued, but often without the boldness and vision which had characterised Buchman's and Howard's days.

These setbacks might well have been terminal. In many countries MRA activity virtually ceased for some years. It has taken time to begin to rebuild bridges and to re-establish trust and confidence. I am among many who believe that in the process MRA has emerged healthier - less strident and more open, less judgmental of other people and more appreciative of those with similar aims.

MRA in the seventies and eighties

For many people in Britain, MRA has been synonymous with the Westminster Theatre which MRA owned from 1946 to 1998. At first the theatre was only used occasionally by MRA. Then in 1961, at the instigation of Peter Howard, a continuous series of plays was launched, aimed at challenging the permissive values of the 'swinging sixties'.

The Westminster quickly gained a reputation as a theatre which viewed contemporary issues through the prism of faith and moral values. Audiences came in coachloads from all over the country and people often returned home with inspiration to give their marriages another try, bury the hatchet with their enemies or, in some cases, take steps which prevented job losses at their places of work.

During this same period Tirley Garth, a large country house in Cheshire which had been given by its owner, was developed into a conference centre, which continues to operate today. MRA held camps there for young people as well as conferences aimed at enhancing industrial and race relations. For example, the Senior Community Relations Officer for Tyne and Wear attributed much of the improvement in community relations in Newcastle-upon-Tyne to the approach he had learnt at Tirley Garth. Workers and management from manufacturing

industries who came there played a significant role in securing the future of some plants which were threatened with closure.

At the same time, many of MRA's British workers were overseas: some in the Americas, where MRA's work was being re-established, and others in Africa and Asia, where local MRA initiatives were developing.

MRA has been credited with a role in initiatives that helped avert fresh violence and a major white exodus after Robert Mugabe won Zimbabwe's pre-independence elections. In India, under the leadership of Rajmohan Gandhi, a grandson of the Mahatma, MRA built a conference centre in Panchgani. Since 1975 some 8,000 people from 80 industrial concerns have taken part in industrial seminars there, which still continue.

Meanwhile, during the eighties MRA increasingly worked at the Westminster Theatre in partnership with others who also sought a spiritual renaissance in and through the arts. But as the costs of commercial theatre soared, MRA decided to sell the theatre. In 1999 it moved its London headquarters to 24 Greencoat Place, in Victoria.

Initiatives of Change activities today

Today Initiatives of Change in Britain is engaged in programmes ranging from international conflict resolution to community building, from values and ethics in business and industry to training programmes for young people - in Britain, Eastern Europe, and at Initiatives of Change's centre in Caux, Switzerland.

Agenda for Reconciliation (AfR) draws on Initiatives of Change's 50-year experience in this field, dating back to the immediate post-war years. The programme was officially launched in March 1998, and its international secretariat is based at the Initiatives of Change centre in London. AfR describes itself as 'a global trust-building network' which seeks to help individuals find 'liberation from hatred, greed and indifference. Experience shows that people who have found this spiritual freedom bring a particular dynamism to the process of peacemaking and social change.' People associated with Agenda for Reconciliation are currently at work in Cambodia, East Asia, Papua New Guinea, Southern Africa, the Horn of Africa, Russia and the Baltic region, former Yugoslavia and other sensitive areas. In Cambodia there have been two international seminars in Phnom Penh, and over 1,200 copies of two Initiatives of Change videos, which draw on Cambodia's spiritual heritage in the search for reconciliation, are in circulation. Kenyans associated with Initiatives of Change have launched a grassroots onslaught on corruption, the Clean Kenya Campaign. A group of Somalis from different factions, originally brought together by MRA in 1994, are working tirelessly at the local level to rebuild government. One of them, a former guerrilla fighter, said at an AfR conference, 'When I met people who believed that Somalia could build its future on forgiveness, I thought of my former commander, whom I hated because of his treatment of me. With great difficulty I went and asked his forgiveness. Today he is in the forefront of those working for reconciliation.'

Hope in the Cities is linked to a similar initiative in the United States. It brings together people who are addressing the problems of poverty, racial discrimination and unemployment focused in Britain's cities. Its catchphrase is 'making Britain a home for all her peoples'; its method is to promote honest conversations on such issues as race, leading to understanding and common action. It organises exchange visits with those doing similar work in other countries and hosts a series of dialogues at Caux on 'Europe and its Muslim communities'.

Foundations for Freedom, launched in 1993 and based in Oxford, runs training courses for young people in the former communist countries of Europe. The aim is to promote commitment to the values - such as trust, honesty, community spirit and personal responsibility - which underlie free societies and which have been eroded by decades of state control.

Over 30 courses and seminars have taken place in 11 countries, including Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Lithuania. After one training course in Ukraine, a participant commented, 'I see that I no longer have to be the victim of circumstances.' Another said, 'I will use these ideas

not only in my life, but in my country as well.' Two groups of young Ukrainian MPs have visited Britain to learn from the strengths and weaknesses of British democracy, both at the national and city levels. A course in Siberia has focused on business ethics; one participant said, 'I have decided never to go back to the old life of lies.' Several of these courses have been funded by the British Government's Know How Fund.

Caux Conferences for Business and Industry, many of them organised from Britain, have brought together several hundred people for each of the past 25 years in Switzerland. They provide a forum where business people can look beyond the bottom line to the deeper values and purpose of their work - and report on the practical results. In recent years there has been increasing interest from the new free-market economies of Eastern Europe. Themes have included globalisation, job creation and the moral values needed in a market economy.

The Initiatives of Change Schools Service supports teachers who want to encourage secondary school students to think about their priorities, values and life choices. Over the last ten years, the programme has provided speakers - often groups of young people - to some 350 secondary schools.

Alongside these formal programmes are dozens of smaller initiatives, such as that of two former teachers associated with Initiatives of Change who wrote a teaching resource pack on values. The course, which is cross-curricular but particularly popular with teachers of Personal and Social Education, focuses on the 'other 3 R's' - 'responsibility, relationships and respect' - and is in use in over 170 secondary schools.

The Clean Slate Campaign is an example of how Initiatives of Change increasingly seeks to work with coalitions of organisations and individuals for specific objectives. Launched in the spring of 1999, it was a broad-based initiative backed by a number of groups including Initiatives of Change. The campaign invited everyone in the United Kingdom to take at least one practical step to 'wipe their slate clean' in preparation for the new millennium.

How is it all organised and financed?

For much of its history, Initiatives of Change has avoided formal structures other than the legal bodies required in the 40 countries where it is established. In the United Kingdom it is incorporated as a charity under its old name, The Oxford Group. The Council of Management of The Oxford Group carries legal responsibility for national activities, and is accountable to an Association made up of some of Initiatives of Change 's most active supporters. In the days of Buchman and Howard the lack of structures caused few problems; but as Initiatives of Change has diversified in the years since their deaths, the need for clearer organisation and greater transparency in decision making has become more apparent. As a result, a small International Council, nominated by Initiatives of Change 's supporters worldwide, has been formed to give leadership and direction to Initiatives of Change's international work. Its authority is moral rather than legal. Annual global consultations bring together representatives from different countries and programmes. In Britain a twice-yearly National Forum provides an opportunity for policy-making and forward planning; while an informal coordinating group, based in London, provides a clearing-house for ideas and day-to-day management decisions.

Initiatives of Change currently has some 40 full-time workers based in Britain, with many past retirement age also still devoting their time. They are joined each year by 'co-workers', mostly from overseas, who spend a year working with Initiatives of Change's programmes. These people carry forward Initiatives of Change's work in partnership with the much larger number in all walks of life who seek to apply the Initiatives of Change spirit and approach in their daily life and work.

Most of Initiatives of Change's workers do not receive salaries - a practice dating from the earliest days of the Oxford Group, when those who gave up their careers to work with Buchman trusted in God's provision through the gifts of supporters. The system works through an informal network of givers and receivers, linked by prayer, friendship, trust and a common commitment to doing God's will. Today such gifts are often augmented by a small 'living allowance' from Initiatives of Change. Initiatives of Change is funded by donations and legacies, and by the income from its investments which are themselves derived from

donations and legacies. The Annual Report and Accounts are distributed widely each year and are available on request.

Starting with myself

It seems appropriate to end this booklet with a summary of what Initiatives of Change stands for today. Initiatives of Change's approach is based on the belief that God has a purpose for the world and for each person in it. Since not everyone believes in God, I want to start at the other end - why the way we live counts.

I believe that each person matters and has a contribution to make towards improving the world around them - often a more important one than they imagine. When people realise that they do count, they start to feel a sense of responsibility for the way they live. If on the other hand they feel they are simply cogs in a large machine, people find it much easier to blame others for what goes wrong. Instead of asking 'What can I do about this problem?', they think 'It's all someone else's fault. There's nothing I can do. I'll just get on with my own life.'

Some have the illusion that by not accepting responsibility they become more free. In fact they become more and more at the mercy of impersonal forces, for example the market, or the state trying to protect them from the consequences of their own irresponsibility.

The principles of Initiatives of Change point a way out of this dilemma. They encourage anyone who is dissatisfied with their own life or the world around them to start a process of change - setting an example by starting to live according to the values they wish to see in society.

'Starting with myself' may sound too simple, but there is a certain logic to it. Do I want to see peace in the world? How about starting with my own relationships with family and neighbours? Do I want to see an end to corruption and crime? Why not begin by being honest and trustworthy myself? Am I worried about global warming? I can at least cut my own energy consumption. Starting with myself ends the blame game and cuts out hypocrisy.

Having started with myself, I cannot stop there. I've made it up with my wife: then what about taking a step towards someone of a different background, race or culture? I may well find that this person thinks my attitudes ought to change as well as structures of society which perpetuate discrimination and disadvantage. Starting with myself can lead a long way - to a new set of attitudes, even to a life's work reforming unjust systems.

Survival kit

But how do I start in my own life? Who is to say what is right and wrong? Isn't life a jungle, where I can only do my best to survive, and it is all too easy to get lost?

The four moral standards which Initiatives of Change proposes - honesty, purity, unselfishness and love - are essential equipment for my survival kit. And more than just survival, they lead towards inner happiness, freeing me to make my particular contribution to society.

Honesty is about openness and liberation. Dishonesty, however small, so easily requires more dishonesty to conceal the truth. Usually it is harder to be honest with myself than with other people.

Purity helps me to love without lust, to care for people without trying to manipulate them.

Unselfishness challenges me to be practical in my wish to help others, and to remove that big 'I' from centre stage.

Love underpins these three. To love is to see the best in others and to want the best for them. Love embraces those I don't like as well as those I do.

These standards need to be absolute, or else I can adjust them to suit myself, thereby avoiding their challenge. But they are not rods to beat myself and others with, nor impossible

hurdles to trip me up and generate a sense of guilt. They are not ends in themselves but guidelines. I find it hard to come anywhere near them through my own efforts; in my experience it needs the help of a higher power - of God.

Inner voice

I believe that God loves each person, and guides us accordingly. It stands to reason that He would provide the means for living life in His way, if we have a mind to. Moral values are only one way in which He guides.

There is, I believe, a special source of wisdom which is available to everybody. Call it conscience, the inner voice or the voice of God - it offers comfort and direction, a satisfying sense of purpose for each individual. It does not replace our capacity for common sense, but enhances it.

How to access this 'guidance'? As Buchman found, it needs quiet, time to unclutter the mind and heart so that inspired thoughts can be recognised.

For me the 'quiet time' is fundamentally about spending time with a loving God. I also find that I need this time to understand where I am being directed. Finding and following that sense of direction can often be difficult. But I have discovered that as I give myself more fully to God, He becomes more real to me, and the task is made easier.

Common ground

Initiatives of Change is not a sect. It is a movement where each one of us is rooted in our own religious tradition. I, as a Christian, find my theology in Christianity. I understand and seek to live the ideas of Initiatives of Change within a Biblical context, following Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour. Initiatives of Change's ideas do not require me to water down my Christian faith, but rather encourage me to live it more fully.

At the same time, these ideas enable those of different faiths to work together without any of us compromising our beliefs. For the concepts of divine guidance and moral standards - expressed in varying terms - are common to all the world's major religions.

And Initiatives of Change is not just for people of faith. It also gives a starting point for those who find religious belief difficult or impossible.

Into the third millennium

What about the new century? Some of mankind's achievements in the last one have bordered on the miraculous. Sadly, though, division has also been one of its hallmarks.

Two world wars have been followed by hundreds of other conflicts which still spark and smoulder. Fascism and Communism promised a new world order - and left only greater disorder. The pursuit of material growth has delivered much for some - but left many struggling for even the basic needs of life. Technology has made communication instantaneous - but never have so many people felt lonely and unwanted. In many spheres of life, distrust is eroding even the bonds of family, friendship and communities.

Everyone agrees that the challenges of the 21st century are immense. If a just world order is to replace disgraceful poverty, corruption and conflict, there will have to be a united effort worldwide. This unity depends on human beings learning to respect each other's freedom and diversity.

The unity that is needed is not the same as uniformity - a drab sameness which attempts to hide our differences because we feel threatened by them. Uniformity does not work, since it does not allow people to be themselves. Unity on the other hand, with its capacity to help us pull in the same direction, allows us to celebrate our diversity in the knowledge that we have already affirmed what we have in common.

It is not only unity between people and communities that is needed. Scientific advances are enabling us to understand better the unity of the physical world, but in the field of values there has long been a separation between personal and social morality. This has left an imbalance and a lack of wholeness. Our forefathers seem to have been strong on personal morality, but weaker on such social issues as racial and economic injustice. Today it is the other way around.

When we come to see these two parts as a whole, we may begin to unlock the door to a more sustainable world order. I believe that the fight for justice and the search for personal goodness are not enemies but allies. Our lives cannot be divided into compartments, some marked 'Danger: could affect others' and some, 'Safe: only concerns me'.

A shared vision

Frank Buchman's vision, which is still that of Initiatives of Change today, could be summed up as 'God's will be done on earth'. As a Christian, I am reminded of the Lord's Prayer. Though each would express it in their own way, it is a vision that is shared by Jews, Muslims, Hindus and those of other faith traditions - as well as pointing towards fundamental human values which non-believers can accept.

Since Buchman's time, and increasingly today, Initiatives of Change is finding it possible for people of different faiths to work together as equal partners in unselfconscious cooperation for this common vision.

This unity will not be built on all holding precisely the same beliefs. Nor can it be based on pretending that each other's beliefs do not matter. By focusing on what needs to be undertaken together, while continually deepening our roots in our own religion, we will find the way to live and work as one.

In 1938 a moral and spiritual 're-armament' was needed. Today the need is the same, though I would call it a 're-awakening'. On the global scale required, this is beyond any one group of people, or movement. It depends on new birth, starting in the lives of individuals of every race, creed and culture, and spreading out until every nook and cranny of the human house is reached.

For further reading

Frank Buchman: a Life, by Garth Lean (Constable, London 1985; Fount Paperbacks, London 1988). Authoritative biography of Frank Buchman, by one of his colleagues. Described by the *Sunday Telegraph* as 'well-documented and fair-minded'.

Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft, edited by Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson (Oxford University Press, London and New York, 1994). Study by Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies of the role of spiritually-motivated groups in resolving conflicts. See for detail on MRA's role in Franco-German reconciliation and in Zimbabwe.

The Forgiveness Factor: stories of hope in a world of conflict, by Michael Henderson (Grosvenor Books USA and London, 1996). Stories of MRA's work for reconciliation since 1946.

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