

An apology and a challenge

A crucial platform for ME99 has been the conviction that the voices of "ordinary people" who work at the level of community based organisations must be present as strongly as possible. ME99 wants to promote dialogue which includes not just religious and political leadership elites, academics and the like, but also the "voices of the periphery," of those usually marginalised from such gatherings or overwhelmed within them if they are present - simply because of the nature of authority structures and the way in which power and knowledge is implicated in replicating dominant hegemonies of thought and practice.

It was for this reason that the community groups present at ME99 spent five or more months preparing their input, strengthening their natural alliance with each other and their confidence for the event. Their presence is neither trivial nor secondary. Of course, this does not mean that the favoured hegemonic discourses and practices fade away of those of us who habitually tend first to see things from perspectives other than the periphery and the margins-even if our originating background was there. With the best of intentions, our priorities are shaped by other things most of the time, even if we assent ideologically to the importance of the voice of the other which comes to us from outside the centres of knowledge and power.

This the community groups have known this since our first engagement with them in preparation for the ME99, and this I have what otherwise is taken for granted. The message prepared by the community groups and presented so powerfully by Welikaze Sokutu, and the response this message evoked, both point to the deep significance of this voice.

Yet I at least must make a confession. One group in particular spent a great deal of thought and time on preparing a video for discussion - on AIDS/HIV - that would bring their experience and insight into the centre of that discussion and to the attention of others. I failed adequately to prepare the core group convenors of that workshop for this presentation, and somehow the resources necessary for the presentation were not there either. Things had fallen through the cracks.

In part this happened because of the complex and almost hourly interactions we were having for two days with the Deputy President's office, as well as the inevitably heavy pressure on office staff to assist delegates, service personnel, and so on, while making sure everything ran according to plan. But, I thought (and still think), however understandable it may be that the protocol and security of having the Deputy President at the ME99 receive minute attention, would I-if I myself came directly out of a community group location and experience-think of that first and in the process fail to attend to a need that had been brought to my attention in respect of the community groups? I think not. Not because a member of a community group is a better human being necessarily stressed to them. I have also stressed that their presence, nevertheless, but because that perspective is shaped by other experiences less, is a vital one in "destabilising" and bringing into question and priorities which would not allow the cracks to appear in just that way.

Now I share this confession for the following reasons. It reminds me, and perhaps all of us, of the deeply rooted, problematic nature of structures, systems and perspectives which are "naturally" hegemonic or dominant, and of the fact that this has less to do with persons than it has to do with power and place. It reminds me, and perhaps all of us, of the challenge of the presence of the community groups in our midst. It reminds me, and perhaps all of us, of the difficulty of breaking

free of habitual attitudes and practices that come with being in the centres of power and knowledge. I also want to say that we have arranged that the video will be shown not just to those who attended the AIDS/HIV workshop, but to any and all delegates who would like to see it. This is the only way to honour the work that went into it, and the presence of this group with us. The showing will happen at an appropriate time which we will announce to delegates on Thursday. Please take note. And perhaps my sharing of this matter will prompt further debate amongst us about the issues it raises-that would be in the spirit of the ME99, and the cause of a deepened notion of the place of religion in public life.

Jim Cochrane

ME99 Director