

AVP INTERNATIONAL GATHERING, KATHMANDU 2017 REPORT

Chris Jackson

GENERAL OVERVIEW

The AVP World Gathering was held in Kathmandu, Nepal, from 5th – 10th November 2017. It was based in the luxurious Park Village Hotel. The entire seamless experience was a testament to the extraordinary professional approach and tireless teamwork on the part of the organisers, plus all the seen and unseen supports, including the hotel management and staff. Ireland was represented by three delegates, John (Mulligan), James (Bowes) and Chris (Jackson). All the delicious meals were served hot (mostly Nepalese-style cuisine) and were presented buffet style, which meant everyone served themselves. The food was eaten in the expansive 'al fresco' dining area, which usually meant that people found someone new to sit with – a clever strategic move! It was at meal times that much of the business was done – pretty much like the pubs in Ireland!

The Gathering was attended by 146 delegates (as well as several visitors) from 40 countries, with at least 14 different languages being spoken, yet despite this, the precisely planned programme ran without any (apparent) difficulties. Each delegate had been placed in a 'buddy' group with 2 others prior to their arrival, and it was left to each trio to organise meetings. Some kind of '24-hour bug' infiltrated the Gathering during the week – not really a gastric thing – more a cough/sore throat/feeling lousy thing, and probably aggravated by the dust from the roads. It affected a large number of people, including James then me. John remained serenely untouched.

Here's a bird's eye view of the exhilarating but strenuous week, from which it can be seen that no time was wasted! Each exhausting day was carefully structured thus, often with various 'extra-mural' things happening during the lunch break. The exception was Wednesday, when the afternoon was devoted to various sightseeing opportunities.

06.30 – 8.00 **Breakfast**

08.30 – 10.00 **EDUCATIONAL FEEDBACK CIRCLES:** 'Brainstorming' on a particular topic, usually conducted in smallish groups in one big room. (Workshop Resources; Presenting Transforming Power in AVP Workshops; Sustaining your AVP Group.) Extremely useful and informative.

11.00 – 12.30 **TOPIC SESSIONS:** These were presentations delivered by groups of attendees themselves, usually two or three people from different countries who didn't previously know each other, who had collaborated beforehand to consolidate their piece. (For me, these sessions were the most valuable part of the conference.) Alas, there were five such sessions running simultaneously each day. Too numerous to list (but available on application!) and virtually impossible to choose one.

12.45 – 14.15 **Lunch**

14.30 – 16.00 **REGIONAL SESSION:** the world was carved up into five regions (Africa: Asia/West Pacific: Europe: North America: Latin America) and delegates joined one according to their geographic location. In ours, experiences, challenges and difficulties were shared, and a decision taken to form an official mutually beneficial European group to further network and maintain contact. John (Mulligan) undertook to establish this upon his return to Ireland.

16.00 – 16.30 **Tea**

16.45 – 18.15 BUSINESS MEETING: Various aspects of the more serious business issues brought to the gathering by delegates for discussion. (This was perhaps 'over my head' as a relatively new volunteer.)

18.30 – 20.00 SUPPER

20.00 – 22.00 WINDING DOWN: each evening ended with something less 'academic' leading to bedtime:

- a welcoming 'social' (which I missed because my luggage had not arrived in Kathmandu with me, and I had to go to the airport to retrieve it. It took 5 hours. Don't ask)
- Film Night comprising various short films presented by AVP delegates from various countries, providing a brief look into other worlds!
- Light and Livelies from around the world. Exactly what it says in the title, and reminds me that one of the things we brought back with us is an excellent resource – Light and Lively Supplement – 127 pages of really good stuff!
- Peace Vigil – everyone out into the beautiful grounds for a candle-lit gathering – a very happy/sad/bittersweet/moving experience.
- Nepali Cultural Programme – an evening of Nepalese culture presented by various local indigenous groups – a brilliant night!
- Multi-Cultural Festival – the majority of delegates arrived dressed in their National costumes (OH, THE COLOURS!) and gave us a peek into some aspect of their culture in a multitude of ways. Then everybody joined in dancing and singing to end the whole amazing experience.

Activities Attended:

- Buddy Group
- Let's get to know each other
- Making Role Plays Easy and Impactful
- Presenting Transforming Power in AVP Workshops
- Resources and Projects to support AVP Workshops
- Basic Workshop: Critical Elements
- Peace Process in Nepal
- Sustaining your AVP Group
- Giving Effective Feedback in AVP
- Understanding Conflict Dynamics and Transformation
- Regional sessions Europe
- Business meeting
- Kathmandu visit
- Nepali Cultural Programme
- Meeting with Irish Nepali society president, AVP Nepal representative and Irish representative living in Nepal
- Multicultural Festival/Farewell party

Resources Brought Back

- 31 Educational resources, manuals, guides etc., pack (extensive and in different languages) on memory stick
- Insightful piece of work from Mark Thomas entitled **Role Plays: All-In Format**
- Directory of attendees
- Gathering sessions materials available on website <http://avp.international/gatherings/>
- Roger's Awareness Wheel!

Learning:

- How fortunate I was to have been given the opportunity to attend
- Initially I was painfully aware of my own inadequacies and inexperience, and felt that I was taking up a space that could have been far more productive for AVP Ireland. Being a 'newbie', I didn't know enough to recognise what I didn't know. Initially I just showed up and wandered about after everyone else - all of whom seemed to be 'on a mission' and 'going somewhere.' Then I 'got it' and things changed considerably!
- It became clear quite quickly that a lot of the delegates already knew each other from previous Gatherings etc. All around me, people were already involved in stuff and co-presenting various things for which I hadn't the knowledge or experience to be of use. Then I realised I could help in other ways - like taking notes at meetings, transcribing stuff etc.
- Trust the process.
- I was very sorry that we didn't bring our national flag
- The opulent, top-class hotel is situated on one of the main roads in Kathmandu and stands on acres of land with landscaped gardens, walkways, water-features and even a Buddhist shrine. It is surrounded by a high wall and its entrance is manned by security guards on a 24-hour basis. In contrast, the area outside the entrance is one of extreme poverty. A man sits in the gutter trying to make money by mending shoes with glue and cut up plastic bottles. Another sits at the roadside with an old Singer treadle sewing machine repairing clothes for people. A butcher sells meat from a lean-to shack on a piece of derelict land in the blazing sun, with no refrigeration and many local dogs waiting for him to turn his back. Generally, poverty equates to elevated crime - yet the crime rate in Kathmandu is extremely low (except for bribery and corruption, which operate on an entirely different level). So what's Nepal's magic formula - nature, nurture or AVP?
- Not speaking the language or any other diversity need not prohibit learning. Co-operating transcends barriers.

Local Observations

Kathmandu is a beautiful city with an 'inner city' population of 1.25 million, rising to 5 million including the urban reaches of the Kathmandu Valley. That's one million more than the whole of Ireland! Hinduism and Buddhism are the two primary religions in the city - there are countless temples throughout the city. Nepali is the most commonly spoken language, as well as Nepal Bhasa and English. The currency is the Nepalese rupee, but American dollars will get you by, but you will be '*encouraged*' (expected) to change them at one of the myriad money shops. It appears to be a very poor city, seething with traffic driving on mostly unmade roads amid clouds of dust. The only 'rule of the road' seems to be 'try and stay on the left, but if not, every man for himself.' There are no traffic lights. Most people seem to travel by moped, and it is common to see a family of four crammed onto one bike, with father driving, mum at the rear and two small children - even tiny babies - wedged between them. Legally, only the driver must wear a helmet, but some passengers wear face masks, as do many pedestrians. Rickshaw taxis (covered tricycles) and small electric 'buses' (reminded me of a slightly bigger model of Rodney Trotters' Reliant Robin) are a popular mode of transport. Despite the extreme poverty, the crime rate is very low.