

Let's talk about diversity

Sanlammers are embracing diversity by participating in Cross-Cultural Conversations, where people of every creed, culture and colour meet to share information in the interest of greater understanding.

The dynamics of small groups and a passion for the diversity in South Africa have given rise to many cross-cultural conversation groups at Sanlam over the last two years. And the need for these informal discussion groups increases by the day, says Carel Wandrag of Sanlam Personal Finance: Actuarial, founder and facilitator of Cross-Cultural Conversations.

In October 2004, Carel started the first cross-cultural conversation group at Actuarial because he has a passion for the diversity in the country. "I approached the management of Actuarial and told them of people's positive experiences of such groups in my personal life and was given the go-ahead to start the first group. After that many more groups were established. Currently, I also facilitate conversation groups at African Life and with the Sanlam technology consultants in Johannesburg."

The aim of these groups is to create a forum where people from different backgrounds can talk about different aspects of diversity, he says. A conversation group consists of 12 people of different races and ages and both genders. They get together once a week for eight weeks and discuss a different topic at each meeting.

Topics range from the meaning of group members' names to their music preferences, habits and traditions, beliefs and spirituality, and food and culture. "When we talk about music, each person brings his or her favourite CD to the meeting, and when the theme is food, each person brings something they enjoy eating for the others to taste."

According to Carel people's experience of the groups is very positive. "It changes people's way of thinking – they realise that you cannot label someone because he or she is brown or black or white,



A diversity food experience! Members of a diversity conversations group share favourite foods. In front are (from left) Cobus Bowler, Carel Wandrag and Aisha Slamdien. At the back are Geoff Cornelius, Dolores Abrahams, Venesia van Rooyen, Lisa Bailey and Cindy Ludick.

because there could be two or more black or white people next to each other in the group and each one is a unique individual. People learn to understand each other better through informal and personal conversation."

Carel emphasises that participation in conversation groups is voluntary. He says new groups start up if a member of an existing group wants to facilitate a new group. "As soon as people hear about these groups, they want to take part. I regularly get queries and requests from people who want to join a conversation group."

** Those who are interested can contact Carel at info@crossculturalconversations.co.za, or visit the website <http://www.crossculturalconversations.co.za>.*

passionate manner of sharing. Trust and insight is created in an exceptionally short period of time due to the topics discussed, the way in which the topics progress and the professional and calm manner in which Carel facilitates sessions. This is a must for everyone – even if you are just inquisitive!"

Kenneth Diamond of SPF: Human Resources:

"In my book, cross-cultural conversations mean practical transformation. The structure of the conversations helps create a better understanding of what and who we are as a diverse community. It also touches on the value systems that make us the people we are. This allows the members in the group to reflect on how they interact and interrelate with each other as members of a diverse society, within the work environments."



Kenneth Diamond

Ronessa Moodley from SPF: Human Resources:

"I found it to be a very rewarding experience, not only because it increases your understanding of other cultures, but especially because it enables you to connect and forge relationships with people with whom you ordinarily may not get a chance to communicate."

"In my opinion, this is the most effective way of breaking through stereotypes. It was non-threatening, very interesting and a wonderful break from work."



Ronessa Moodley

Sanlammers say ...

Marie Arnoldi of Group Communications:

"The approach that the Cross-Cultural Conversations initiative is taking clearly originates from the heart. That is the one distinguishing factor that sets it apart from other diversity programmes. The other is the fact that diverse people with diverse backgrounds are encouraged to share in such a way that it produces a non-contrived, natural and



Marie Arnoldi