



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

RESTORING AND EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES (REC) CC- UGANDA

Faiths /Traditions Represented: Latter Day Saints, Pentecostal and Muslims

Location of CC: Plot 96 block 205, Fatuma Road, Nansana West II zone- NANSANA-Wakiso District

Key Areas of Focus: Education for orphans, Restoring Reading Culture, Girl Child Retention, Organizing Family Protection Clinics, Youth Mentorship, Organizing sessions on Learning to Live Together, Environment (fruit Tree Planting), Interfaith Dialogue.

Summary:

Restoring and Empowering Communities (REC) CC is located in Nansana, Wakiso district and convenes Latter Day Saints, Pentecostal and Muslims as well as a mix of local and regional ethnic groups and communities to promote developmental, cultural, moral and spiritual values, specifically among the primary school children, their head teachers and families. Although interfaith relations are generally centred more on individuals, REC exists to facilitate a culture of learning to live together in all aspects of life for peaceful and respectful co-existence. This is achieved through their primary programs and activities of the REC Book Clubs in schools which are intended to instil a reading culture among the young children and to facilitate access to free books to the less privileged who would otherwise not have afforded them. Through the learning to Live Together program, they also break barriers to ethnic and interfaith cooperation by enabling community members to understand themselves and others, by appreciating diversity as seen in the activities they organize during festivities, the free community clinics, and others.

1. *Can you please help me understand the current religious/cultural/political contexts in the area where your CC is working?*

Although Uganda's laws allow religious pluralism, some members in our community have some intolerance towards members from a different faith to theirs. *"Whenever people see a woman wearing a veil entering a church or any non-Muslim worship place; they ask, what is a Muslim doing here? Some say, why are you sending letters to the Archbishop?" I gladly inform them that, the Archbishop or any other religious leader has a duty towards his people, and am not teaching Christianity!" - Nageeba Hassan.*

At the top leadership, relations are fair with the religious leaders coming to the same table as seen in the current rift between the Kibuli and Old Kampala following, where government is seen to encourage dialogue. The current economic demands have created a large bearing on family upbringing to mostly urban dwellers where it's almost impossible for parents to get



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enough time to educate their children on the cultural or moral values. Most of the teaching is done in the schools and the children out of school are left at the mercy of charitable initiatives. The urban lifestyle is a host of many other ethnic groups both from within Uganda and countries within the region including mostly South Sudan, Kenya and Rwanda. The youth in particular are faced with challenges adapting to such changes. The political environment is characterized with community members belonging to various political affiliations with the National Resistance Movement, Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) and Democratic Party (DP) as well as some of the leading parties with a big following. Election time usually brings divisions on political candidates with the youth being most active during the campaigns.

2. Why is interfaith/intercultural bridge building needed where your CC is working?

It is very important to counter the religious and cultural intolerance among individuals. *For instance, so many times I get questions such as; "it would be good if you don't give out religious books especially the Quran to non-Muslims", Nageeba Hassan.* But to our understanding, during the prophet's time, there were all sorts of religions and the prophet himself made a charter where everyone had freedom of worship. We encourage people to relate well and simply emphasize that we are not preaching on any religion but rather are encouraging the people of different faiths and cultures to appreciate diversity and accommodate each other. Most importantly, we are promoting the common value of human dignity and sanctity.

3. Can you please briefly describe the main activities of or programs your CC is doing this year?

This year we have focused our efforts on two major areas, namely; The Books for Keeps Program and The Girl Child program. Under *the Books for Keeps program*, we have embarked on a campaign to reach out to about 250 classrooms in over 100 schools and provide them with free books for reading and retaining them as their own personal copies. Our program addresses the gap of a poor reading culture among most school children, who also grapple with limiting means to access books in their poorly stocked libraries or with parents or guardians who cannot afford to get books. The books also enable the students to read and tell the stories in their own way and pass on the knowledge to at least two more students for a multiplier effect. As we give out the books, we enter into an agreement with the school administration and work through the student/pupil's leadership which we call REC Book Clubs to supervise the program, mostly done through setting aside reading corners where students take off time to read books. Aside from the schools, the books are distributed to community libraries in the target area, and school libraries. The books cover a wide range of issues including story books, culture, curricular books, and are obtained through donations from like-minded individuals and institutions such as churches, charity organizations, mosques and others.

Our *Learning to Live Together Program* helps people of different cultural beliefs and spiritual expressions to learn to live together. Our activities under this program help people to understand themselves and others as well as appreciating diversity. *2 (two) years ago we received backpacks with scholastic materials like dictionaries to distribute to schools. One particular school sent the materials back on the ground that they don't associate with infidels, Nageeba Hassan.* This taught us a lesson to reach-out to people to accommodate each other and capitalize on the wealth of diversity.



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We have activities for the Girl child where we train girls in making affordable sanitary towels using affordable materials as a way of enhancing girl retention in school. In the schools we have also conducted Anti-Bullying program which is intended to prevent violence among pupils/students. This is implemented through the school leadership, where a patron and student leaders are assigned a task to create a referral pathway for those in need of mentorship and guidance.

Because parents and guardians are pivotal in the child's upbringing, we also target these groups through our family support groups in which about 10 homes in our immediate neighbourhood form groups to identify and address common problems such as youth problems, the need for income generating activities, domestic violence, health problems and others.

The International Day celebrations are dearly observed at REC and so far this year we have organized the International Day of Peace on 21 September, The Girl Child's Day 10th October, and the Universal Children's Day/World Day of Prayer and Action for Children – 20th November and others.

4. *Between which specific religions or cultures are bridges being built?*

We promote cooperation among Latter Day Saints, Pentecostals and Muslims in Nansana Town Council, as well as the multicultural mix of people living in Kampala and surrounding areas.



5. *Please explain the method or strategy that your CC uses to bring together people of different cultures and faiths that would otherwise not interact or cooperate with each other.*

We use a wide range of programs that are tailored to the different categories of people served. We strive to instill a reading culture among school children, youth and the general community with the hope that they get one or two things to learn from the readings. To expand the reading circle, we establish reading clubs also known as REC Book Clubs supervised by school heads and student leadership to offer support to the children and interest more to join the clubs. We



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use a mix of group counselling, anti bullying talks, and other means, to bring together children of various spiritual expressions and cultures. At an early age we educate children on the behaviours and practices that facilitate free cooperation and interaction with all people anywhere.

Under our community interventions we organize interfaith-intercultural parties during festive seasons and invite community members to our offices to express love, share, and to eat together. We use such platforms to encourage people to share about their religious and cultural expressions in a bid to bridge obstacles to cooperation. The community dialogues, family support groups, community fundraising and free community clinics have also been influential in bringing people together. We are always on looking out for common needs in the community which we then utilize to connect the people. *I remember one time as we started this initiative, I had an indifferent Christian neighbour who made it clear to me that he was not comfortable with my charity mission, as seen from one day when I gave him a Christmas card and meat to wish him a good festive season. He said he could not accept stuff from a non believer ("woman in a veil) and also stopped his children from coming anywhere near our office. However, recently his attitude changed suddenly, when he approached me for support with chairs to host a church gathering, which I gladly offered with free space under our tent and chairs. This opened our relationship to the present day, Nageeba Hassan.*

We also support community fundraising to help build worship places like mosques, churches, drainages and others. Because of this we are looked at as people who don't discriminate any religion or spiritual expression.

We have also involved youth in our interventions through one-on-one youth chats in places of their leisure such as sports, betting clubs and others. Our colleagues usually initiate chats with youth with various habitual problems with smoking, drug use, criminal activities, sexual behaviours and others. We engage them in constructive community service such as donation of free mosquito nets and condoms. The youth then participate in the selection of the most vulnerable people within their community to benefit from such items.

As an organization, we don't impose ourselves to anyone instead we encourage people to make a free choice to become part of our cause of promoting developmental, moral and spiritual values of life. We are cautious of the fact that when working with people of diverse background you have to use an interplay of strategies to win them over, including very good interpersonal skills, use of magic words, offering your opportunity for others to take, *for instance, at public gatherings or meetings, I usually offer my seat for someone else to sit before I do. At times I do very simple things with an intention of initiating dialogue or a chat with someone, such as being the one to greet first!! mean it goes with the way we behave, if someone treats you with animosity, it doesn't help! We just have to change the way we conduct ourselves, Nageeba Hassan.*

6. Given the current contexts, you described, what does your CC hope to achieve?

We are looking at a future where REC becomes a centre for practical experience of peace building and interfaith cooperation all aimed at promoting developmental, moral and spiritual values of life.



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7. How do you see your CC's work improving cooperation among people of different traditions?

Our work knows no bounds! Looking at the school children, each of them believes differently from the other. Take for instance the free books we donate, we give to everyone irrespective of spiritual or cultural background. And as we enter into schools and the general community, we don't impose ourselves on the people, but we share our story to them and interest them to give us a platform. We therefore work to demonstrate by example to the people we serve. When the community members come to feast together during the festive seasons, we see people participating with ease.



8. How is the work of your CC helping to prevent religiously inspired violence or transforming conflicts?

Our efforts strive to focus children at an early age to refrain from behaviours and practices that breed violence based on culture or religion. As we celebrate diversity in the chats, sharing sessions, reading clubs, cultural and spiritual events, community activities and others, we are trying to mobilize our audience on nurturing cultures of good values that promote peaceful co-existence among people of different backgrounds.

9. What are some indicators / observations you see that relations are improving between people of different faiths/cultures in the area where your CC works?

People used to be indifferent to our services. Their facial expressions and behaviour could tell that they found it strange to identify with us! I remember statements such as: *“what is a Muslim woman in a veil doing at a church?”* What drew them closer to us were the services offered as mentioned above that were focused on common problems on supporting education of the orphaned children, hosting festive parties and giving out free meals to the vulnerable. Gradually



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they saw no problem with our cause!” Now we are realizing gradual change, in for instance, at the cultural events, children from different schools come together to express their cultures and religions through music, dance, story reading and telling, sporting events and others and we see diversity celebrated. Nageeba adds that, before, such moments were a dream, but now it happens!

10. Do you have a specific short story you can share about your work that might inspire other CCs or teach us a lesson about interfaith?

At my time in one of the leading Muslim founded schools in Kampala, it was a practice to teach only Islam and Christianity since they were the dominant religions then. After realizing this gap, during my lessons of Educational Islam, I started giving assignments to pupils to ask their parents to tell them the things they do before their prayers and to share the next day. The sharing revealed spectacular insights of what the different religions do before prayers including scripture reading, singing spiritual songs, humbling self in communication with God or Allah and many others. What the children realised is that each of them had an opportunity to share their prayer values, something which was common to all. Subsequently, some parents started approaching me about their children’s improved allegiance to their faith. And I remember some of the children said; teacher we want to change to your religion, and I asked them why? And they said; we want to dress like you.” I told them that dressing like me would be okay as long as they stay in their religions. From such experiences, we learned that children or humanity in general need to be loved and cared for, reaching out to them and offering them a platform to express their feelings, beliefs and other values of life. *Nageeba Hassan*

11. How is your CC’s work helping to achieve the mission of URI?

When we joined URI, we decided to strengthen our interfaith work and presently we organize interfaith dialogues and prayers to that effect. This year we have organized about three events, in which one of them we hosted Hindus, Orthodox, Bahai, Sikh, Catholics, and Pentecostal to an interfaith dinner where we looked at an era where Uganda was a sanctuary for cultural and religious pluralism. REC has also contributed towards regional peace building efforts. Recently we moved a motion to form an East African Religious Council. I am proud to inform you that all religious leaders in East Africa signed the motion and from this commitment we want to see a region, where besides condemning acts of violent extremism based on religion, religious leaders in East Africa address such security threats before they happen by preaching and committing their followers to peace and emphasize the common values among religions.



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URI GL staff appreciating REC's work during one of the CC visits in November 2014

12. Within your CC, you have members from different faiths/cultural traditions. How would you describe cooperation between these members? What are the challenges?

We demonstrate good cultural and interfaith relations as members! The things that bring us together are the problems we face as people living in the same community. Religious and cultural diversity are the penetration strategies we use to reach otherwise hard communities. For instance, as we distribute the free books, we let a member of the same religion of the target school or place of worship to initiate contacts and deliver the materials. *We also respect the holy days, we don't work on Fridays and the rest of the weekends since most of the members worship on those days.* Nageeba Hassan

13. How is being part of URI helping your CC to achieve its goals?

One latest experience is that during our fundraising campaign this year, we were surprised that most of the individuals and companies we approached identified us from the URI global website and this has connected and promoted us to the extreme corners of the world. This is notwithstanding the annual assemblies where CCs share their work and experiences and from which contacts are exchanged.

14. How can URI better support your CC in reaching its goals?

We can capitalize more on URI's global website to connect us to more people who can subgrant our work. We are open to volunteers, trainees, and donations for programs such as cloth to make the girls sanitary towels or sewing machines. URI can organize an annual URI Day where all CCs in the Great Lakes can exhibit or showcase their work and vision to the outside



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world for best practices, enriching the network bond, or learning something new. The databank can be shared and group mail be established for regular information exchange.

We also appreciate URI's interfaith emphasis, but wish to appeal for support to reach out to people's most pressing problems such as poverty, domestic violence, child abuse, girl child education, environmental changes, reproductive health and many others, from which people can feel more relevance.

