

Fall 2014

# INTERACTION

INTERFAITH PEACEBUILDING AND THE ARTS



CARAVAN, a URI Cooperation Circle, featured an exhibit on November 2014 in Washington, DC and New York City: "AMEN - A Prayer for the World," which expressed the commonality of prayer throughout various religions.



## OUR NEW COOPERATION CIRCLES

URI's grassroots network now includes 655 CCs in 84 countries around the world.

### August 2014

- Mulapnen Capacity Global Services (Jos, Nigeria, Africa)
- St. Mary's Public School, Mulakuzha (Kerala, India - South Zone, Asia)
- Youth for Peace (Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Europe)
- Quinaroo CC (Mérida, Venezuela, Latin America & the Caribbean)
- Hope in Life Foundation (Multiregion)

### September 2014

- Center for Environmental Education and Development (Jalingo, Taraba State, Nigeria, Africa)
- Cape Town Interfaith Initiative (Cape Town, Western Province, South Africa, Africa)
- P.R.N.M. School, Kunnicone (Kollam, Kerala, India - South Zone, Asia)
- Zero Limits (Kollam, Kerala, India - South Zone, Asia)
- Interlevensbeschouwelijke Werkgroep Gent (Interfaith Work Group Ghent) (Ghent, Belgium, Europe)

### October 2014

- Dialogue, Reconciliation and Peace Center (DREP) (Jos, Nigeria, Africa)
- Youth in Action for Development (YAD) (Kenema, Sierra Leone, Africa)
- Prafull Oorja (Multiregion)
- Interfaith Initiative of Santa Barbara County (Santa Barbara, California, USA, North America)
- Abbey of Hope (Yamouth, Maine, USA, North America)
- Maia Earth Village (Puerto Princesa City, The Philippines, South East Asia and the Pacific)

## SAVE THE DATE! 14 MARCH 2015



### Dear Friends,

Thirty years ago, I worked as a community organizer in an urban neighborhood in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. The community, which was one of the economically poorest in the state, had been torn apart for many years by conflict between different cultural groups who lived in the neighborhood. Despite countless attempts to address this situation, the tensions continued to grow as intergroup relations deteriorated.

At a community meeting one night, emerging from a sea of frustration, anger and despair, came the voice of a 16 year old young person from the neighborhood. "What we need," he said, "is a mural." "A what?" the group responded. "Our community needs a mural!" he insisted. Over the course of the next few months, a skeptical community began to get behind this project, contributing their ideas to the design of what would become a giant mural painted on the side of a building in the center of the neighborhood. The design of the mural was a collage of images - face and places - that reflected the diversity of cultural groups living there. The process of designing and creating the mural forged strong bonds of connection between previously alienated community members. And when it was completed, there in the middle of the neighborhood was a constant reminder of the beauty of the diversity in the community and the possibility for positive change when people work together for peace.

The Arts can be a powerful form of peacebuilding. Across the URI network, artists of all sorts - painters, poets, musicians, sculptors, weavers, dancers, photographers, singers, writers and craftspersons - are deepening interreligious understanding, transforming conflict and creating cultures of peace, justice and healing through their art. In this issue of InterAction, we celebrate the many URI Cooperation Circles for whom the Arts are a tool for peace. May our world continue to be transformed by the beauty of creative expressions offered by the artists in our midst.

The Rev. Victor H. Kazanjian, Jr.  
Executive Director  
United Religions Initiative (URI)



The 2014 Global YLP Leadership Training and Retreat in San Francisco featured a mural project activity, which illustrated the participants' visions of interfaith peacebuilding.

## ART AS INTERFAITH PEACEBUILDING

In this issue of InterAction, United Religions Initiative celebrates the Cooperation Circles around the world who are passionate about art and interfaith peacebuilding. Whether our CCs are capturing the spirit of the network through photography, creating music during an assembly, dancing with a message, or honoring indigenous traditions through craftwork, URI is creating a rich tapestry of unity that reflects the diversity and talent of its members.

Art and peacebuilding are one and the same for many CCs. According to PK McCary, founder of Texas-based Cooperation Circle Think Peace International (TPI), "Art is peace—that's our motto and belief and we work to make it happen every day."

Some URI CCs find that art-based education is a powerful way to create an opportunity for interfaith and cultural enrichment. Australia-based Cultural Infusion CC has done just that by bringing the world's music, dance, theater and other performance arts to the classroom. Across the entire URI network, CCs engage youth in crafting their dreams of peace through creative outlets, just as URI Asia Executive Secretary Abraham Karickam has done every year with his pupils by holding painting competitions. This year, URI's Young Leaders Program retreat participants created a beautiful Banyan Tree mural showcasing with their hopes and dreams for peace and the global interfaith movement, as represented through hand painted leaves and birds.

For other Cooperation Circles, art can become a tool. CARAVAN Cooperation Circle founder Reverend Paul-Gordon Chandler's says, "art is a catalyst for a lot of things to happen." CARAVAN is a Multiregion CC based in Egypt

and the US. Over the past six years, its art festivals have steadily grown, exhibiting the work of hundreds of Christian, Muslim and Jewish artists. By providing a safe space for artists to reflect their spirituality, CARAVAN successfully provides a space for viewers to partake in an interfaith experience.

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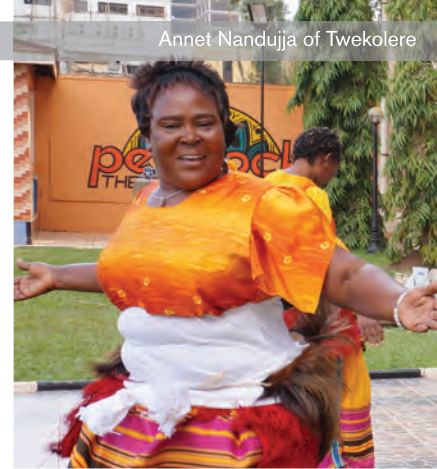
***Art is peace -- that's our motto  
and belief and we work to make it  
happen every day.***

PK McCary, Founder of Think Peace International

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"It's about investing yourself in 'the other.' What we're trying to produce is an 'encounter point,'" he says. As both a Cooperation Circle and an internationally recognized non-profit, CARAVAN serves as a great resource to the URI network, with Reverend Chandler offering his wealth of knowledge to any and all CCs in need of advice and guidance.

As evidenced by so many of our talented Cooperation Circles, the arts can provide an effective tool in working towards interfaith peacebuilding. Should there be an art to peacebuilding, URI CCs are surely on the forefront, imagining and implementing a shared vision of peace through creative action.



## Twekolere Women's Development Association

*Uganda, URI Africa*

Beyond empowering women through skill-share programs and organizing community outreach for HIV/AIDS patients, Twekolere Women's Development Association, based in Kampala, Uganda, continues to entertain and inspire the community and beyond with traditional song and dance. Twekolere is a part of the musical group *Nandujja and the Planets*, an internationally recognized Uganda-based band that has performed for Uganda's World Cup Tour and in front of various heads of state. Performances usually begin with a speech about the environment, peace, or other issues facing the community. According to URI Africa (Great Lakes) Regional Coordinator Despina Namwembe, "People both young and old pay attention to what [Annet] Nandujja tells them, making it easier to use the arts to promote interfaith, cross-cultural appreciation and build peace."

## EKTAAN

*India, URI Asia*

Biswadeb Chakraborty, Regional Coordinator for URI Asia (India, East Zone) and National India Team Coordinator, is a founding member of EKTAAN (meaning "one tone" in Bengali), a Cooperation Circle that has held concerts, disaster relief camps and interfaith dialogues across India's east zone. He describes one of his fondest memories of the CC: "I was performing with my dear friend from another caste, making the most mesmerizing music together," he says. But both musicians were nervous about how a higher-caste audience would receive them. "By the end, people were so charmed that they forgot about caste and they gave us a very long standing ovation." EKTAAN is living proof that, in Biswadeb's words, "musicians are the instrument of cultivating strong relationships across cultures and religions that transcend ideology and build bridges."

## Mujeres Kunas Artesanas (MUKUA) CC

*Panama, URI Latin America & the Caribbean*

The Mujeres Kunas Artesanas (MUKUA) Cooperation Circle was created so that the traditions, wisdom and art of the Kuna people of Panama were not lost. MUKUA carries out this mission by educating tourists and the local community about locally made crafts with a special focus on Molass. Meaning "shirt" or "blouse" in the Kuna language, Molass are created to mark the passage into adulthood. Molass also have historical significance: the government of Panama gave the Kuna Yala territory autonomy after the Kuna rebellion—an uprising that occurred after the government tried to prevent Kuna women from wearing Molass. In addition to keeping the Kuna heritage alive, this CC provides leadership training for local indigenous women. "We want women to be proud of what they know and to continually impart their knowledge," said CC member and former URI Global Council Trustee Fany Avila Eleta.

## AUDIR

*Spain, URI Europe*

AUDIR, short for Associació UNESCO per al Diàleg Interreligiós, is a Barcelona, Spain-based Cooperation Circle and a Catalan organization under the network of UNESCO, bringing together hundreds of people from 10 different religions to promote knowledge, dialogue and cooperation. Seven years ago, they started the Interreligious Choir for Peace of AUDIR, consisting of 50 singers that have held more than 30 concerts to date. Francesc Torradeflot, AUDIR Executive Director, says that music can be seen as an alternative to talks about religious dogma that can create conflict and division. "Music, as silence, is a very privileged place to feel and to have experience of the Absolute," he explains. "It is a peaceful place, where no one is talking over anybody, and all can be in communion with Divinity."

Mola weaving



Cultural Infusion



The Rothko Chapel



## Heartbeat: Jerusalem

*Jerusalem, URI Middle East & North Africa*

Heartbeat: Jerusalem's members, coming from Muslim, Christian, Humanist and Druze backgrounds, work to empower young Israeli and Palestinian musicians to develop creative, nonviolent tools for social change. Members are trained musicians and dialogue facilitators that work with young musicians aged 14-24 during weekly sessions and overnight retreats, learning about each other's cultures in safe, politically neutral settings across multiple cities. Developing skills in songwriting, performance technique and music theory while engaging in dialogue about the harsh realities around them, youth participants raise awareness of 'the other' and harness their individual and collective power to influence their communities. Major activities include merit-based youth ensembles, exchange programs in Jerusalem, Palestine and Berlin, as well as monthly open mic nights in Jerusalem.

## Cultural Infusion

*Australia, URI Southeast Asia & the Pacific*

In addition to being a new URI Cooperation Circle, Cultural Infusion is also an Australian non-profit that produces art programs and events, many of which introduce schoolchildren and community members to different cultures and faiths for the first time. Their in-schools arts program "Discovering Diversity," for example, brings the world's cultures to the classroom by featuring immersive educational experiences in many activities including: Flamenco dancing, gypsy puppet storytelling, Taiko drumming, throat singing and music of the Caribbean. URI Global Council Trustee Peter Mousaferiadis created Cultural Infusion in 2003 as a way to provide indigenous and culturally diverse programs to schools and communities. Today, many of its annual events are performed for audiences, promoting intercultural harmony and celebrating global diversity through music, dance, theater and other art forms.

## Think Peace International

*URI Multiregion*

Think Peace International CC is composed of artists, educators and social activists from various faiths, cultures and ages based in Houston, Texas. Since its founding in 2009 as a URI Cooperation Circle, they have produced a number of projects and campaigns for peacebuilding and awareness including photo competitions, the Beloved Community Project based on the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Peace Train show and many others. According to founder and former URI Global Council Trustee PK McCary, art and creative expression can be tools to facilitate tolerance and unity. "Art is peace—that's our motto and belief and we work to make it happen every day," she says.

## The Rothko Chapel

*United States, URI North America*

The Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas was built in 1971 and is said to be the world's first ecumenical chapel. Featuring the iconic, meditative paintings of Mark Rothko, this sacred space welcomes visitors to reflect, meditate and immerse themselves in the transformative power of art. It also hosts programs on mindful living, world arts, human rights and social justice. Chapel founder Dominique de Menil once said, "[Rothko Chapel] is rooted in the growing hope that communities who worship God should find in their common aspiration the possibility of dialogue with one another in a spirit of respect and love." To this day, the Chapel continues to live out Mrs. De Menil's vision of a truly singular interfaith space.



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