

AUTUMN 2016

INTERACTION

ENVISION, INVEST IN URI



URI staff members and Global Council Trustees gather in Santa Clara, CA, USA for key strategic planning sessions to envision the global network's roadmap from now until the year 2020.



Dear Friends,

Under the theme “Envision, Invest In URI,” this newsletter captures the spirit of the upcoming 2017 Circles of Light gala. The choice of this theme allows us to reflect on the role of URI’s volunteers and donors in achieving success.

The words of URI’s vision statement, “URI envisions a world at peace, sustained by engaged and interconnected communities committed to respect for diversity, nonviolent resolution of conflict and social, political, economic and environmental justice,” are omnipresent in the efforts of the URI network. Supporters have enabled URI to strive toward this vision and to become the largest grassroots interfaith peacebuilding organization in the world – from 89 interfaith groups (called Cooperation Circles or “CCs”) at its inception in the year 2000, to over 800 CCs today working in 96 countries.

Through the support of volunteers and contributors, the URI network actively engages in supporting the CCs – where people of different traditions and practices collaborate to address critical issues in their local communities, such as alleviating poverty, peacebuilding and conflict transformation, preserving the environment, and protecting human rights.

The investment in URI’s network directly impacts these social justice and interfaith dialogue efforts in various ways. Contributions, whether in time or funds, enable URI to: provide trainings for CC members - giving them essential skills in areas of interfaith dialogue, intercultural understanding, peacebuilding, communications strategies, organizational management, impact assessment and fundraising; assist URI’s Regional Coordinators to hold annual local assemblies, at which representatives of CCs meet one another, build powerful relationships, and share best practices; and ensure URI’s collaboration with major organizations, such as the United Nations.

Every volunteer hour and every contribution sends out ripples of hope to grassroots peacebuilders around the world for whom the URI network provides a daily connection to a global interfaith movement that sustains their work.

As supporters, you are an integral part of URI’s vision and investment in a world at peace.

With deep appreciation for envisioning and investing in URI,

Diana Conan

Director of Development

Welcome to our new Cooperation Circles!

NOVEMBER 2016

- Dwarka Peace Society (New Delhi, India - North Zone, Asia)
- Golden Way Young People For Justice And Peace Group (Faridabad, India - North Zone, Asia)
- Parwaaj CC (Ahmedabad, India - West Zone, Asia)
- Sadbhawana Foundation - Indore (Madhya Pradesh, India - West Zone, Asia)
- Xavier’s Cooperation Circle (Ahmedabad, India - West Zone, Asia)
- Caminhos da Terra (Goias, Brazil, URI Latin America & the Caribbean)
- Interfaith Café (Florida, US, North America)
- Path to Anandam (California, US, North America)

OCTOBER 2016

- Nkhudzi Bay Youth Organization Cooperation Circle (Mangochi, Malawi, Africa)
- Modern Method (Kabul, Afghanistan, Asia)
- Building Bridges for Peace and Development (Lahore, Pakistan, Asia)
- Wiregrass Spiritual Enrichment Center CC (Alabama, US, North America)

SEPTEMBER 2016

- Center For Applied Spiritual Science (Jos, Nigeria, Africa)
- Alliance For Development - AFODE (Kampala, Uganda, Africa)
- Integrated Community Resilient and Development Organization - ICORD (Pallisa, Uganda, Africa)
- Love Care Foundation (Ghaziabad, India - North Zone, Asia)
- Bright Future CC (Lahore, Pakistan, Asia)
- Hand in Hand (Lahore, Pakistan, Asia)
- Joy Foundation (Toba Tek Singh, Pakistan, Asia)
- Ex Conselheiras e Conselheiros da URI Global Regiao ALC (Goias, Brazil, Latin America & the Caribbean)
- Sanabel Tounsia (Nabeul, Tunisia, Middle East & North Africa)
- Nashville Cooperation Circle @ Scarritt Bennett Center (Tennessee, US, North America)
- Social Artistry Alliance of South East United States (Georgia, US, North America)
- Tri City Interfaith Council (California, US, North America)
- Dialogue Interreligieux pour la Paix en Afrique - DIREPAF (Bujumbura, Burundi, Africa)
- Religious Journalist Association of Liberia (Paynesville, Liberia, Africa)



ENVISION A UNITED WORLD

United Religions Initiative: hope is our power.

In a world threatened by fragmentation along ethnic and religious lines, where political leaders encourage fear of the other, and minorities find themselves alienated from their friends and neighbors, the people of URI defiantly imagine a world at peace.

“‘We Unite...’ proclaims the Preamble of URI’s Charter,” reflects the Rev. Victor H. Kazanjian, Jr., URI’s Executive Director. “In this time in which human differences are being used to divide people from one another. **We**, at the United Religions Initiative, **Unite**. Ours is a unity that honors diversity, that sees diversity as a resource to building peaceful and just communities.”

Where harmful stereotypes create friction within communities, URI Cooperation Circles gather members of every group to work side-by-side on shared projects, so true friendships form and banish the fear.

Where tensions arise over competition for scarce resources, URI Cooperation Circles teach sustainability methods and provide educational opportunities to break the cycle of poverty.

Where violence has occurred and people still carry deep scars, URI Cooperation Circles help people rebuild trust within communities by creating a safe space for discussion and respectful communication.

“The URI network was made for a time such as this,” says Frederica Helmiere, Regional Coordinator for URI Multiregion. “The CCs in this network are like a fleet of ships. I see in this network hundreds of vessels, large and small, spread across the globe, serving as vanguards of actions powered by social justice and compassion.”

The URI community envisions a world where all people can live and thrive, not just despite their differences, but by embracing their diversity. Around the globe, in nearly 100 countries, URI Cooperation Circles teach conflict resolution and the skills needed for respectful, peaceful collaboration between groups of every faith, ethnicity, and culture.

“The whole idea is that there are so many religions and so many different belief systems in the world that it becomes difficult to remember that we have the same core values,” offers Sharad Moonat, CC Leader for Path to Anandam CC. “We believe that everyone on this earth should have full opportunities.”

We invite you to envision a peaceful world with us.

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- Frederica Helmiere, Regional Coordinator for URI Multiregion

WHY SHOULD PEOPLE INVEST in URI

Why should people invest in URI? Because the returns on the investment have both significant local and global impact. Through the generous gifts of funding, time, and energy, URI investors make the world a more peaceful place. The URI network reaches communities in nearly 100 countries around the world with the message that people who belong to different faiths, religions, and cultures can collaborate on improving their local communities and the world.

“Religious divisions are still flash points. So I am delighted to support URI whose practical wisdom is that people from different religions will come together to work on pressing needs in their community,” says John Weiser, longtime supporter of URI. “As has been said elsewhere: ‘Where doctrine divides, the practice of helping neighbors in need unites.’ URI demonstrates that in countries around the world.”

URI has over 800 interfaith grassroots groups which work tirelessly in their communities on projects like building schools in rural areas, providing free medical help to destitute elders, and ensuring that people have access to clean drinking water. These groups, called Cooperation Circles, thrive because of URI’s vibrant network. The URI network helps them communicate with each other, advocate for each other,

share similar experiences, and lend support where needed. It allows them to learn and work more effectively together than any group can alone.

“To be a member of a global movement itself is a great impetus,” says Khairunnisha Irshad Pathan, leader of the Parwaaj Cooperation Circle, based in West Bengal in India. “We will work locally but our voice will be heard at the global level. There is hope for humanity through URI work. What can be more satisfying?”

By holding regional assemblies in places like Europe, Africa, India, and Pakistan, URI allows members to meet in person and share best practices for working more effectively. By providing training webinars on topics like how to take advantage of local media outlets, or URI North America’s recent online social media training, URI enables Cooperation Circles around the world to promote their successes. By providing webpages for each Cooperation Circle, the URI global office provides an online presence that enhances the visibility of all groups, including those working in very remote areas.

When people invest time, money, and energy in URI today, we all sow the seeds for peace, justice and healing for generations to come. Now is the time to invest in URI.



Leaders of the **Environmental Resource Cooperation Circle** were hosted by former US Secretary - and longtime URI supporter - George P. Shultz in his San Francisco home



Interfaith Peace Building on Natural Resources Management, a URI Cooperation Circle, brought together 95 Buddhists, Christians and Muslims to plant 650 mangrove trees in Cambodia in celebration of International Day of Peace



Despina Namwembe and Sotheart Seoung participate in a new pilot **exchange program for regional staff members** in the URI network



Participants of the **URI Europe** Regional Assembly, which gathered Cooperation Circles from all over the continent to exchange ideas and learn from each other

Circles of Light's Next Generation: THREE QUESTIONS WITH GWINNE BEREXA

Gwinne is a financial professional, philanthropist, and hard-working volunteer who has impacted the mission of several NGOs in and outside of the USA; and now has chosen to seed, with a talented committee, the next version of Circles of Light.



Why did you choose to be involved with URI?

I was born in Colombia, the daughter of an American mom and a Colombian dad. Before my birth, during the 10-year civil war called La Violencia, some religious minorities were persecuted for their beliefs – many of these people were Protestants, who practiced one of the religions in which I was raised (I was also raised Catholic). Although that war ended a long time ago, I see that violence and anger because of religion are still present and part of many communities around the world.

I have come to believe and know that our world needs a URI. I have been on a journey with URI for the last five years, understanding and appreciating its impact. I, too, believe that faith cannot be dictated and choice cannot negate someone else's views.

We should not, and URI will not, judge people for what they believe. This is why I decided to deepen my commitment and chair the Circles of Light event. Every effort this committee and I support will embody the principles of URI: peace, justice and healing.

Why do you believe URI's work is essential?

Envision 816 Cooperation Circles around the world, working to improve their communities. The impact is significant; most importantly, it allows people to come together and respect each other.

As donors, you can make an impact by funding regional URI offices, training, and connecting people from all over the world with each other and a global audience. Did you know URI directs 82% of its spending to program efforts in support of the network and its direct efforts? That is a remarkable percentage!

I believe we truly can build on Bishop Swing's and the early URI supporters' vision of another United Nations that included different beliefs: one founded on love, hope, and dialogue among the many faiths and traditions.

What can you tell us about the theme ENVISION, INVEST IN URI? Why is this important?

Let's look at the first word: Envision. To me, "vision" is central. I work for a vision of a future where people are treated equally and are valued as humans. It's a world where everyone has a right to seek guidance, whether through religion, faith, and spirituality, or by just being good and kind.

Now let's examine "Invest In." This is how people make a difference. "Invest in" means not only coming to the Circles of Light event, but also continuing to support URI by sharing the amazing story of people sustaining the vision and empowering the actions of grassroots groups around the world.

By investing in URI, you will give a gift of bounty to this important organization as it endeavors to realize its vision.

I invite you to join us for the Circles of Light event in March to witness, firsthand, the impact of URI's work to bring peace, justice and healing to the world.



SAVE THE DATE
Saturday, 25 March 2017

CIRCLES OF LIGHT GALA
benefiting United Religions Initiative

Ritz-Carlton Hotel San Francisco
Reception: 6:00 pm | Dinner: 7:00 pm

For more information or to sponsor a table, please visit www.uri.org or contact Marina Shkurko by phone at (415) 762-2725 or by email to events@uri.org.



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