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Global Interfaith Grassroots Organizing: The Record So Far

Sally Mahé Posted on Thursday, November 10, 2011 at 07:37PM

LOCAL-GLOBAL DYNAMICS

Since its Charter was signed in 2000, United Religions Initiative (URI) has grown to include more than 530 grassroots groups and organizations in 78 countries. Each Cooperation Circle has its own name, size, governance and mission, but they all share in their commitment to and practice of diversity, and to advancing the central purpose and principles of URI. As URI's director of Organizational Development for over 15 years, I've had a good seat from which observe and participate in developing an institution that believes in the power of people to self-organize in order to fulfill their aspirations for peace, justice and healing.

So, what are we seeing? What is our experience teaching us?



Masanko Banda's drum led the long procession of religious leaders from dozens of faiths who signed the URI Charter, June 27, 2000 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Photo: Rowan Fairgrove

A common document rooted in shared values provides stability. Diverse people are compelled to action by purpose and principles that articulate their core values, passions and longings. In the United States, citizens are stirred by the words of the Preamble to the Constitution: *We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union...*In the same way, people have consistently been drawn to URI by the words of its **Charter**. Statements that call people to a common cause and guide behavior bind them together and open opportunities for long-term, diverse, and high-functioning grassroots activities.

Recognition and appreciation: focusing on what works rather than what doesn't work is worth more than money. An enduring reality of a grassroots activity is that most people involved are not paid but act from personal commitment. Working with hundreds of groups in URI, watching when folks come alive and when they wear out, I realized that people, like flowers, respond to essential "nutrients," among them the need to be recognized, be successful, have their value amplified, and the meaning of what they do deepened.

URI as an organization embraced an approach to positive change called **Appreciative Inquiry**. Wilted from tedious work, crises, hatreds and injustices that overwhelm their efforts for the good, we found people coming back to life when organizational structures give them a chance to focus on their values, renew their sense of personal power, and help them

imagine a world they want for their children.



Sally Mahé, I., and Joyce Ng'oma, r., URI coordinator for Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania, meet with Ugandan URI leaders at their assembly in Kampala last August.

Maintaining the tension between giving guidance and leaving freedom to innovate produces positive results. Giving unlimited numbers of people the freedom to innovate creates an amazing and unanticipated diversity of activities and impact. However, grassroots groups also call for systematic guidance and training to become more effective. An organizational culture that welcomes this tension by encouraging unbridled innovation springing from people's creativity, while providing guidance and training in order to increase its impact, is challenging but constructive.

Conversation and dialogue balance action-oriented programs. Early analysis of URI grassroots groups indicated an even split between those organized around conversation and sharing spiritual practices, and those involved in action/service-oriented programs in their communities. Over the years, however, a pattern emerged across cultures that grassroots groups involved in interfaith work often choose a combination of "inner work" and "outer work."

Recently speaking with members of the Interfaith Council of Bainbridge Island in Washington State, I experienced my own renewed commitment and joy as we went around the circle sharing stories of faith and life experience. Active interfaith work that takes on vexing local issues will continue to be reinvigorated, balanced, and anchored by such sharing. Most often, especially in areas of entrenched conflict such as the Middle East, grassroots interfaith organizers find that their personal relationships with "the other" make the biggest difference in their lives and propel their work.

Platforms to connect grassroots with policy-makers are critical. Over the years, URI has seen effective alliances built among students, religious leaders, civil servants, government officials, the military, the media, and corporate executives. Making an effort to reach out to "sectors" we don't normally interact with or are critical of is invaluable in creating opportunity for significant change.

Strong relationships create community resilience. Strong community relationships help unleash people's resilience, creativity, and hope, whether preparing for disaster relief, responding to crises, or sharing the doom and gloom surrounding issues like the economy, peace, and the environment. Grassroots organizing among people from different faiths creates such relationships and strengthens communities in times of difficulty. When terrorist bombs hit the island of Bali, an already established interfaith community ran to the scene to offer joint prayers of grief and support. In New Orleans, it is well documented that faith communities, networked to some degree with one another, provided the most successful response to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. We may be living in a dangerous world for quite a while. Grassroots organizing emphasizing relationship-building and cooperation skills is a sterling investment in community resilience and ultimately survival.

What does the future hold?

Grassroots organizing has the opportunity to take on new meaning and power as communication tools emerge connecting humanity across continents and bridge historic divides of all kinds. New networking, new relationships are developing everywhere, and interfaith activists have gotten the message.

More and more, responsibility for positive change will be distributed among the many – taken up by "we, the people." More competence, more cooperation, more compassion, and more commitment to good relationships will be needed across cultures and among people

everywhere as we learn how to tap “the better angels of our nature” and exert our collective influence to make a better world.

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It's the phrase "while providing guidance and training in order to increase its impact" that gives me pause in Sally's Article. This is a very sensitive area for reflection and discussion but we must at some point begin to speak to one another about it while not losing our respect and indeed affection for one another.

November 18, 2011 | **George Armstrong from New Zealand**

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