



The Interfaith Observer

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United Religions Initiative

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History



The idea to create a global forum for preventing and responding to interreligious conflict came to URI President and Founder Rt. Rev. William E. Swing, then-Episcopal Bishop of California, when he was asked to host a UN 50th anniversary celebration at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco in 1995. He found little interest among top religious leaders, but at the grassroots level he found a deep desire for peace and social justice. From this, the idea for a bottom-up global interfaith network was born.

Rt. Rev. Swing hired founding executive director Charles Gibbs and a small staff to initiate a global chartering process, which would include thousands of stakeholders from all over the world and a diversity of faiths. After four years and dozens of meetings, URI was launched in 2000 as a platform for people of different faiths to build relationships and work together for a shared purpose: to “promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings.” In the eleven years that followed, URI has grown from 83 founding member organizations to more than 525, whose work on the ground touches millions of people worldwide.

Mission

URI’s mission is to cultivate peace and justice by engaging people to bridge religious and cultural differences and work together for the good of their communities and the world.

Uniqueness

URI is a pioneer of grassroots interfaith organizing and action. Its unique organizational design leaves primary decision-making authority at the local level, where member groups, called Cooperation Circles, are self-organized, self-governed and self-funded. The URI network, governed by an elected global board of trustees, connects members to one another and provides a web of capacity-building support that helps them succeed in their work and take it to the next level.

Program



URI's global staff had a planning session last year in Amman, Jordan.

URI implements its mission through local and global initiatives that build the capacity of its member groups and organizations to engage in community action such as conflict resolution and reconciliation, environmental sustainability, education, women's and youth programs, and advocacy for human rights.

Key global programs include:

- Young Leaders Program, which includes regional and local trainings for young leaders, youth encounters to introduce young people to interfaith work, a Youth Ambassadors Program to mentor key emerging leaders, and a pilot high school service learning program.
- Traveling Peace Academy, a locally rooted peacebuilding training program for community leaders in conflict zones that emphasizes personal and community transformation as the key to sustainable peace.

Regional programs spearheaded by URI's eight regional offices focus on issues of primary importance to their regions. For example, URI-Pakistan runs a Women's Desk to provide empowerment, peacebuilding and vocational training programs for women; one of URI's four offices in India recently ran a regional campaign to end the practice of female infanticide and is opening a counseling center for women around this issue; and URI's subregional office in Kampala, Uganda, is developing an initiative to prevent extremist recruitment of youth in the Great Lakes region.

Goals for the Future

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. URI's primary goals for the coming years in furtherance of this vision are to help connect member organizations to one another and other stakeholders around common issues to increase their leverage and give them a greater voice in national, regional and global decision-making processes; to elevate the importance of interreligious engagement in international development work; and to expand and strengthen the URI networks in existing regions and into new regions.

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