



## COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

### Cape Town Interfaith Initiative

**Faiths /Traditions Represented:** Abrahamic – Christian, Muslim Jewish Also Hindu Baha'i Khoisan, African Traditional, Buddhism, None, Wiccan, Hare Krishna, Sufi, Spiritualist, and Unitarian

**Faith Partnerships:** Brahma Kumaris, Yoga Spirituality (Swami Vidyananda), Ananda Kitur, Art of Living

**Location of CC:** No 1 Cambridge Road Zonnebloem, Cape Town

**Primary Contact:** James Ellman (Chairman)

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**Secondary Contact:** Mary Frost

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**Key Areas of Focus:** Dialogue, Education, Interfaith prayer gatherings.

**Key Languages:** English, African Traditional languages. (We encourage the language of origin at prayer gatherings, e.g. San, Hindi, Hebrew, Arabic etc. in order to promote authenticity of faith)

**Date:** October 2015

### SUMMARY: Profile interviews by Berry Gargan, Southern Africa Liaison

Interfaith activity in Cape Town was born out of the vision of a few people that the South African political imbalances of the time (1970's) could start to be redressed through an interfaith movement, which would embrace all cultures. From the Interfaith Forum of those days, the movement grew until Rev. John Oliver, Rev. Gordon Oliver and other active interfaith members hosted the Parliament of World Religions in 1999. Out of that, the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative was born. A few of the original 70's group is still there – Mary Frost remembers the first time a local Imam sang his call to prayer in a Catholic church.

Although the political context has changed, the struggle is far from over. The wounds of the past remain painful and unhealed for many. Apart from that, South Africa is fighting new struggles now against such insidious enemies as corruption, poverty, gender-based violence.

As a peace-based organization, CTII believes the best weapons are dialogue and education because these are the foundation of knowledge, understanding and compassion.



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The picture on the URI Southern Africa Banner is of an historic CTII event in Cape Town

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

Cape Town is a city of close to 4 million people. In religious, cultural, and political terms we are a very diverse and pluralistic society – facing the challenges of socio-political transformation. Inter-religious conflict is rare. Racism raises its head frequently (i.e. on a one-to-one basis. Political discourse is often characterized by racist comments.)

In Cape Town we have a lot more intrafaith conflict than interfaith conflict. Some of our partnerships are with groups who express their faith through the unconditional acceptance of others, such as the Brahma Kumaris. But inside the different faiths, those of orthodox or conservative tradition do not come to us, to interfaith events. I wish I could tell them how we draw parts of each experience to ourselves to enrich our lives. It does take a certain maturity within yourself to embrace people of other faiths. What many people don't realize is that their faith would grow so much more if they could embrace other people. It is false security to believe that yours is the only way. Our work is progressive. We just keep reaching out.

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

Ignorance and indifference towards religious teachings and practices still pervades our society.



Neville Biggs, CTII Treasurer and a member of the Baha'i faith, opens in prayer for the Southern Africa Regional Assembly, March 2015

The picture on the Southern Africa region's URI banner was one of the first events we organized in St. George's (Anglican) Cathedral. It was in the 1990's for World Aids Day, where we had people who were Muslim, Baha'i, Hindu – different faiths. It was a breakthrough event. We had to get special permission to do this in the Cathedral because so many Anglicans were against the idea. Then, when Sri Ravi Shankar of Art of Living came to Cape Town, CTII organized for him to speak in the Cathedral. There were some who were offended, saying "How can you bring this person in here?" These were religious leaders. A lot of what we do is diplomacy. In Cape Town, we are slowly getting over that sense of separation. We could not have done it in the 80's. We were quite undercover for a long time. People had enough trouble with their own faith; they could not deal with anyone else's. It still has to evolve a lot more.



March 2015: Former Cape Town Mayor, Rev Gordon Oliver of CTII delivers the keynote address at the opening of the URI Southern Africa Regional Assembly

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

- a) A high-schools project (now in its 5<sup>th</sup> year) based on an interchange of pupils from schools of different religious, cultural and socio-economic status brings teenagers together on a weekly and monthly basis. We primarily run activity programmes, discussion, and sharing activities in addition to volunteering, coaching, and mentoring activities in poorer schools around the subjects of math, science, and language.

It started with 15 children and there are now 28, from seven different schools and a teacher from each school. It is quite a process: we have to get the principal's permission and then a teacher must be involved, so that teacher must agree. And then the process is subject to change, which we must respect. One

school was always on board but a conservative new governing body made them withdraw. Marlene Silbert runs the programme, which has had as one component a twinning with a school in Blackburn, England. Currently, the exchange programme is suspended due to lack of funds but the relationships that were built are still strong.

- b) A quarterly programme of monthly public meetings offering presentations and dialogue opportunities on topics of a theological and scriptural nature. This is our Open Hearts - Open Minds series of interfaith dialogues around issues affecting our communities. This year Peisach and Easter fell on the same day which presented an opportunity to explore the meaning of both the Jewish and Christian celebrations. Last year Pentecost and shava ut happened on same day. What did that mean? People are fascinated to learn. We will be having a dialogue around Assisted Dying in November. This is a very topical subject and an important conversation. It will be interesting to learn how the different faiths approach it.
- c) An annual public interfaith "Prayers for the City" event at the start of each new year. It happens on the last Sunday in January every year just before the World Interfaith Harmony Week from 1 – 7 February. We have been doing this for about 9 years. We started as a small group under the trees in the national gardens. We have evolved – now the City of Cape Town gives us the amphitheater free, exposing us to different communities. It is much more open there, with tourists passing by and joining in. Many in Cape Town did not have access to us before. Now, the mayor usually speaks. People get insight into the diversity around us, which is important because often we are quite insular and don't even realize how much diversity there is amongst us.
- d) Interfaith concert of religious music. This was a very successful event in 2014 and will be repeating this on an annual basis from 2015. The concert was at Erin Hall last year and now we



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have evolved to needing a bigger venue – this year’s concert will be at the Novalis Institute on Sunday, 8 November.

- e) Promoting the Charter for Compassion. The City Government has agreed on principle to become a City of Compassion and we are in the early stages of planning to widen public engagement and commitment in this regard. The Charter was launched in 2013 in Cape Town and we are hoping to grow the charter. The city and various churches have already accepted it and there is a school friendly version going out to schools.
- f) John Oliver Memorial Lecture. We held the first one in 2014 and have agreed to hold this event annually starting from 2015 – around the theme of Compassion, related to The Charter. This year, it will be on 20 October at Erin Hall. Father Christopher Clohessy will be our speaker. He is a Catholic priest from the Newlands and Lansdown parishes in Cape Town. He has a doctorate in Arabic studies and has been recalled to Rome because of his knowledge of the interfaith arena.

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

Across all religions and cultural / ethnic groups in Cape Town, we accept people for their human status. We get atheists too – they offer a lot spiritually, often. When I welcome people to our dialogues, I say: “Welcome to those from all Religions, and none.” One year a lady came up to me afterwards and said thank you so much for saying that. She had never felt really welcomed before. It was a special moment because she felt recognized.

#### 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.

I would like to highlight the amazing work that is being done by Marlene Silbert who runs our schools programme. This year we will have 28 learners from 7 schools whereas previously we had 15 learners - 3 from 5 schools.



Marlene Silbert heads the Childrens Exchange programme for CTII. Here she is with Jason Woolff of Umbiyozo CC during the Cape Town YLP visit in April

We will speak about the **Charter for Compassion** and the learners will discuss this with their teachers and principals as they would like to introduce the Charter to the rest of the school. We also included aims, objectives and ground rules

The Tutoring Programme has also expanded exponentially. There will be many additional pupils who will tutor literacy at Mimosa Primary School in Bonteheuwel on a Tuesday or a Thursday throughout this academic year. Many learners who were not on our 2014 programme have volunteered to tutor – (eg. about 12 from Herzlia)



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I have already arranged for our teachers who will be accompanying their learners to meet with the two Amy Biehl coordinators to discuss details and lesson plans. Where possible the young tutors will attend the meeting. There is no doubt that Mimosa is a well organised school and the Amy Biehl coordinators are also far better equipped than Siyazingisa Primary coordinators.

We will take our 28 learners to the **Nelson Mandela Museum in Qunu** (just outside East London) for 4 days (3 nights). Without reductions the cost is R137.50 per person but I will investigate the possibility of getting a reduction and also the cost of the flight to Umtata which is about 30 minutes from the Museum.

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

We hope to achieve interreligious understanding and acceptance of religious differences, resulting in greater harmony and collaboration.

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

By engaging in collaborative programmes of activity on spiritual, socio-economic and educational issues, we are able to focus on cooperation among people of different religions.

The real work of interfaith happens in our meetings. That is where we learn about the language of interfaith, how terminology that is standard to one group might be offensive to another. I have started to talk about prayer gatherings now, rather than church services or worship. In our meetings is where the respect starts, so that we live our interfaith beliefs and the ethos of interfaith flows from the top down in terms of the various spiritual communities.

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

There is a lot more intrafaith than interfaith conflict, but mostly the issue is a failure of spiritual leaders and the community to see the need for interfaith. We therefore find people discarding other faiths whereas spiritual enrichment and growth would be so much more complete if only they could embrace people of other faith, and their beliefs. We don't have to believe them, we just have to respect them as we ask them to respect us. The work we are doing is helping to dispel the violence of fear and ignorance, replacing these things with compassion, love and a spirit of humanity.

### **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?**

Our Schools Programme provides evidence of better relations among pupils and this rubs off on to their teachers and parents. I can see when we have dialogues that relations are improving. It is such

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Rev Gordon Oliver of CTII during the Cape Town Regional Assembly in March

a gift to see Muslims chatting comfortably with Christians and to see the benefit of some of the traditional faiths together, all thought of stereotypes being dropped.

We have a lovely event at the Ashram every year with representatives of 6-7 faiths speaking to a theme, how their faith interprets that theme. Beautiful, gentle dialogue is created where people can sing, say, chant, their interpretation of a word from their faith.

### 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?



Prayers for the City hosted by Cape Town Interfaith, January 2015

- When Father Clohessy, a local Catholic priest, returned from getting his doctorate in Arabic studies he came and spoke in the Anglican cathedral, and many Muslims came. It was a big thing, and not everyone was in agreement. But it was a wonderful experience which broke the ice. Then he was invited many times because people were no longer afraid and they saw the benefit.
- After 9/11 we were in the Claremont Mosque and the Anglican Dean, the Rabbi and the Iman were praying together. It was so profound and sincere- many of us got goosebumps. What an incredible experience to be there, to be part of it.
- Our Schools Programme has many examples of teenagers relating their stories of finding each other, especially in the context of Jewish / Muslim teenagers.
- I think of the Homosexuality Talk at the Jewish Holocaust Centre where, for the first time, I welcomed people of every faith and none. One woman was so touched. I learned how much that means to people who don't feel they belong anywhere. That discussion was packed – many people were not happy with the subject and felt that it was taboo in terms of their religion. One person even told me that homosexuality did not exist in their religion.

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

We see ourselves as peacebuilding partners. If we can't talk to each other, we are never going to be at peace. Talk, work, act: we must do these things together – that in itself is a peacebuilding exercise. That is our life's work. We have got to be prepared to be in for the long haul. It is not flippant. I have seen such amazing results and blessings.



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This is the joy of my work – over 2 years ago I had an interfaith dialogue in the Sufi temple and amongst those attending were three students – one came to me, a Muslim studying Arabic from a Jewish lecturer. He wanted dialogue on campus. I agreed but could not do anything. Communities have got to want it. They must come to us and ask. Two years later that student contacted me and said: “We are ready, we want it.” I told him that we need to be conscious of different faiths. He is on the Student



Prayers for the City hosted by Cape Town Interfaith Initiative  
January 2015

Representative Council, so he has some clout. I told him: “Make sure the rest of the SRC is with you because you can’t fight everybody.” That is what happened, they had challenges. That is why it is good to start with small groups, a small drop of water. The ripple effect is much more authentic. That is where we are, it is so exciting. Now the student is in conversation with Sarah, one of our council members who is also a student. It is a student thing. I put him in touch with some clergy on campus who are behind this thing. It is an exciting breakthrough – these students all have their own little pockets on campus, if they all work together what a force they would be. I hope that ripple effect will come too with the school children.

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

Even within our meetings we learn all the time how to speak about things without being disrespectful. For example: we speak of not prayer service, but a prayer gathering. It is a different vocabulary. We learn the terminology of respect within the meetings all the time. It can be very challenging to be open-hearted enough to find that common space within personal faith. Orthodoxy is very strict. Anglicans are usually progressive but there are pockets of conservatism who find it hard to accept interfaith as readily. It is an individual thing and we need to understand where that individual is coming from. We can be very insulting without even realizing it. It’s a continuous learning curve. We want to build with compassion but one flippant sentence can break down the whole relationship.

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

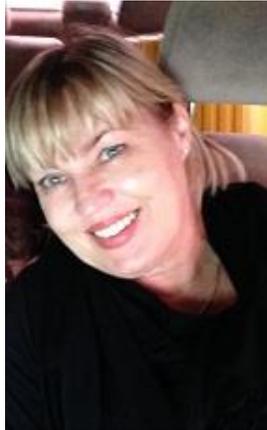
Exposure is one thing we need because we have not had an administrative head before which we are building up now with James. So it is about increasing the network, which we believe we can do through our association with URI. In the end it is about learning and questioning and having growing experiences at our events.

I want it to evolve in people’s minds, especially people who without knowing it themselves are stuck in a conservative groove. I would love them to realize that we are all God’s children and we need to embrace



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each other as such. We don't need to believe the same, or speak the same language. We can help each other together, not in pockets. Can you imagine! That would cross the cultural, religious, all barriers. We don't need any barriers. URI helps us to breach the barriers.



Regional Coordinator  
Karen Barence is a  
member of Cape Town  
Interfaith Initiative

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

We need more exposure, and to be connected nationally and internationally. We don't know where the opportunities are to connect with other interfaith organizations both at home and around the world. For example, Karen is going to Durban to meet an interfaith group – we would love to be in touch with them, offering mutual support and ideas. We have been breaking ground, working alone for so long with no resources or people. So much has been going on. We don't need to do this all alone, we can reach out.

We just want you to tell people about us and about the amazing work that is happening here. This is our passion. It is what we have to do.