

Interkultureller Kreis URI Bonn CC
(Intercultural Circle URI Bonn CC)

Faiths /Traditions Represented: Muslim, Christian (Protestant, Catholic), Baha'i, Humanist, Buddhist

Location of CC: Bonn, Germany

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Key Areas of Focus: Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogue and Action

Names of CC Profile Participants: Marianne Horling

Date of Interview: 1 July 2015

Summary:

The Multicultural Circle URI Bonn CC brings together people of various cultural and faith traditions, e.g. Baha'is, Buddhist, Muslims, Humanists and Christians. They are from various cultural backgrounds and over the past years have met regularly and shared their stories with each other as well as topics of cultural, social and religious interest. Through dialogue and conversation, they have deepened their friendship and built trust.

This is very relevant as the city of Bonn and its Southern part Bad Godesberg is very diverse and colorful and has inhabitants of many backgrounds and walks of life, including – more recently - refugees.

Cultural activities, such as sharing poetry and stories about personal activities and life stories has raised their consciousness about the preciousness of diversity and open the group members to curiosity and refraining from stereotypes.

Having developed their friendship, they are able to support each other when any conflict arises and to encourage others to see people as individuals with individual life stories rather than attributing stereotypical judgements.

Building on the friendship which they have developed they carry out projects, such as the exhibition "Sounds of faith" and its by-programme of lectures, readings and music which has met a very positive response. They also support refugees, e.g. through collecting needed items, such as toys and clothes, and continue their religious and cultural activities, e.g. by visiting various faith communities.

They have many ideas for additional projects which they want to realize over the next years, such as supporting neutral rooms of silence in hospitals and clinics in Bonn or engaging with schools in conflict resolution or interfaith work.

CC Profile Questionnaire:

1. What is the current religious/cultural/social context in the area where your CC is working?

The city of Bonn – and its Southern part: Bad Godesberg - is very colorful, diverse and multicultural. People of various ethnic and cultural background live here. They have come to Bonn for various reasons and now center their lives here, some for a short time, some for decades. Bonn is home to a number of UN agencies as well as a university, which attract people from various places and walks of life. Recently refugees also began to arrive at Bonn and stay in temporary quarters for a limited time.

2. Why is interfaith/intercultural bridge building needed in the area where your CC works?

It is important that people from various religious and cultural backgrounds get more acquainted with each other. By dialoguing we become aware of the preciousness of diverse cultures, and people can appreciate each other's cultural richness.

Strengthening openness and curiosity for each other is crucial, so that people take an interest in each other and let themselves be surprised by others.

This leads to social cohesion, friendship and relationships are built. The dialogue also supports the personal development of the individual participants.

Once a basis of understanding and friendship is built it is possible to positively influence potential conflicts. Through conversations with each other, the group members can give each other support and backing, when a conflict arises. Group participants can encourage each other and exchange experiences. By discussing and exchanging we develop more sensitivity about possible conflicts, human distress, or social issues.

3. Please briefly describe the main activities or programs your CC is carrying out? Please specify the year in which the activity took/is taking place.

Over the past three years, our members have shared various activities and stories with each other, e.g. one person has told us about his project in Bangladesh to support women, run through a family foundation. Another member told us about Hindu celebrations in the country of her origin, Mauritius.

We had an evening of Turkish poetry with music and poetry from Rumi to modern times. We have had a lecture about Chinese medicine based on Buddhist background. One of our members is an artist and we have visited her and she has shown us her artistic oeuvre and explained philosophical thoughts. We also had a sharing of spring and love poems shared by our members.

Another member of the Baha'i faith had told us about her pilgrimage to Haifa. A Muslim member has given us an introduction to Islam and Sufism.

Our circle over the past two years has developed from an intercultural circle somewhat more to an interfaith circle. – We have embraced dialogue between secularist and religious people, and reach more subtlety and nuances in our views. We recognize more and more that each human being must be taken as an individual, and sweeping statements do not help.

In November and December 2014, we organized an exhibition “Sounds of faith” It consisted of tables with photos of people of various cultural and religious backgrounds and texts in which they describe how sound what they believe. As part of the exhibition we organized a by-programme of events, such as lectures and readings, music and encounters. The response was very positive, and many participants expressed appreciation that the exhibition was organized. It helps to reduce fears, e.g. of people who have had negative experiences of religions all together, have found them lacking respect towards other faiths, and are therefore very skeptical of any religion and have distanced themselves from them. Interfaith dialogue and respect is also a counterforce against any kind of extremism and fundamentalism, including from secular people. Religion and spirituality are basic needs of human beings.

We visited religious institutions, e.g. in the second half of the year we plan to visit the Jewish house of learning and Sufi musicians who play Central Asian and Ottoman Sufi music and tell stories. We also plan to visit Old Catholics, Baha'is, a Hindu temple and a mosque.

One part of our work is to support refugees, e.g. by collecting goods and items of daily need, such as clothes and toys, and giving them as donations to refugee homes. There is a refugee camp in Bad Godesberg which is now fully occupied. A new camp is being prepared for about 20 people. The refugees are of various backgrounds: from African countries, e.g. Sudan and Mali, as well as Roma and other people from the Balkans, e.g. from Albania, Mazedonia, Kosovo and Serbia.

A longer-term project is to support neutral rooms of silence in hospitals and clinics in Bonn.

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

Christians of various backgrounds, Humanists, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Muslims.

5. Please explain the method or strategy that your CC uses to bring together people of different cultures and faiths that generally do not engage or cooperate with each other.

Because our members have shared activities and stories with each other, we have been able to open ourselves up to new opportunities for growth and learning, like our projects in Bangladesh and Mauritius.

Engaging with people individually and inviting them to participate is the key to involving people in dialogue and enlarging the scope and reach of our conversations.

We also build our relationship and network with likeminded organisations, NGOs, the integration officer of Bonn, the house Migrapolis etc.

6. Why do the activities your CC is carrying out improve cooperation among people of different traditions in the broader community?

Because people broaden their perspectives and become more able and willing to engage in positive dialogue, to listen to each other and be open for each other.

7. Within your CC, you have members from several different faiths and cultural traditions. How would you describe cooperation among your CC's members? Have there been any challenges?

We have built our relationship and developed friendship and friendly cooperation. Over time we have increased our understanding of each other. But even now, after two or three years together we still recurrently discover new aspects of a person that we had not been aware of before. We have become more familiar with each other and more friendly, and therefore we open ourselves more to each other and share more with each other. We get to know each other and our personal life paths more in depth, are touched by each other's stories and build stronger and more lasting friendships.

8. What are some observations or signs you see that relations are improving between people of different faiths/cultures in the area where your CC works?

Through our activities people's interactions with each other get more normal, more open, people get interested in each other and do not look at each other only critically or from a distance. Our activities build trust.

9. What does your CC hope to achieve?

We want to continue our activities and our getting to know each other. We have many plans for future projects, e.g. supporting rooms of silence in Bonn hospitals and rehab clinics, where there are many patients from various countries, e.g. the gulf region.

We want to realize a musical project with the musician Saad Thamir who has Iraqi roots and has already participated in the by-programme to the exhibition "Sounds of faith" We want to visit religious institutions, the garden of religions in Cologne.

We also would like to continue the cultural part of our activities, e.g. through a lecture, maybe on winter time, how we deal with death, or other topics.

10. Aside from funding, what are some specific ways URI can better support your CC in reaching its goals?

We need a volunteer who can create our website.

We are interested in building up youth activities and youth work in our CC and would be happy about support in that.

For working with schools, it would be very important having a written prospectus which can be handed to responsible persons in schools, with an explanation of the offers and possible formats in cooperation with URI's youth programme. It would be best if this is very nicely done, in color and professionally looking to build reputation and interest.

11. As you know, the Purpose of URI is 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 what ways, do you feel your CC's work helping to achieve this purpose?

We fulfill URI's purpose in all our doings. Because we have a strong focus of cultural activities, we have raised the consciousness of our members, especially as it relates to the preciousness of diversity. We open the group members to curiosity, refraining from stereotypes, and do so in accordance with the preamble, purpose, and principles of URI.

12. What value or benefits does your CC receive from being a member of URI?

As part of a larger international network our voice has more weight. We are more listened to and more recognized. We are seen differently being part of a world-wide movement. Through it we are taken more seriously and have a greater chance to make an impact. We can more easily cooperate with e.g. municipal and state offices, such as the integration officer of the city of Bonn. We receive invitations which we would not receive if we were just by ourselves.

13. What value or benefit does your CC currently provide or could potentially provide the URI network?

We inform the public and stakeholders about URI and make it better known. We cooperate with other CCs and support other CCs. We host people from the international URI community, e.g. from the USA, Pakistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina. We have also hosted a URI Europe general meeting last year.

14. Do you communicate or work with other CCs in the URI network? If yes, please share a few examples. If no, please explain why you have been unable/ uninterested to connect with other CCs.

Yes, we do communicate and work with other CCs in the URI network. Last year Marianne visited the Austrian URI CC in Lienz which had various benefits for both. CCs can mutually encourage each other and support each other. They can also exchange knowledge, ideas and good practices. E.g. there is a home for refugees in Lienz, which is one of the best ones in Austria. It was also very interesting to exchange about the history of the town. Likewise, we exchange practical hints, such as possibility to use an interfaith exhibition of the World Ethos Foundation.

There is a strong and continuous cooperation with other German CCs. E.g. cooperation with URI Germany was critical for organizing the exhibition "Sounds of faith." Because it is a registered association, it has charity status and a bank account. So, it was possible to apply for funding through URI Germany and the financial dealings were all done through and with support of URI Germany, which was also able to offer tax exempt receipts.

There is likewise a very good cooperation with the DMLB CC where Marianne participated actively in DMLB's interfaith events, such as the Three Faiths (Jewish Christian Muslim) Summer School at Ammerdown, UK, offering an art workshop; or in the Christian-Islamic Conference at Pentecost, leading through a cultural evening. At the same time benefitting from

contacts – such as the musical group “Duo Morgenwind”, knowledge and ideas through these events and learning many things.

15. As a CC that works on improving interfaith relations, perhaps you have seen, heard, or experienced something interesting. Please share a very important personal experience or lesson related to interfaith/intercultural relations that changed impacted your beliefs OR a story about something that happened in your community related to interfaith relations.

We were very impressed participating in the URI Europe Assembly in Plovdiv and learning a lot about Bulgaria and its faith communities and traditions, something that we knew very little about before. Our URI friends in Plovdiv, especially Father Petar and team, are an inspiration for us.

In 2012 Marianne took part in a URI Europe workshop with people of the Balkans in Sarajevo, and it made her fully realize, why she is part of URI, seeing that people whose communities had been at war with each other were sitting around the same table and have a strong will to cooperate, work together and support each other, which she found very touching: interfaith can work, against all conflicts.

Last but not least Marianne is very grateful to Sheikh BASHIR for bringing her into URI and being a big mentor and supporter and a role model; being very realistic and down-to-earth, and at the same time encouraging and setting an example by continuing the dialogue despite all real difficulties, holding up the ideal of interfaith cooperation and dialogue.