



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

United Religions Initiative Ladakh CC

Faiths /Traditions Represented: **Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Christian.**

Location of CC: **Ladakh, Jammu Kashmir**

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Key Areas of Focus: **Women's education, caring of elderly and disabled persons, interfaith dialogue and religious harmony.**

Summary:

United Religions Initiative Ladakh CC is located in Ladakh, Jammu Kashmir and works to uplift downtrodden and marginalized communities. Their programs include girl child education and caring for sick, elderly, disabled and visually impaired people. United Religions Initiative Ladakh CC promotes religious harmony and interfaith unity among Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Christians. This CC is also committed to a sustainable future, and is pioneering tree planting efforts in the local community.



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

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

We are located in a sensitive and remote border area of India populated with different faith traditions. Education is of prime importance for the success of our multi-faith community. The school we oversee is open for all religious and ethnic backgrounds. We have members of the Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim communities working together as faculty, staff and students.

2. *Please briefly describe the main activities or programs your CC is carrying out this year?*

Our CC is working in the area of Women's education and Buddhist studies. We run a center for the visually impaired and senior citizens in our community. The center has a residential school for both formal and informal Buddhist learning. On August 24-31, 2014 we successfully organized an International Festival of Buddhist Heritage in Ladakh, where delegates from 25 countries took part.

In addition to our regular activities we will be celebrating Losar (New Year), World Interfaith Harmony Week, International Women's Day, Buddha Jayanti, Indian Independence Day, and Nonviolence Day. We also work in close collaboration with the Ladakh Hill Development Council and other local schools. As a CC, we plant trees on our property and take care of the trees together. Our CC hopes to focus more on spirituality and environment in the coming year.

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

Primarily, the intercultural cooperation and bridge-building in Ladakh is necessary between the Buddhists and Muslims, but there is also a formidable Hindu and Christian presence. Although, the Muslim presence in Ladakh is old and has traditionally lived in harmony, tensions persisting in the global context tend to enter the local context as well.

4. *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.*

Our bridge building activities are carried out mainly through community meetings, organized cultural activities, interfaith dialogues, collective celebrations of festivals and organized sports meets.



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

5. Given the current context you described, what does your CC hope to achieve (goals)?

We would like to further strengthen our CC's goal of interfaith harmony by involving more young people in achieving this goal. We believe this will further strengthen inter-school cooperation among our current partner schools: Bharti Vidya Niketan, Imamiya School, Mission School Leh, and St. Peter's School Chushod.

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

School education and empowerment of women has gained popularity. Our intake in school admissions has increased. Our events are consistently engaging more participants from other faiths. We have also seen more interfaith marriages taking place.

7. How is the work of your CC helping to prevent religiously inspired violence or transforming conflict? (NOTE: This question is relevant only in areas with violence/open conflict.)

There is no such violent conflict existing in Ladakh, as observed by the Dalai Lama, who said "If you want to see communal harmony...see Ladakh, where they live in harmony."

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?

Due to a healthy initiative taken by government and non-governmental organizations like ours, civic bodies and organizations are prioritizing equal representation of women and religious denominations.

9. Please share a specific short story about your CC's work that might teach a lesson about interfaith or inspire other CCs.

In Laddakh, besides the name and religious affiliation it is difficult to differentiate who is Muslim and Buddhist. Everyone's language, dress, and food preferences are very similar (except for Halal meat requirements). My sister is a Buddhist and married a Muslim. After initial resistance, the relationship between the two families improved, and frequent visits increased. The only issue was that my sister and her kids cannot eat non-vegetarian food in their home.



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

In some Himalayan social traditions not offering meat-share to any one of the family member is against social etiquette. My sister came to visit her mom's house with her children, and was offered food with meat. She refused stating her in-laws will get offended, as she's a Muslim she is not supposed to eat meat, unless it is Halal. In the end, she was not able to refuse the meat and requested no one to share this news with her in-laws. Later she confided with her husband. Knowing the Ladhak Buddhist social tradition of meat-share, he told her that she can have non-halal meat outside, but not in their family home. This story illustrates how two communities can make adjustments with food and religious traditions in an emerging pluralistic society. They are setting trends that will pave the way for future generations of interfaith relationships.

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

Our CC is working for education and women's empowerment to generate awareness about conflict resolution, healing, and reconciliation. We hope to spread URI's principle No. 9 through our work, in letter and spirit: "We practice healing and reconciliation to resolve conflict without resorting to violence."

11. Within your CC, you have members from several different faiths and cultural traditions. How would you describe cooperation among your CC's members? What are the challenges?

The majority of our CC members are Buddhists, interspersed with Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. We have 450 Buddhist and 5 Muslim students. The faculty has a number of Hindu and Christian teachers. The school's health care center is open for all community members. Our biggest challenge is not having enough human and financial resources to meet the demand.

12. How is being part of URI helping your CC to achieve its goals?

URI has given us a global network of peace workers. It has expanded our visibility, and that helps in making our position more strong and effective. Our local initiative got global notice.

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

We need logistical support and material resources on interfaith peace-building, and added networking opportunities.