



Stories of Hope

“Taking our Experience Home: A Journey in URI Peacebuilding”

Stories of Hope highlights community workshops that address urgent local concerns and develop URI Interfaith Peacebuilding Skills. These workshops were conducted by six URI grassroots leaders representing diverse backgrounds, traditions and life experiences, who studied together at the 2002 Summer Peacebuilding Institute (SPI) of Eastern Mennonite University. To help strengthen peacebuilding practices in the URI network, they each applied SPI learning in action when they returned home to Uganda, the Philippines, Zimbabwe, and Malawi. Through these projects emerge voices from diverse religions finding ways to deepen their relationships, trust and understanding as they address local concerns together.

This booklet contains the stories of six members of URI Cooperation Circles, representing diverse backgrounds, traditions and life experiences, who studied together at the 2002 Summer Peacebuilding Institute (SPI) of Eastern Mennonite University. To help strengthen Peacebuilding practices in the URI network, they each applied SPI learning in action when they returned home to Uganda, the Philippines, Zimbabwe, and Malawi.

Interfaith Dialogue for Nation Building: Manila, Philippines

In October, 2002, an intensive three-day, workshop-seminar entitled Interfaith Dialogue for Nation Building, was offered by The URI Peacemakers' Circle CC in Manila to a diverse group of twenty people. The attendees came from various sections of society, are from different faith traditions, and are all currently engaged in or are inclined towards promoting peace in the Philippines through interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

The three days were spent exploring:

- roots of conflict
- role of dialogue in peace making
- faith traditions as resources of peace rather than conflict
- visions of peace in the Philippines

The workshop introduced a group of passionate peacemakers to each other, inspired them to consider interfaith opportunities to work side by side and presented and modeled respectful, engaged dialogue. It was the first step to peacebuilding collaborations. In a follow-up meeting in November 2002, six peacebuilding projects were chosen as concrete plans to be further developed. Subsequently, a year-long training program has been designed and is seeking funding from the Philippine government and other sources. This workshop was led by URI Peacebuilder Marites Guingona-Africa.

Ugandan Youth Peace Building Workshop: Kampala, Uganda

In January, 2003, the Interfaith Cooperation Circles MCC gathered together thirty young people from various religious affiliations at Makerere University, Kampala, to share and reflect on the role of religion in peace and conflict, the meaning in their own lives of peace, and in planning how to engage in interfaith cooperation and other peace building initiatives for youth.

The Hon. Dan Kidega, Youth Member of Parliament set the tone for the day with a reflection on growing up in and living with conflict. He challenged the youth to play a part in solving the process and urged them to begin by examining the conflict within themselves.

The group explored religion as a source of conflict and a resource for peace, focusing on how each of their traditions promoted inclusion, peace, tolerance, or exclusion, prejudice or violence against others. Participants related their traditions to current conflicts in Uganda and noted that the teaching of peace in all faith traditions, are misinterpreted for political reasons. Together they discussed the potential of young people from all traditions working together for peace.

The participants described the characteristics of youth as growing, dynamic, flexible and ambitious. They agreed that young people desire to have peace, employment, their own houses and vehicles, to play a role in society and freedom and this leads to them to be easily recruited to join rebels because they are promised their desires.

The participants defined peace as living in harmony, co-existence, consensus, understanding, mutual respect, compromise, friendship. They discussed that peace is not merely the absence of war. It also means health, adequate food supplies, employment equality and economic prosperity. In peace building there is need to concentrate on efforts to build relationships of trust with others.

Despina Namwembe spoke about the United Religions Initiative as a way to work together and appreciate diversity. URI Cooperation Circles (CCs) in Uganda include the Youth Initiative Mission Cooperation Circle. She encouraged the youth to consider what it would mean to create a CC without the attitude of "what /how will I benefit?" She said in her own experience that the most valuable part of her experience was meeting people of faiths she did not know and learning how people can be together and work towards one goal despite their different religious beliefs

Participants committed to:

- establishing a network and keeping in touch
- understanding and accepting others
- sharing knowledge
- relationship building with neighbors, family, and peers, etc.
- training
- promoting friendship with others
- involving friends to let them know more about URI
- holding bigger gatherings of this kind.

Proposed activities included: seminars and workshops; visiting other churches; public talks; participation in environmental conservation; news placements and a newsletter; leaflets; regular meetings.

The workshop was such a success that it ended with a unanimous decision to go ahead and form a URI Youth Initiative Mission Cooperation Circle.

This workshop was led by URI Peacebuilder Shabnam Olinga. To learn more about Shabnam, visit our Members Corner. This workshop was sponsored by the U.S. Institute of Peace through a grant to URI.

Peacebuilding with EDICISA: Harare, Zimbabwe

EDICISA (Ecumenical Documentation and Information Center in Southern Africa) launched a three-year regional training program on peace building with a one-day workshop in December 2002 aimed at promoting non-violent language in the media. Presenters included Mr. Rashmeat Mukundu, of the Media Institute of Southern Africa, Dr. Chivaura, from the University of Zimbabwe, Mr. Supa Mandiwanzira of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, Mr. Bornwell Chakaodza of the privately owned Standard newspaper, and Dr. Mahoso. The twenty five participants were drawn from the various media houses, Church organizations, Muslim organizations, educational institutions and NGOs.

Some highlights from the discussion:

The Rev. Murombedzi Kuchera pointed out, journalists are society's keepers who, with their pens, can protect or destroy us: "their pens are more venomous than the venom of the most poisonous snake on earth".

As reported by Rashmeat Mukundu, research and information officer of MISA, the Zimbabwe Government is very aware of the destabilizing potential power of the press, and is additionally suspicious that the media is being manipulated by Western powers. This has led to some repressive media laws that have been introduced since 2000.

Dr. Chivaura spoke of the importance for tolerance, and the expression of diverse opinions in the media. He pointed out that mutual respect between the two constituencies of the Media and the State is called for, with recognition that both are called to serve the public.

Supa Mandiwanzira of the ZBC addressed participants on the role of the media in peace building. "There is a pressing need for the media to accurately report on issues and avoid taking sides because by doing so we are putting fire to the violence because people who read our work would then burn for revenge."

Bornwell Chakaodza of the Standard newspaper, while addressing the same topic as Mandiwanzira, made it clear that the Church and other religions must share the burden with the media in peace building, and to take care not to become like the false prophets and priests of the Old Testament.

Speaking on the professional standards and ethics on reporting, Dr. Tafatoaona Mahosa noted that there is need to regulate the media for the public good. He also pointed out that

the African vision of media morality is based on the ubuntu concept, therefore having a much broader application which is more circular in its thinking than the more commonly accepted linear framework.

During the plenary session, a number of views were expressed:

- a need to move away from the culture of looting and lying
- the polarization of the media as a major concern
- good news should also be featured in the media
- a partnership between the Church and the Media should be pursued
- media should be guided by relational rather than contractual arrangements, that media ethics should reflect African values

The key focus of the concluding brainstorming session was on whether the press is a facilitator or obstacle to social progress and national development. It was agreed that the role of the media should be to facilitate national dialogue.

This workshop was led by URI Peacebuilder Tendai Chikuku. To learn more about Tendai, visit our Members Corner. This workshop was sponsored by the U.S. Institute of Peace through a grant to URI.

Peace Building Awareness Workshop: Lilongwe, Malawi

The Lilongwe Cooperation Circle, organized a two day training workshop for fifteen participants led by two facilitators in December, 2002. While there is no war in Malawi, the country experiences religious, political, economic and social conflicts, often marked by intolerance that erupts into violence. The broad aim of the workshop was to create awareness of the causes, structures and management of conflict, and to develop skills of conflict transformation so that participants could return to their diverse institutions as agents of peace.

Following are some of the tools and activities utilized to build this awareness:

- Participants drew simple pictures as a way to talk about reasons for conflict at all levels. Through role-play and dramatization, participants discussed different forms of conflict management.
- Communication skills needed to deal with conflict were illustrated through the "broken telephone" game.
- "I" messages were practiced whereby when resolving conflict each participant talks about themselves and how they feel rather than accusing the other person in some way.
- Active Listening was practiced as a method of solving problems and decreasing chances of misunderstanding the others.
- Participants role-played a religious conflict mediation.
- Participants listed forces that drive people towards violence such as fear, anger, helplessness, frustration, competition for resources and dynamics between rich and poor. Discussion of forces that restrain people from violence such as desire for peace, ethical teachings, respect for human life, intermarriages, economic interdependency, personal friendships, value and upbringing. It was pointed out that

violence is likely when negative forces overwhelm the positive ones. It was discussed that violence should not be used to resolve conflict because both the aggressor and the attacked are losers.

- Group activities and role-plays were done to illustrate that non-violent action is essential element in conflict transformation and peace building.

During the plenary the following examples of tactics of non-violent action in response to violent situations came up; Women stripping naked in protest of tribal war, placing a live baby in the middle of battle and lying down in front of a combat

Groups also discussed the following:

- Symbols can play a powerful role in arousing conflict as well as reducing it e.g. temples, sacred time and event, religious holidays sacred animals etc.
- Authority can play a powerful role in arousing violence and reducing it e.g. religious leaders can create a strong sense of belonging or can reduce the ability of militant leaders to attract followers.

In groups, participants brainstormed on how communities can be made more peaceful, and the consequences of violence on development. They examined how intolerance, a common aspect in Malawi, can erupt into violence, and examined the constitution of Malawi for sections that address peace.

The justice of the Western legal system was discussed, specifically how it encourages human rights and the rule of law but it is punitive, conflictual, impersonal and state centered. It encourages the denial of responsibility and empathy on the part of offenders. It leaves victims out ignoring their needs it doesn't heal their wounds.

Participants also discussed the following:

- Examples of people, organizations, other religions that worked successfully with people of their religion.
- What attitudes of other religions are offensive to their religion
Examples of practices, assumptions of their religion that may be hurtful to other beliefs; Texts or doctrines most likely to be employed in support of violence.
- How politicians use religion for political ends and negotiating for peace in the eventual conflicts.
- The role of religious leadership in conflict or in peace building.

This workshop was led by URI Peacebuilders Bruno Banda and Eve Maliwichi. To learn more about Bruno and Eve, visit our Members Corner.

This workshop was sponsored by the U.S. Institute of Peace through a grant.