

# Partners in Leadership

## United Religions Initiative



Best Practices that Exemplify  
URI Values and Enliven Leadership

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# URI PARTNERS IN LEADERSHIP

## Best Organizational Practices that Exemplify URI Values

During the last several years the URI community has enjoyed an array of effective practices, lessons and experiences that have advanced our work and enlivened us as a community. Building from the experiences at URI global summits and regional assemblies and CC initiatives on five different continents, we have had an opportunity to collect some of the best practices that exemplify the values and purpose of the URI and to consider how to include this expertise as we go forward. This collection is a small reflection of the talent provided by URI community.

On every continent there are URI leaders with experiences and expertise in the areas described below who are willing to help others. Please contact the URI office in San Francisco and we will connect you with resource people.

### 1. Appreciative Inquiry

In the URI context, Appreciative Inquiry has proven itself, again and again, to be a powerful tool for bringing people together from diverse backgrounds. Grounded in a belief that calling a group to focus on a problem creates a practice of deficit thinking and ties people to what has failed in the past, AI asks people to recall and share the best of their past experiences. At the start of past regional gatherings and global summits, participants were invited to form pairs and engage one another in conversation. Sample questions are:

*We have all been part of efforts where we have joined with others and brought dreams of a better world into being. For the moment I would like you to reflect on a "high point" in your life experience -- a time when you were involved in something significant or meaningful. Reflect on a time when perhaps...*

- *your deepest energies were called upon;*
- *you gave your whole best self to something;*
- *you were listening, perhaps with a spiritual ear, to what the world was calling for from you and others;*
- *whole new paths or possibilities emerged;*
- *changes, small or large, were made that at first seemed impossible;*
- *visions of a better world were actually brought into being.*

*Please share with me the story and how it unfolded. Without being too humble, please share what you contributed to this effort. Are there lessons that might be brought to this gathering?*

*Each of our communities of faith has special gifts -- traditions, beliefs, practices, values -- to bring to the arena of interfaith cooperation and action. As you think about your community of faith, what are some of its most positive qualities or gifts that make it capable of working cooperatively with others of different faiths to create a better world for all people?*

- *Are there special texts or passages or quotes that stand out for you?*
- *A story or parable?*

- *Historical experiences?*
  - *Capabilities, commitments, or values?*
- Please share these with me.*

The personal experiences and the valuing of our diverse traditions such questions evoke, and the relationships that are created as the answers are shared in one-on-one interviews and then in small groups, provide a foundation of trust, mutual respect and a recognition of common ground in the midst of diversity. They create a climate of careful listening and a spirit of cooperation and inquiry. Building on this foundation, participants co-create a positive vision of a shared future powerful enough to motivate the cooperative action necessary to transform the past.

In discovering Appreciative Inquiry, the URI found a process for creating an organization that reflected the values we felt the organization should embody. At the center of those values was a belief in the essential nature of interfaith cooperation that honors, indeed celebrates, diversity and yet constantly strives to discover common vision leading to shared action for a better world.

## **2. Welcoming the Gift of Diversity - Valuing Voices That Are Not Often Heard**

Since the first Global Summit in 1996, the URI has engaged people in global inquiries about the values, visions, and potential of the URI. During the first years of inquiry that included people on every continent, a consensus emerged that the URI should “value voices that respect others” and “listen to voices that are not often heard.”

These values have been reflected at URI regional conferences and global summits by an enduring commitment to seek out a broad diversity of people and to provide scholarship monies for people who need it.

A “maximum mix” of participants who have a stake in the vision of the URI have brought vitality to URI gatherings and an unlimited potential for cooperation. Young adults, an equitable number of women to men, professionals from different sectors of society such as business, the arts, education, and the media have been consciously sought out and invited to participate in the URI gatherings.

Because of the history and present practice of oppression and persecution of native peoples around the world, and because it is especially important in this time of environmental crisis that their spiritual wisdom about Earth be part of the conversation, the URI has made a special effort to invite indigenous peoples to the URI regional conferences and global summits.

Invitations to a maximum diversity of people, money set aside for scholarships, and inclusion of people whose voices are not always heard has continued to strengthen the URI in pursuit of its Purpose.

URI has also kept a close eye on translation needs, seeking to provide one-on-one translation for participants who need it. For the 2002 Global Assembly in Rio de Janeiro, URI set up simultaneous translation capacity (into Portuguese) for the plenary sessions and also invited volunteer translators to attend and provide translations for individuals.

### 3. Shared Leadership

From the beginning, URI conferences and summit gatherings have been planned and implemented by an expanding circle of leaders. With initial help from Professor David Cooperrider, Diana Whitney and PhD students at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland Ohio, and URI leaders from every continent, the URI continues to learn the art of sharing leadership. URI conferences require many talents: to manage logistics, organize participant's travel needs, plan conference space and decoration, coordinate religious services and practices, plan the agenda for the conference, and lead and facilitate sessions, just to name a few.

Rather than delegating all of these responsibilities to professional and paid staff, the URI has benefited by an increasing number of extraordinary leaders from diverse backgrounds, ages, religions, and expertise who often volunteer to take responsibility and share leadership. Before the conference, planning teams usually share information via email for several months and then meet together for one full day directly before the start of the conference to organize the final details.

### 4. Open Space Technology

While it is customary at regional or global assemblies for one or two honored speakers to give speeches or for a panel of knowledgeable people to share their perspectives, leadership within the URI has been significantly advanced by an organizational process called Open Space. This process creates space and time for any participant at an assembly to host a discussion around a subject that is dear to their heart or for which they have a particular expertise. Any participant who wishes to host a discussion is invited to make a sign stating the topic. One by one, they offer a short "promotion" for their session. A room assignment and a meeting time is assigned to each presenter and placed on a large grid that can be seen by everyone. Assembly participants choose what sessions they would like to attend.

In the URI where there are many leaders and many exciting and new ideas to share, Open Space has proven to be a useful process that gives many people an a chance to share their ideas and become a leader in their favorite topic for a session.

Open Space Technology was developed by Harrison Owen as a means for large groups to deal with varied and complex issues in a short period of time entirely through self-organization. Like Appreciative Inquiry, it is both an organizational methodology and an approach to accessing leadership inherent in any group toward coherent planning without a superimposed hierarchical structure. As such it has many implications for how to be a leader that embodies these values and practices. One of Harrison Owen's latest books is, The Spirit of Leadership: Liberating the Leader in Each of Us.

### 5. World Café

The World Café is an intentional way to create a living network of conversations around questions that matter. It is a creative methodology for hosting authentic conversations in groups of all sizes. You join several other people in a café style table in a small conversation cluster exploring a question or an issue that really matters in your life, work or community. Others are sitting nearby exploring similar questions at the same time. You won't be sitting for too long however, because half of the excitement of being a part of the World Café is the

opportunity to move to another group, visit with new people and cross pollinate ideas and insights. As the conversations connect together, collective knowledge grows and evolves. A sense of the larger whole becomes real. The wisdom of the group becomes more visible.

#### World Café Operating Principles

1. Create Hospitable Space
2. Explore Questions that Matter
3. Encourage Everyone to Contribute
4. Connect Diverse People and Ideas
5. Listen Together for Insights, Patterns, and Deeper Questions
6. Make Collective Knowledge Visible

To learn more, go to the web site: [www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com)

\*from A Resource Guide for Hosting Conversations That Matter at the World Cafe, copyright 2002 Whole Systems Associates

Another resource: Turning to One Another, Conversations to Restore Hope in the Future, by Margaret J. Wheatley, author of Leadership and the New Science

## 6. Hospitality - Creating Safe Space

One of the most important lessons in evidence in all URI gatherings is the power of hospitality, the importance of making all who attend feel welcome and valued.

An important part of hospitality is creating a safe space for all participants. At minimum, safe space means that each person can be fully present and participate in a respectful way that honors what they hold dearest. Many of the Principles in the Charter point to practices that help create safe space. For instance, "listen and speak with respect to deepen mutual understanding and trust" and "members of the URI shall not be coerced to participate in any ritual or be proselytized."

Over the years we have come to recognize that safe space is not the same for all people. What might feel natural and comfortable for some may be uncomfortable for others or even a violation of a religious practice or principle. For example, for some people hugging is a natural form of greeting, for others hugging is a violation of cultural sensibility and/or religious vows. For some alcohol is a part of their religious observance and a welcome component of social gatherings, for others the consumption of alcohol is avoided for health reasons and/or prohibited by their religion.

As we seek to understand what makes a safe space, it is important to recognize that to create a safe space is not a guarantee that no one will ever feel uncomfortable. Sometimes feeling uncomfortable is necessary for positive growth and change. There is a profound difference between being uncomfortable because we are being challenged to see the world or another person in a new way, and a feeling that something precious to us is being violated. As a community, the URI is committed to become ever more skillful in creating safe space that protects us from violation and enables us appropriately to risk growth that initially might be uncomfortable.

## 7. Religious Ceremonies and Sacred Practices

In the same way the URI continues to learn what it means to create safe space, we also continue to learn what it means to be a bridge building organization that respects the sacred wisdom and differences among religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions.

One way to deepen understanding and respect has been to integrate a diversity of religious ceremony, prayer, meditation or sacred practices into regional assemblies and global assemblies. Usually, about an hour is set aside in the early morning for meditation and prayer practices. Participants from different faith backgrounds lead these practices that have included silent and movement meditation practices from various religions, sacred ceremony, and song and dance.

In addition, participants from different faith traditions are invited to self-organize a brief program that shares something from their religious teaching, prayers or practices with the entire gathering at the start of every morning and afternoon session. Sikh chanting, Raja meditation, Shabbat services, Islamic teachings from the Koran, Christian agape meal, Hindu music and chanting, and a Wiccan ceremony are some of the expressions that have been offered at URI gatherings for the benefit of all. Participants are invited to experience and share in these kinds of events but are not coerced in any way to participate.

## 8. Dreaming the Future - Imagining the Possibilities

The United Religions Initiative began as a vision - a global dream on the eve of the new century and millennium of what was possible. In the last four years and through a series of activities that asked people to vision their dream of a better world, a collective purpose emerged for the URI: *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 pursuit of this purpose, dreaming has continued. At URI assemblies, participants are invited to take part in dreaming exercises. "Imagine that it is 30 years in to the future. Imagine the URI is changing the world; imagine the types of contributions being made; imagine how the URI is growing as an organization; and, imagine a world where the people of different faiths are living together in peace for the good of the Earth."

At the North America Regional Assembly in June of 2001 participants were asked to create a "Dream Book." Small groups worked together to share their dreams of the URI making a difference in the world. Each group created a large poster image of their dream which then was bound as a large book and offered as a gift to other regional assemblies. "Dreaming activities" can take many forms like the creation of a dream book or declarations, or an assortment of skits, imaginary news shows, or collages. What is constant in all of these differing activities is the sense of value Einstein described when he said, "imagination is more powerful than knowledge." The URI is learning that it is in people's dreams and the sharing of those dreams with one another that action is inspired and positive change begins.

## 9. Engaging the URI Charter to Deepen Understanding

### Background

Since June 1996 thousands of people have shared their visions and worked together to create the URI. It is an organization for global good rooted in shared spiritual values. People from many different cultures and perspectives are working to create an organization that is inclusive, non-hierarchical and de-centralized; one that enhances cooperation, autonomy and individual opportunity. This co-creative work offered by people of many cultures is producing a unique organization composed of self-organizing groups which operate locally and are connected globally.

The URI's Charter has been spoken into being by a myriad of voices from around the world. Its essential spirit, values and vision are expressed in the Preamble, Purpose and Principles. Together, they inspire, ground and guide all URI activity. The Charter includes:

**Preamble** - the call that inspires us to create the URI now and continue to create it everyday;

**Purpose** - the statement that draws us together in common cause;

**Principles** - the fundamental beliefs that guide our structure, decisions and content;

**Organization Design** - the way we organize to enhance cooperation and magnify spirit;

**Guidelines for Action** - an action agenda to inspire and guide our worldwide URI community.

### Engage the Charter

You are warmly invited to participate in our growing community and become part of this extraordinary force for good in the world. This Charter is your invitation to participate in its on-going creation. Read our Charter and then plan to engage others in conversation. Here are some ideas:

#### a) Create Conversations

##### Preamble and Purpose

Ask people to read aloud the Preamble and Purpose. Take turns reading each paragraph. Then, ask the group to reflect on the following question:

When in your life have you been a part of something that expressed the same values expressed in this vision? Please tell the story of what happened. What was it that you valued deeply? What difference did your experience make in your community? In your own life? Thinking back to the Charter, what words especially resonate for you and illuminate the experience you just described?

##### Principles

Ask people to read the principles, each person reading one principle. Then, ask the group to reflect on and discuss this question:

Which of these principles stand out for you as offering powerful guidance for a better way? How might we change if we lived these principles in pursuit of the URI purpose? How might living these principles change our communities and our world?

##### Organizational Design and Guidelines for Action

Ask people to work with the different sections: the Organizational Design, Global Council, Global Assembly and Guidelines for Action. (You might form pairs or small groups - each group might work with one of these sections.) Ask each group to reflect on and discuss the following questions:

What inspires you about this plan? For you, is there an image, a metaphor, or a gift from nature that helps you describe or better understand the ideal qualities expressed in this organizational plan?

### Action Agenda

As you imagine becoming a part of the living United Religions Initiative, what shared action for a better world would you like to be involved in? Which Action Area is most compelling for you? Have you already taken part in activities or projects that seek to live into any of these Action areas? Please describe your experience.

### Building the URI Together - A View of the Vision

The (funny looking) bubbles and circles on the last page of the Charter show a picture of the different kinds of structures that make up the URI. Begin with Cooperation Circles and read to the left! In pairs or small groups imagine and discuss why you might want to participate in a Cooperation Circle, or become an Affiliate.

Imagine a growing global community of Cooperation Circles. Imagine how one might take root where you live or around a particular interest. Imagine how such a group could spring into being from the passion, determination, creativity and resourcefulness of the people in this group. Having ideas does not mean you must act on every one! What ideas from your group seem most needed?

Explore why might a group you already belong to desire to foster a Cooperation Circle as part of this work? Imagine what are all the benefits you might receive by being in touch with similar groups around the world? Imagine how would your actions benefit the worldwide community?

Affiliates support the URI but do not desire the rights and responsibilities of Cooperation Circles. What groups or organizations do you know that might consider becoming affiliates? What individuals might you invite to become an affiliate? Would you consider becoming an affiliate yourself? How might you tell others about the URI and its global vision for cooperation and peace?

## 10. The Circle

### *THE CIRCLE*

*Every thing the power of the world does is done in a Circle.  
The sky is round, and I have heard that the  
earth is round like a ball, and so are all of the stars.  
The wind, in its greatest power, whirls.  
Birds make their nests in Circles,*

*for theirs is the same religion as ours.  
The sun comes forth and goes down again in a Circle.  
The moon does the same, and both are round.  
Even the seasons form a great Circle in their changing  
and always come back again to where they were.  
The life of a person is a Circle from childhood to childhood  
and so it is in everything where power moves. Black Elk*

Meeting and inquiring in a circle is a simple and powerful way to bring people together that invites a deeper listening, a sacred presence and a voice of spirit/soul to be heard. People gather in a circle with the intention to ease the pain around the world and envision a better way, a way that brings peace instead of more war and violence, and mutual support for creative and effective new actions.

## **Partners in Leadership - 2002-2003 Additions**

### **Introduction**

The URI is dedicated to organizational learning and adaptation. Each year, good organizational ideas emerge that are useful to share with the URI community. If you have questions or would like more information about any of these best practices, please contact Sally Mahé, Organizational Development, email: [sally@uri.org](mailto:sally@uri.org)

### **11. Teleconference Calls by Topic**

In 2002, Dr. Steve Fitzgerald, regional support staff for North America region, designed a series of conference calls to provide opportunities for CCs and affiliates in North America to share experiences, ideas, and questions with other affiliates and CC members.

Steve believes that conversation is a vital source of inspiration, relationship building, and organizational innovation. Steve discovered that CC members and affiliates are renewed when they connect with others to exchange views, information and good ideas about topics that interest them. Calls provide staff an important opportunity to listen to CCs first hand experiences.

Calls focused on different topics. Steve asked different CC leaders and URI staff to coordinate the different calls. Each call coordinator planned an agenda for the call in advance, including preparing an opening meditation or prayer.

All CCs in N. America received information about how to connect with the call. An inexpensive telephone service was used. Each person paid for their own long distance charges. Most calls lasted 1 1/2 hours, AND 6-10 people participated in each call. The average cost was about \$5 or less per participant per hour.

Brief summaries were written after each call and posted to the CC website.

Teleconference: Topics included:

1. Leadership Development
2. Peace-Building
3. Communications
4. Youth Engagement in Interfaith and URI
5. Resource Generation within CCs, URI-NA, and Globally

North American CC members and affiliates received the following instructions for participating in the calls:

- Each participant pays for long distance charges.
- Each call is scheduled for one hour, but the participants are free to extend the call if they wish.
- Each call can include up to 30 people. If you would like to be on the call, email the contact person for that call to let them know, then follow instructions to dial into the call.
- You are free to join any call that you feel drawn to, even if only to listen.
- Each call is co-led by 2-4 people from different CCs, global council reps, and/or support staff who have personal experience and insight to share regarding the topic of the call.

## 12. URI Home Gathering

Partial information about the Home Gathering is included below. For a complete Home Gathering packet, go to the URI website: [www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org). Home Gathering prepared by Kay Lindahl and Sally Mahé.

### **Background**

The URI is a grassroots organization. It calls forth people, as Mahatma Gandhi said, “to be the change they want to see in the world.” URI calls people to use their creativity and resourcefulness to promote interfaith cooperation, peace building and respect wherever they are.

This guide offers information about how to encourage people to support this vision and join the URI by inviting them to an Interfaith Home Gathering. (a person’s home provides a lovely context of hospitality but interfaith Home Gatherings can take place just about anywhere.)

### **Purposes of a URI Interfaith Home Gathering**

- To engage people in sharing the vision of the URI in a way that draws upon their own sense of meaning, creativity and commitment.
- To enjoy getting to know people better from a variety of backgrounds.

- To invite people to consider joining the URI, an expanding community of people from around the world who are committed to making their vision for inter-religious peacemaking and cooperation real.

#### Various outcomes of an Interfaith Home Gathering:

- People may want just to affirm their commitment to this vision - to reach out to people of different faith backgrounds with respect and acceptance.
- People may want to meet again in an informal way to continue getting to know one another better.
- Some people may wish to become affiliates of the URI or they may want to form a URI Cooperation Circle. URI Cooperation Circles are groups of diverse people, associations and organizations who are committed to the URI purpose and want to pursue the URI vision and purpose in their own unique ways.

#### How to Host an Interfaith Home Gathering:

- Invite 8-12 people from different religious, spiritual and cultural backgrounds. (Ideally, you might invite some people who know about the URI already or who have experience with interfaith activity and others who are hearing about interfaith work for the first time.)
- Become familiar with the Guidelines contained in the Home Gathering packet. Packet includes:
  1. An invitation letter
  2. A proposed schedule for a three hour gathering
  3. Directions and guidelines for leading a gathering
  4. An appreciative interview exercise
  5. Next steps

Coaching is available. If you would like assistance in hosting a gathering, please call the URI office. In addition to the San Francisco office, there are active URI Cooperation Circles in many parts of the world. Contact URI San Francisco office to locate people near you who could help. 1.415.561.2300.

For a complete URI Home Gathering packet, please go [www.uri.org/resources](http://www.uri.org/resources)

# Partners in Leadership Additions 2003 -2004

## Introduction

With over 240 Cooperation Circles in over 50 countries, a multitude of excellent projects, lessons, programs and practices for interfaith cooperation and peacebuilding are emerging in every corner of the URI. The three activities offered here are just a few of the many practical resources and best practices offered by URI CCs throughout the world.

These "best practices" are offered by Gerardo Gonzalez, convener of the Spiritual Forum of Santiago for Peace CC and URI Global Council trustee, Latin America; and by Marites Guingona-Africa and Shakuntala Moorjani-Vaswani, co-conveners of the Peacemakers Circle CC in Metro Manila, Philippines. Shakun is a URI Global Council member and Marites is the URI regional coordinator for the Pacific.

### 13. Observance of International Day of Peace, September 21

Offered by the Spiritual Forum of Santiago for Peace Cooperation Circle

## Reflection

Our celebration of the International Day of Peace, honored every year by the United Nations on September 21, was spread over three days and organized around three different kinds of events. The three different programs allowed people to join together in solidarity for peace and offered different ways of people from different faith traditions to feel comfortable joining together in pray.

People who preferred to pray in their own faith home were welcome to do so and still participate in the event; people in schools had the opportunity to offer prayers for peace appropriate for multi-cultural and multi-religious school settings; people who wanted to participate in interfaith prayer in the same place with people from various religions and traditions were welcome to pray for peace in that setting.

The format for this event gave full respect to people's preferences while still honoring the act of praying together for peace.

Each year CCs can share what they plan to do on the occasion of the UN International Day of Peace. By sharing ideas and proposals, we learn together and consolidate URI as a network of local interfaith organizations.

*Submitted by Dr. Gerardo Gonzalez, Coordinator of the Spiritual Forum of Santiago for Peace, URI Global Council Trustee, Latin America.*

## **Different Levels of Engagement**

This event took place over three days and included three components:

### **1. Day One: Prayers for Peace by Faith Communities:**

Faith communities belonging to diverse religions and spiritual traditions were invited to gather in their own places of worship (churches, temples, synagogues, mosques, etc.) using prayers and practices from their own traditions. Each faith community was aware that other faith groups were doing the same throughout the city of Santiago on the same day. (September 20)

### **2. Day Two: Prayers for Peace at the Schools:**

Private and public schools were invited to celebrate the International Day of Peace by offering prayers which were of an ecumenical or interfaith character. (September 21)

### **3. Day Three: Prayers for Peace at a Central Location:**

A central Ceremony of Interfaith Prayers for Peace in the World, presented the evening of September 22nd at a huge hall of Catholic University, was the closing event. Forty flags from different countries brought together all the peoples of the world. Representatives from thirteen religions and spiritual traditions (including Christians, Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, Sikhs, Sufis, Baha'i and Mapuches) were seated in a circle at the center of the hall surrounded by a multi-religious audience.

The leaders prayed one by one, using their own language, songs and rituals. At the end of each prayer, a flower was deposited in a flower vase at the very center of the circle. Thus, at the end of the round of prayers, a beautiful bouquet of flowers emerged, representing "our unity in diversity."

A minute in silence after each prayer allowed all the people attending the ceremony to pray simultaneously for peace. The event ended with all the participants reading in loud voice a "Declaration for Peace in the World" and singing for peace.

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## 14. The Peacemakers' Interfaith Youth Circle

Offered by the Peacemaker's Cooperation Circle, Manila, Philippines

### Reflection

In today's world where news of violence is daily fare on television, and where movies like *The Terminator*, *The Matrix Reloaded*, *X-Men* and *Star Wars* invade our consciousness, I have wondered how matters of faith, religion and peace are being perceived by our younger generation.

As our response to this concern, we at the Peacemakers' Circle took time to plan and organize an interfaith dialogue program for the youth. Below are two accounts of how we fared in our endeavors to reach out to youths of diverse cultures and beliefs in Metro Manila. They have responded overwhelmingly well to our invitation and have come, in their diversity (to the common ground we prepared for them), with willingness to dialogue with one another and to share with each other their visions of peace concerning their future.

We are heartened by this outcome. In their passionate responses and their eagerness to stay overtime to continue with the dialogue we saw the seeds of hope in the youth. This experience is encouraging us to continue our work with them and to carry on nurturing the seeds of hope in their hearts with our presence and guidance, our enthusiasm, and our support. We pray that those seeds will grow and bear good fruit in the generations to come.

Marites Africa

### Overview:

Number of Participants: 33 (with ages ranging from 18-35)

Religions/faith traditions: Christianity (Roman Catholic), Islam, Hindu, Shinji Shumei Kai (a spiritual expression of the Shinto tradition), and various indigenous traditions of the Philippines

Topic: Questions on Religion and Peace

Facilitator: Mr. Marco Gutang, a college professor of Peace Education

### Description:

The session started late because of the rain. While waiting for others to arrive, I encouraged those present to converse with their neighbors and get to know one another informally. Because of limited space, we sat around an inner and an outer circle with chairs in the outer and cushions on the floor in the inner circle. When most of the youths arrived we started formal introductions. They stated their name and what school/university they attended and what religion they practiced. As Executive Director of the Peacemakers' Circle, I welcomed them and briefly shared my story about how I came to know about the interfaith movement

through the URI, and how I was inspired to pursue the vision of peace among religions, and to commit myself to helping to realize it.

I showed them a video on URI that included interviews with people from diverse faiths who helped give birth to the URI. I also showed the video on the first URI Global Assembly held in Rio last year. We observed reactions to the videos. We saw how eager they were about what was being said. After the video many expressed their enthusiasm for the URI vision and purpose!

After hearing feedback about the video, Marco Gutang facilitated the workshop. He offered 7 questions to the group. Before each question, the participants were asked to find a partner (a person whom they did not know) and take turns with that partner in responding to the questions asked. After 5 minutes, a chime signaled them to return to the big circle and share their responses with the big group. This went on in the same manner for the six other questions. After the 7 rounds, the youths not only had been able to share their thoughts and feelings concerning the questions asked, they also had the chance to meet 7 different people around the circle!

Here are the "tough" questions asked by Marco:

1. Who is Allah/God/Buddha/Supreme Being? How do I experience God/Allah/Buddha in my life?

2. I see my religion/faith tradition as...

I see other religions/faith traditions as...

3. Other religions/faith traditions see my own faith as...

My own religion/faith tradition sees other religions as...

4. My parents taught me that my religion is...

My parents taught me that other religions are...

6. My religion taught me that my religion is...

My religion taught me that other religions are...

7. My idea of peace is...

My religion's idea of peace is....

One bright young man later exclaimed that those questions were provocative and could not all be answered in one day! But Marco wanted to break the ice and get them all warmed up for the next session. I think his strategy worked. Many asked to extend the time or come together in the circle again at another date to continue the conversations. As the rounds went on and partners were changed at the strike of the bell, Shakun, Pal Kashim (a Muslim mother) and I watched from the sidelines. It was amusing to see the young people preferring to huddle together in small circles rather than opting to move to the adjacent rooms for more space to breathe! They obviously liked to be herded close to one another despite the babble of voices around them. It was a wonder how they could hear each other's voices above the din!

Finally, they were called back to the big circle where thoughts and sentiments were shared about the experience. One Muslim woman (a real-life princess!) expressed the uneasiness she felt at the beginning of the exercise. She said that she was not used to talking about their religion with non-Muslims.

Although she had been co-facilitating interfaith dialogue workshops with fellow youths before, this was the first time she was actually experiencing being a participant. This was a new experience for her and she felt rather uncomfortable. In the end she acknowledged that it was interesting for her and proceeded to join our photo sessions with gusto.

Another point that elicited passionate responses from various quarters was the one raised by an indigenous, *Datu*, a bright tribal youth leader. He said that *God allowed wars to happen so that we can know the meaning of peace, and continue to strive to attain it.* Almost immediately, hands went up and voices were heard to qualify that statement or to refute it. Another member of the tribal youth group quoted the song, *Imagine*, by John Lennon, saying that perhaps we should *"imagine a world with no religion....perhaps then peace can come about."* Hands started to come up and a chorus of voices ensued either in laughing protest, or in tentative agreement. When openly chided by some of his friends about this comment, the young man calmly said, *"Well, I am only saying IMAGINE...and WHAT IF...?"*

Conversations went past the 6 p.m. and many wanted to continue with the dialogue. We ended with the promise of getting together again next month.

## 15. Interfaith Dialogue: Visions of Peace Among Religions

Offered by the Peacemakers' Circle CC, Metro-Manila, The Philippines

*Marites Guignona, CC convener and URI Regional Coordinator for the Pacific*

### Reflection

This is a 3-hour interfaith dialogue workshop program designed for high school and college level students. Its purpose is to help the youth participants become aware of the need for people of faith from diverse religions, spiritual expressions, and indigenous traditions to reach out to one another in the spirit of true dialogue for peace and the common good. It is hoped that through the experience of dialogue mutual respect, understanding, cooperation can come about and

help foster bonds of friendship among its participants. It is also hoped that these friendships will lead to mutual sharing of visions of peace, and to the collective endeavor of exploring ways in which collaborative work is possible in realizing shared visions.

### Program Outline

#### *A. Opening Chime*

Lighting of Peace Candle - Silent Prayer - Introductions

#### *B. PowerPoint slide show presentation: Are We Reading the Signs of the Times?*

-Images of conflict and war in the world.

-Religion is involved in virtually all the wars.

-Religion has a clear moral responsibility to act for peace...

#### *C. The message of Peace in My Faith Tradition: a 5-minute sharing by:*

Reverend Fr. Leonardo Mercado, SVD - Executive Secretary of the Episcopal Commission on Inter-religious Dialogue. Prof. Alireza Kunting - Founder and President, Islamic Relations Rev. Talampitiye Sumangala Thero - Buddhist Monk from Sri Lanka Dr. Shakuntala Moorjani-Vaswani - Board Member, The Hindu Temple D.

#### *D. Small Circle Discussion (10 minutes):*

a. What struck you about the video presentation and/or sharing of the representatives of the different faith traditions?

b. What questions are in your mind now after having heard the different faith representatives?

#### *E. Big Circle Sharing (30 minutes)*

F. Creative Visualization exercise: IMAGINE A WORLD AT PEACE (5 min)

G. Individual Reflection (10 minutes)

1. My vision of a world at peace is...

2. What are my personal blocks that hinder me from helping to make this vision a reality?

3. What can I do to overcome those blocks so that I can begin to realize my vision?

H. *Big Circle Sharing* (20 min)

I. Explore ways of helping each other realize the vision: Draw/create personal visions (artwork) in small groups.

J. Group Presentation of artwork

K. My Commitment to Peace (a one-page form participants fill out individually)

L. Closing Silence: The Peacemakers' Prayer

### Evaluation

The workshop was well received by the students. They seemed to engage themselves quite eagerly in the activities. Questions raised at the open forum were simple and forthright. There were a couple of sensitive moments when one student questioned our Buddhist monk about the statement he made regarding the Buddhists non-belief in God. The perplexed girl asked the kindly monk, *"Is it not said somewhere that one who does not believe in God is a fool?"* For one brief moment a stunned silence fell upon the assembly of 70. I had to intervene and ask to rephrase the question so that my Buddhist friend could respond with his usually kindly manner. Another unsettling question was asked about the Islamic Hamas and the human bombs in Palestine: *"Why do Muslims seem to glory acts of violence?"* one bright girl asked. I heaved a sigh of relief as my Muslim brother Ali responded to that with a sweet smile. Without batting an eyelash he said that not all who claim to be Muslims are true Muslims. There are those do not know the teachings well. But Ali candidly pointed out that in Islam, Muslims are also taught to fight when they are oppressed or victimized by acts of injustice.

The workshop proceeded well and ended beautifully with colorful visions of a world at peace 30 years from now drawn in white sheets of paper. Each group of students presented their vision to the assembly amid lively bantering and hoots of laughter at the various antics made by each group of presenters. Shakun whispered in my ear, *"Marites, this is our dream come true...to reach out to the youths!"* I said "amen" to that.

The workshop was the first step, the beginning of our campus tour. *Inshallah*, in September we will be traveling outside Metro Manila to bring this workshop to 170 students at the University of Cebu. Sister Sandra Clemente, in charge of the student affairs program of that university, is helping to make our workshop possible. Sister Sandra is also the founder of the *Kalinaw URI CC* based in Cebu (a city in the Visayas region of our country). There are many possibilities for this workshop to be shared in various colleges and universities around the country and much to look forward to!

Marites Africa and Shakun Moorjani-Vaswani

## Partners in Leadership Additions - 2006

### 16. United Religions Initiative Global Council Endorses Darfur Unity Statement: *A Model for Collective Action*

Submitted by Stephen Fuqua, initiator of Darfur Project and Regional Coordinator for North America Region

*What follows is a description of how a small, international group of individuals active in the URI came together in response to a global crisis and agreed on two responses in keeping with the URI charter. These responses resulted in Global Council support for the Darfur Unity Statement, an unknown number of individuals and groups contacting their government representatives to support international intervention, and three independent articles mentioning URI actions with respect to Darfur.*

Sometime in early 2004, tribal warfare in eastern Sudan's Darfur region began to unfold into what most would call out-and-out genocide, perpetrated by government backed "Arab" militias against the "African" Darfurians (both are Muslim groups). In January 2005, the U.N.'s International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur issued a report to the Secretary General that included the following assessment:

"Based on a thorough analysis of the information gathered in the course of its investigations, the Commission established that the Government of the Sudan and the Janjaweed are responsible for serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law amounting to crimes under international law. In particular, the Commission found that Government forces and militias conducted indiscriminate attacks, including killing of civilians, torture, enforced disappearances, destruction of villages, rape and other forms of sexual violence, pillaging and forced displacement, throughout Darfur. These acts were conducted on a widespread and systematic basis, and therefore may amount to crimes against humanity."

Around the same time as this report, URI members began to express their concern at the lack of international action to halt these "indiscriminate attacks." A small group out of the many concerned individuals came together and mobilized a special effort to provide appropriate action responses to the conditions in Darfur.

Members of this group organized a special-focus e-mail listserv and invited members of CCs to join. They proceeded to research and share various kinds of information about Darfur and considered various effective ways URI members might respond. One that emerged from the discussions was a request that URI add its organizational name as a signatory to a Unity Statement written by the Save Darfur Coalition ([www.savedarfurcoalition.org](http://www.savedarfurcoalition.org)).

Representing URI members from across the United States and from Brazil, Israel, Ethiopia, Nepal, Pakistan and Chile, the group requested that the URI Global Council show its solidarity and desire for peace by endorsing the Unity Statement. Though the URI Global Council cannot make policy pronouncements on behalf of URI members, it can speak for itself. Reporting on the Council's agreement to support the Unity Statement, URI Executive Director Charles Gibbs said "the Standing Committee enthusiastically supports having URI be added as a signatory to the Unity Statement. A key factor leading to the committee's support was that the request came from our

grassroots representatives and members who had been seriously considering this issue."

A second outcome of the group's deliberation was the crafting of a letter to interfaith leaders throughout the United States requesting their support for a campaign to encourage passage of the Darfur Accountability Act in the US Senate. The Accountability Act would have provided additional American aid in the region and work to secure additional African Union and UN peacekeeping troops specifically for Darfur. (Incidentally, a weaker version of the Darfur Accountability Act passed Congress in late 2005, though funding for its provisions was later removed from the budget).

Though the letter-writing campaign did not generate any responses from other religious leaders, a press release ([www.interfaithnews.net/wp/2005/04/07/urigc-darfur/](http://www.interfaithnews.net/wp/2005/04/07/urigc-darfur/)) discussing both actions did prompt responses from several media outlets and blogs, who mentioned the URI in articles on faith-based responses to Darfur (these included *The Philadelphia Tribune*, *Christian Today*, and *The Christian Post*)

Deborah Moldow beautifully summed up the group's sentiment in saying, "...*We don't have the answers to how to make a genuine difference in the suffering in Darfur. But the URI is beginning to grapple with the question, which is part of a larger question essential to our future in the world...it is time for the United Religions Initiative to stand up and be counted.*"

#### Steps taken in response to the genocide in Darfur:

1. Concerned individuals came together on a dedicated e-mail list.
2. The convener asked several individuals to research the work of specific organizations and news reports, and to bring their findings back to the group.
3. Two separate group actions were decided upon:
  - a. Support passage of the Darfur Accountability Act in the United States with a letter-writing campaign to religious leaders.
  - b. ask the Global Council to become a signatory to the Darfur Unity Statement.
4. A press release was written and distributed via Religion News Service.
5. The mailing list was kept open after this action to help disseminate up-to-date news and research to all who wished to stay informed.