

## Faiths Together Uganda

**Faiths /Traditions Represented:** Islam Muslim, Christian Pentecostal, Christian Anglican, Christian Catholic, Christian Seven Day Adventist, Christian Orthodox, African Spiritual traditions, Hindu Hare Krishna

**Location of CC:** AFRICA-GREAT LAKES, Seeta-Mukono, Uganda

**Key Areas of Focus:** Conflict Resolution, Interfaith/Intercultural, Peace Building

### Summary

*Faiths Together Uganda CC is located in Seeta-Mukono, Uganda. They primarily engage youth from Muslim, Pentecostal, Anglican, SDA, African Spiritual, & Orthodox communities. Faiths Together Uganda is actively working to heal fragile communal relations in the face of recent ethnic/religious violence and polarization that swept their country and region. They use song and dance to bring members of different cultures and religions together, and to pass on the message of religious tolerance. Their main programs include interfaith-intercultural clubs on school campuses and organizing an intercultural performance troupe. Faiths Together Uganda has helped many of their youth participants forge strong relationships across cultural and religious lines through collaborative action and dialogue.*

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



Buyondo Michael (extreme left) with members of Faith Together and URI-GL

The vision of Faiths Together was shaped by the events of the 2009 Buganda Crisis. In 2009, Uganda experienced a near civil turmoil where about 27 people were reported dead by Human Rights Watch; following the government's restraint of the *Kabaka* (King of Buganda Kingdom) from proceeding to commemorate the Annual Youth Day in one of his territories, Kayunga-Bugerere, in Mukono district.

During this event, the *Baganda* (people of Buganda Kingdom) in the capital, Kampala and some districts within this chieftaincy, out of protest to what they called an abuse to their King, ensued in attacks to any non-Baganda they could find. The events of the crisis

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prompted the founder, Buyondo Michael to think of an initiative that could unite people by addressing cultural and religious.

Religious and cultural based differences are very common in Uganda and can easily spark tension anywhere at any scale if not immediately addressed. In this regard, preventive approaches to cultural and religious intolerance are more desired than the erratic responses. Furthermore, Uganda has in the recent past until today faced ethnic conflict with the recent one being in the Rwenzori region in Kasese and Bundibugyo districts; where according to The Citizen News paper, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, about 90 people, including eight members of security forces, were reported dead. The reports state that most of the dead are said to be suspected attackers belonging to the *Bakonzo*, the majority ethnic tribe in the area. The Rwenzururu region is inhabited by the *Konjo* and *Amba* peoples.

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

In the midst of such tensions highlighted above, Faiths Together believes that the interfaith and cultural connections they are weaving among the young generation, is an earlier preventive remedy to offset such extremist actions. Faiths Together CC therefore strives to address such intolerance based on one's religion and culture by using the interfaith and intercultural approach to build bridges and connect people of different background and traditions. The young people of different religions/faith are brought together by the common values of love, respect, tolerance and interaction of one another's culture and religion. This is also based on the backdrop that in the Ugandan society there is a general lack of a module for children of different background to interact. Faiths Together is therefore striving to fill this gap.

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

The programs and activities at Faiths Together mainly target children in schools. They include the Interfaith-Intercultural Clubs, Intercultural Troupe, a Home Care and Bursary scheme in the forming. The Interfaith-Intercultural Clubs are based currently in four secondary schools. Here students are continuously mobilized to engage in discussions, debates and sharing about their respective faiths and cultures. This is aimed at appreciating and respecting one another's faith and culture.

The Intercultural Troupe is one where the young people of different religions and cultures get to perform through songs and dances across the region, to pass on the message of cultural and religious tolerance. The same activity is planned to be organized for free to encourage more people to love and appreciate one another and capitalize on their cultures, traditions and faith for peaceful and harmonious co-existence.



*Faiths Together Uganda CC with URI staff including Executive Director Victor Kazanjian, Liam Chinn, and Despina Nawembe.*

Children, who have faced the harsh hand of marginalization based on their faith and culture, find a safe haven at Faiths Together Home Care initiative children from the age of 3 to 21 are enrolled in this humble setting, with nothing very special offered but a home where there is love, care, sharing, joy laughter and hope in life.

Last but not least is the Bursary scheme in the forming which is planned to benefit children who are marginalized on the basis of their faith or culture. This is a response to the social outcry of children marginalized due to their faith and culture. Faiths Together doesn't have much in terms of funds for this scheme but cultivates on the little they solicit from friends, well wishers and a few proceeds made from the entertainment performances of the Cultural Troupe.

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

In Faiths Together CC bridges are being built among Muslims, Pentecostal, Anglican, SDA, Traditional African Spiritualism, and Orthodox faith.

#### **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.**

Through the programs and activities that are tailored to target children, Faiths Together uses a mix of establishing the Interfaith-Intercultural Clubs in schools, Intercultural Troupe, a Home Care and Bursary scheme in the forming.

This is coupled with opening up a Music School for young people to pass on free messages of peace, respect and tolerance for one another's culture and religion through music as well as to provide funding to the interfaith and intercultural school clubs.



Faith Together also plans to organize dialogues among the immediate community to bring people of different cultures and faith together to appreciate each other's values, norms and traditions.

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

By mobilizing students in schools, Faiths Together CC hopes that through engaging them in discussions, debates and sharing about their respective faiths and cultures; the children, youth and the general community are able to appreciate and respect one another's faith and culture.



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

Faiths Together CC has phenomenal stories that really indicate their work is improving cooperation among people of different traditions. Below are some of the highlights

An experience shared by Muzafaru Mayanja, one of the members of Faiths Together CC Interfaith/Intercultural School Clubs during a Focus Group Discussion with URI-Great Lakes. *"The most important reason that attracted me to become a member was learning about the cause interfaith and intercultural bridge building, targeting us the young generation. I came to appreciate that every human being matters and that I should not treat anyone from another religion or culture as an enemy. And that people who commit barbaric acts are human beings like me and once not talked to or sensitized on violent extremism, it can easily lead to turmoil in any society."*

Sengendo Francis another member says ... *"there are some things that I could not think could exist, like people believing in ancestral spirits! One time we were sharing about our different faith, and from the discussion I came to learn that a certain girl worships ancestral spirits. I was so shocked but i came to face reality when I decided to put aside the fear and approach this girl; and this decision created all the difference. She confessed to me about her faith and told me that like other religions, they also have certain days of worship. That was a turning point for me since it demystified every uncertainty I had about this faith."*

Nannyange Proscovia is not shy anymore to profess her ancestral faith: *"I thank the founder of Faith Together for this initiative. Before becoming a member, I used to feel that our faith was extremely discriminated and whenever you could share about the ancestral spirits, you would face discrimination as no one wished to associate with you anymore."*

Muzafaru Mayanja is quick to share about the said discrimination: *I have observed with much concern that some students still discriminate our colleague, Proscovia. Whenever one is looking for her, instead of addressing her by her name, they instead say; are you looking for that demonic girl?" I know this is not right conduct and to put a stop to such treatment, I am planning with my colleagues to organize a dialogue among students on interfaith and intercultural to enable them to understand and appreciate each other's faith, tribe and culture. The ultimate goal of this dialogue shall be respect of one another as a human being; because we are all the same; and emphasize that such a statement alone is capable of instigating violence in the school if not earlier mitigated!*

Muzafaru also chips in with a vivid experience on ancestral spirit worship: *"Dear friends, don't think this is a joking matter. You will all agree with me that if it were not, Faiths Together mobilizing us together, we would not be seated here freely chatting, laughing, shaking hands and enjoying this drink together with our sister, Proscovia who we all know believes in ancestral spirits. As a person, i have gained courage by becoming an ambassador of Faiths Together's message of connecting different religions and culture."*



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

Faiths Together believes that the interfaith and cultural connections they are weaving among the young generation, is an earlier preventive remedy to offset extremist actions even among children and youth.

Our interventions with children and youth in school, is an early life strategy to mitigate the potential of religiously inspired violence. When we engage children and youth at such an early stage, we help them to rise up to the occasion of accommodation and tolerance of each other's faith and culture, thus desisting from any form of violence on this account.



*Faiths Together performing intercultural music for peace.*

The CC's next steps are to train all interfaith and intercultural leaders on promoting peaceful messages among their audiences, to alleviate in advance tendencies and actions of violent extremism as is currently witnessed by the *Boko Haraam* in Nigeria. The founder and the members believe that wide ignorance on religion and culture is responsible for extremist actions because people operate with half-baked information.

An experience is shared in this sitting. *One time, one of the members was shocked to see a Christian who appeared at a pork joint dressed up in the Muslim Kufi (hat). This was enough to spark off an insurgence coming from someone seen to have acted out of ignorance.* And to mitigate such tendencies or actions, Faith Together CC plans to organize dialogues among the immediate community to bring people of different cultures and faith together to appreciate each other's values, norms and traditions.

## 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?

There are some notable indicators of relations improving among the members of the Interfaith and Intercultural clubs. The children have been transformed as they are currently thinking about encouraging their peers outside school, at home and their villages to join the cause of weaving connections of cooperation beyond faith and culture. Muzafaru Mayanja and Sengendo Francis are some of the members who plan to organize an interfaith and intercultural dialogue to that effect.

## 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?

Two stories are shared:

a) I get to make the early morning call to Prayer



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Michael Buyondo, the founder of Faiths Together CC shares a childhood experience.

My interfaith journey began very early during my school escapades, in a one Muslim founded school in Entebbe, Wakiso district. I recall that; one time at school, i had to step in and help my friend to make the early morning call to prayer (*adhan*), as he had his bath late. I was totally amazed that no one noticed that the person who summoned them to the early morning prayer (*subuhi*) was non-Muslim. This made me to realize that we are all the same despite our differences in faith. I also got the courage to learn more about the newly found religion and appreciate some of the values and uniqueness in faith.

b) Ssennabulya Peter a beneficiary of the Faith Together Home too cannot fail to share his experience at this home!

What i find amazing here is the way in which we are all able to co-exist without the question of culture or faith surfacing! I have never heard or witnessed a fight or argument among the children here based on religion or culture. Here we hail from the Anglican, Catholic, Islamic, Pentecostal, Cultural and other faith. But each of us gets to worship and practice the values, traditions and practices of their faith and culture. Yet before coming here, i grew up in an environment where every being in me detested the Islamic faith because of developing hatred towards a Muslim family that neighbored us. At this home we learn to co-exist and what joins us together is human survival in terms of having food, shelter, health care and education.

I also notice that these religious and cultural based conflicts among people are mere perversions, because when catastrophes such as disease epidemics strike, they don't look at one's religion or culture to strike but affect us all in the same accord. And what we achieve here is individual transformation of love, care, solidarity, association, acceptance, tolerance, humility and every other good aspect that you would expect from another person.

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

Faiths Together is helping to achieve URI's mission through the interfaith and intercultural web of connections among the young generation. The voices of the young people have revealed far reaching insight into how much children based on their observatory nature of learning, can easily adapt to living together in harmony. The Founder recollects that, in his school days, students would mix easily with each other and the question of religion or culture rarely surfaced; but now it's common to find adults nurturing hatred for each other in the name of religion or culture.

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

As noted above, the children that are targeted in schools have been brought together and they gradually change their inherent prejudice against people of different religions and culture. They are able to sit together and ask each other about their religious and cultural values. The capacity to inquire into the unknown is a great step to breaking the barriers to peaceful co-existence and cooperation.

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

URI unlocked our Potential to engage in Interfaith Dialogue!

We came to know about URI through Mr. Paul Chaffee and Madam Despina Namwembe, says Michael Buyondo. Paul introduced me to Despina whom i visited and she warmly welcomed and oriented me into URI. She later inquired if as a team we were interested in joining URI to which we openly accepted. This orientation, nurturing and sharing of information is continuous for us with her at the office. The rest is history.

In 2013, Faiths Together in partnership with URI got an opportunity to co-organize the Interfaith Harmony Week. Such platforms have opened the CC to wide exposure to sell their message to people who they would otherwise not have reached by themselves. And here I cannot forget to extend my appreciation for URI for the visit to Jordan. In Jordan, Faiths Together’s potential was unlocked to engage more on interfaith. The organization won a \$5,000 award from the King of Jordan, through URI’s nomination. It was in Jordan that i witnessed the true sense of religious tolerance. In this part of the world i was humbled to see Muslims taking us to visit the holy places of Christians such as River Jordan (where Jesus was baptized) and all those other precious sites valued by Christians. Since then i was opened to the realization that the tendency of some religions purporting to be more superior to others is sheer extremism, Michael Buyondo, the Founder, Faiths Together observes.



2014/027  
 His Majesty King Abdullah II attends H.M. King Abdullah II World Interfaith Harmony Week Prize 27/4/2014

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

Faiths Together CC looks up to URI through their global platforms to promote their cause through songs and dances and other avenues.

The Regional Coordinator, Despina Namwembe too notes that, it is rare to see such a young man committing to taking care of other 20 young people not in the least related to him by blood, but rather ensuring that they are fed, transported to school, their school fees

paid, medical support given etc. Michael has never requested for financial support from me in all the meetings we have held at my office or at his office. Instead you see someone who has deep feelings for others, someone who refuses to give up in spite of the daily financial challenges he faces.