

Spring 2015

INTERACTION

URI AND THE ENVIRONMENT



Thank you to the guest speakers who presented at URI's 2015 Circles of Light, *Global Greening from the Grassroots*: Tomoko Watanabe of ANT-Hiroshima, Janessa Gans Wilder of Euphrates Institute, Rev. Sally Bingham of Interfaith Power and Light, Sarah Queblatin of Maia Earth Village/Mandala Earth Story, and Kiran Bali of Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (pictured here).



URI's Environmental Journey: Step By Step

2000 Seeds of environmental concern were planted in the primitive soil of URI. Our Charter mentions "the Earth" six times and our organizational design calls for URI to imitate nature and to grow organically.

2008 At URI's second Global Assembly held in Mayapur, India, a small committee led by Kat Taylor and her son, Gus, came up with "One Big Idea." They called for URI's Global Council "to create a large coordinating body to raise awareness of environmental issues in URI."

2009 The newly formed President's Council and Satellites picked up URI's latent environmental vocation and formed an official Environmental Satellite which eventually morphed into the Environmental Satellite Cooperation Circle, which, again, morphed into the Environmental Resource CC.

2014 URI was amazed to discover that 175 Cooperation Circles were dedicated to environmental work.

2015 A URI Environmental Workshop was held for the first time for people around the world, and the annual Circles of Light Gala featured five of URI's environmental leaders.

Clearly, URI's environmental power resides around the world in the spontaneous blossoms of Cooperation Circles, not in an office or a Department. Nothing is broken and nothing needs to be fixed. What we learned in March, 2015, is that all of our good work is enhanced by face to face meetings of URI environmentalists and figuring ways for folks, who want to, to stay in touch, draw strength from each other and compare best practices.

In terms of the environment, URI is becoming what it intended to be. I rejoice to see this day.

The Right Rev. William E. Swing
President and Founding Trustee
United Religions Initiative (URI)

OUR NEW COOPERATION CIRCLES

URI's grassroots network now includes 689 CCs in 85 countries around the world.

November 2014

Youth For Development (Adamaoua, Cameroon, Africa)
The Big Brother Society-BBS (Nairobi, Kenya, Africa)
Rahama Women Development Programme (Bauchi, Nigeria, Africa)
Youths for Peace, Bangladesh (YPB) (Narayangoni, Bangladesh, Asia)
Nalantha Institute of Social Studies, Tamilnadu CC, South India (Tamilnadu, India; South Zone, Asia)
Youth of Peace, Yemen (Sanaa, Yemen, Middle East & North Africa)

December 2014

Religions United for the Advancement of Communities and Humanity: RUACH Movement (Yaounde, Cameroon, Africa)
Dialogue Center - Bulgaria (Plovdiv, Bulgaria, Europe)
Spiritual Revival (Plovdiv, Bulgaria, Europe)

January 2015

Network for Empowerment in Rural Areas and Townships NERAT (Jos, Riyom Plateau, Nigeria, Africa)
Interfaith Fellowship, Thalavoor (Kollam, Kerala, India; South Zone, Asia)
Jyothirgamaya Interfaith CC, Punalur (Kollam, Kerala, India; South Zone, Asia)
Kala Sahithy Nature CC, Vettikavala (Kottarakara, Kollam, Kerala, India; South Zone, Asia)

February 2015

Rural Development Ministries – RUDEMI (Maragoli, Kenya, Africa)
Kenya Interfaith Network on Environment Action (KINEA) (Westlands, Nairobi, Kenya, Africa)
Mother Earth Network (Lagnata, Nairobi, Kenya, Africa)
Climate and Sustainable Development Network (Csdevnet) (Lagos, Nigeria, Africa)
Ennerdale Mini Parliament (Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa, Africa)
Face to Face / Faith to Faith (Cape Town, South Africa, Africa)
GAUTENG Khoi and San Council (Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa, Africa)
Ezaz-e-Niswan (Women's Honor) (Punjab, Pakistan, Asia)
Community Organization for People Empowerment (COPE Pakistan) (Punjab, Pakistan, Asia)
Manila Muslim Christian Community Peacemakers, Inc. (Manila, Philippines, South East Asia & the Pacific)

March 2015

Lilongwe Central Cooperation (Lilongwe, Malawi, Africa)
The Quiet Voice (Goodwood W Cape, South Africa, Africa)
Umbiyozo Cultural Diversity (Fresnaye, WC, South Africa, Africa)
Vidyasagar Society (Dhaka, Bangladesh, Asia)
EKta Samaj Foundation (Bhagalpur, Bihar, India; South Zone, Asia)
Arise Kochi CC (Kochi, Ernakulam, India; South Zone, Asia)
BZN Silence Farm Metanoia (Damme, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium, Europe)
Eilat Interfaith Encounter Group (Eilat, Israel, Middle East & North Africa)
Mandala Earth Story Project (Multi-Region)
UNIFY (Multi-Region)
Wisdom Circle Ministries (Multi-Region)



Environmental Resource Community Circle members gather on World Water Day at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Photo by Barbara Hartford and Jim Strong

URI AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL LEADER

With the confluence of World Water Day, the United Nations International Day of Forests and the Tree, and Earth Day, now is the perfect time for the world's faithful to reflect upon what it means to be responsible earth stewards.

This year presents an especially strong reminder of the importance of environmental causes because of the annual Circles of Light gala's theme: *Global Greening through the Grassroots*. The gala took place alongside an environmental workshop where green leaders from Cooperation Circles around the world shared approaches for eco-friendly projects, as well as inviting future collaboration.

This InterAction issue applauds the work of URI brothers and sisters who are frontrunners in environmental conservation and sustainability. For CCs around the planet, blending faith and ecology is an essential part of their larger peacebuilding mission. After all, careful environmental stewardship from the planet's communities cannot happen without all of URI's action areas working in concert - such as ensuring that all voices in each community are heard and supported. "The end purpose of all these projects is environmental peace building," notes Samar Salma, Media & PR Officer for EcoPeace / Friends of the Earth Middle East Cooperation Circle. "Instead of competing over shared resources, the organization's message is that the environment can be a catalyst for peace; for bringing contesting people around one table to start a dialogue."

Like the cultures and traditions that comprise them, Cooperation Circles' environmental efforts take a rainbow of forms. Margaret Henke, Board Chair of The Orange County Interfaith Coalition for the Environment CC, emphasizes practical projects, such as education about drought-tolerant

plants and solar panels, along with simply reconnecting people with nature through hikes. "We try to just get people out to enjoy the natural world."

Edward Bastian, member of the Environmental Resource Cooperation Circle since 2012, points out the imperative of teaching sustainable living. "Religions have been preaching that for a long time; you don't find happiness through material goods, you don't damage the environment through your agriculture; we're trying to revive that and remind people of the relationship."

Instead of competing over shared resources, the environment can be a catalyst for peace.

Samar Salma, EcoPeace Middle East CC

Becoming responsible caretakers of the planet is a shared project that cuts through cultural, racial, and religious divisions. Regardless of faith tradition, every human is deeply connected through the unavoidable truth of having to share the same ecosystem.

In a way, URI's environmental efforts are a microcosm of the larger mission to bridge stereotypes and peacefully connect people; what shared ground could be more obvious than the shared earth under our feet?

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Visit http://www.uri.org/get_involved or contact the development team at development@uri.org

Qewña CC

Argentina, URI Latin America & the Caribbean

Qewña's founders named the Cooperation Circle after a nearly extinct type of tree that is currently the focus of repopulation efforts. Like the tree, the Cooperation Circle's roots go very deep. Located in Jujuy, Argentina, Qewña CC is dedicated to "reviving the deep roots of indigenous traditions and offering these values and practices as gifts to society." Qewña CC works with a lunar calendar related to the feasts of the Qulla culture in order to provide support for renewed healthy communities. The group promotes cultural values, education, organic farming, and health and technology. Qewña CC aims to include youth in dialogue to strengthen peace and to better care for Pachamama (Mother Earth).

GreenFaith Australia CC

Australia, URI Southeast Asia & the Pacific

Greenfaith/ARRCC is the Victoria region's arm of the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change, an interfaith group involved with action, education, and lobbying to protect and save our world from human-caused climate change. The Cooperation Circle has recently produced free and detailed climate action kits for various faiths, available online. They encourage moving investments out of fossil fuels, and preventing new mining and CSG extraction. They bring together people from different faith traditions to foster ecological and cultural diversity. They share their wisdom in responding ethically to the ecological problems their society is facing and to act practically on ecological issues aimed at healing themselves and their environment.



EcoPeace Middle East



Qewña CC

Orange County Interfaith Coalition for the Environment

United States, URI North America

For 15 years, Orange County Interfaith Coalition for the Environment (OCICE) has brought diverse faith communities together for environmental awareness activities. The group holds an annual awards ceremony where categories include best environmental sermons or talks, and houses of worship that have done the most to make their facilities more environmentally friendly. OCICE's board currently includes representatives from various Christian denominations as well as Sufi and Baha'i faiths. Programs include: toxins in the home and yard, how to start an environmental ministry in church, basic stewardship individuals can perform, creation spirituality, energy issues, and transportation alternatives.

Center for Environmental Education and Development

Nigeria, URI Africa

Center for Environmental Education and Development (CEED) develops knowledgeable, skilled and dedicated citizens for responsible natural resource use and a better environment. Their "Model Community Environmental Sanitation Initiative Project" provides communities with the opportunity to safeguard their environment and back themselves with best practices on environmental sanitation. The project proposes inclusive, on-the-ground solutions to critical issues facing communities today, such as tackling natural resource preservation. The project also promotes land rights in Sahelian Nigeria and assists family farmers in the Gassol community to gain confidence as a people to protect their farms.

EcoPeace Middle East

Israel, URI Middle East & North Africa

Among its many projects, EcoPeace Middle East (formerly Friends of the Earth Middle East) calls for better water management to bring back the Jordan River's historical flow, and with it, the regional biodiversity that once existed. Another project involves three ecoparks that serve as ecotourism models for preserving biodiversity and providing space for environmental education. The Water-Energy Nexus project investigates water interdependencies and renewable energy. The purpose of the CC's dozens of projects is environmental peacebuilding. Instead of competing over resources, the environment can be a catalyst for peace. What was once impossible is now a reality simply because the environment doesn't acknowledge manmade borders.



Ranchi Peace Circle

Ranchi Peace Circle

India, URI Asia

Since 2009, Ranchi Peace Circle in Birsa Chawk, Ranchi, India has been working towards a discrimination-free society by engaging interfaith communities across tribal and caste lines. The Cooperation Circle tackles issues like unorganized labour movement, human rights, securing food for all, and protection of natural wealth. They fight river pollution, mining companies extracting natural resources, and deforestation in the name of industrialization. One recent victory stopped the production of a steel company. Working alongside other local organizations, the group has taken legal action against large mining factories along the river bank, defending indigenous communities' access to clean drinking water.



Center for Environmental Education and Development

Environmental Resource Cooperation Circle

URI Multiregion

Following URI's Principle 10, the Environmental Resource Cooperation Circle (ERCC) is a resource for CCs who want to act "from sound ecological practices to protect and preserve the Earth for both present and future generations." ERCC members visited the URI Global office in San Francisco for an environmental workshop (gathering participants from around the world, including Cooperation Circles from Nigeria, India, Kenya, Argentina, Spain, the Philippines, North America, and the Middle East) to share best practices and discuss challenges in pursuing environmental projects. The ERCC serves to remind the world's religions of the inherent connection between faith and responsible earth stewardship.

Procesbegeleidersgroep Samenwerkingsverband Traumahulpverlen

The Netherlands, URI Europe

This Cooperation Circle offers help to people, animals, nature and environment after big calamities. The group aims to awaken and strengthen people's spiritual lives, enabling them to contribute more in times of despair. The foundation's website addresses self-empowerment topics such as how to respond to radiation, and provides disaster preparedness advice. The group also holds workshops with experts on subjects such as: responding during floods and inundations, dealing with radioactive clouds, providing counseling for dying people, and healing the earth and nature after a disaster.



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