

Spring 2013

INTERACTION



A UNITED RELIGIONS INITIATIVE PUBLICATION

URI AND WOMEN



Students and speakers, including CC member Annett Nandujja, celebrate International Women's Day at Ntinda East High Secondary School in Kampala, Uganda. The theme for 2012 was "connecting girls, inspiring futures."

Dear Friends,

Welcome to the second annual issue of InterAction dedicated to International Women's Day. This year we are pleased to announce that URI is launching its new Women's Initiative in three regions – a program that has been a long time in the making, with strong advocacy from a host of URI women leaders.

There are obvious reasons to build on the momentum and strength of the women-focused – and led – Cooperation Circles in URI's global network, since they work on women's rights and economic empowerment, as well as the education of girls, ending violence against women, the role of women in peace building and more. The urgent need for this program was brought home to me this week when I read a report from Despina Namwembe, URI's Coordinator in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, one of three target areas for the new Initiative.

Despina described the ongoing effort by members of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative Cooperation Circle to mediate the conflicts over disputed land that have plagued northern Uganda since the end of that country's civil war three years ago. What struck me was the pain I saw in the faces of the women whose photographs accompanied Despina's report. These are women who lost husbands and brothers in two decades of war – who had, on many occasions, been brutally assaulted in the course of that war – and who are now struggling to work and raise children on their own. The law says they can own land, but the culture in which they live

continues to see them as something less than equal citizens.

As I saw the suffering, the fear and the determination etched into the faces of those women, I found myself asking: At what point do we, as a global community, decide that these actions are unacceptable? That the rights of women can no longer be ignored? That their bodies can no longer be used as the instruments of war?

We live at a time when, in the name of religion, members of the Taliban shoot a 15-year-old Pakistani girl in order to silence her, and Egyptian clerics declare that women who take part in public protests deserve to be raped. We – as members of URI, and as human beings – need to act now to let the world know that these actions and attitudes will not stand.

Our Women's Initiative is just the first step in that direction, but by supporting the work of brave women at the grassroots – to end girl infanticide, to promote economic development, to support women's leadership in conflict resolution – it lights a spark we hope will spread to other regions, and become a beacon of hope to the whole world.

I hope that you enjoy this issue of InterAction, and that you will consider supporting this important new work.



DEBRA BALLINGER BERNSTEIN | ASSOCIATE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Women survivors of Uganda's 20-year civil war are participating in a land mediation process in Northern Uganda while fighting for their right to own land – a right that is guaranteed by the law, but ignored by their culture.

NEW INITIATIVE BUILDS ON THE STRENGTH OF URI'S WOMEN

A new URI Women's Initiative will address the urgent needs of women in three critical regions by supporting and expanding upon the work of its women leaders.

"Women have been the impactful peace agents in the community – whether elderly women or young women with a firm determination to spread peace and harmony," said Qutub Jehan Kidwai, Coordinator for India's West Zone and one of the architects of the new initiative. "In any conflict, they are the ones who are most vulnerable. So their dedication to peace work comes naturally."

Beginning as a pilot project in the Middle East, India and the Great Lakes Region of Africa -- Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, South Sudan and Democratic Republic of the Congo -- the URI Women's Initiative will support the work of women confronting issues such as domestic violence, female infanticide, cultures of discrimination and lack of access to education and economic resources by supporting the work of women-led Cooperation Circles.

URI intern Mahaut De Talhouet, a graduate student at Georgetown University, interviewed 20 of URI's women leaders throughout the summer of 2012. Her research, which became part of the impetus for the Women's Initiative, catalogued the efforts of women-led CCs throughout the world to take on issues of gender inequality and provide women with the means to transform their lives.

"We reached the conclusion that if women really want freedom, they would need to seize their rights, because they will certainly not be handed to them," said Rowaida Mroue, a former Youth Ambassador for URI's Young Leadership Program who now works with the Lebanese Interfaith Initiative CC. Her group has filmed documentaries and organized demonstrations to draw attention to the ways in which Lebanese laws and traditions restrict the rights of women.

In Africa's Great Lakes Region, the Uganda Women of Faith Network educates women about HIV/AIDS and operates an orphanage and school for children who have been orphaned by the disease. Its members also provide information about agriculture, microfinance and health care – and have taken a strong stand against domestic violence.

"There are women who have been banned by men after gathering the courage to speak out," said Mary Kisakye, whose group is part of the Inter-Religious Dialogue Programme CC. "We want to encourage them and offer real help when they face the harsh repercussions."

In India, the Ektaan CC helps a group of 20-25 women work from home, designing, creating and distributing saris and scarves. The income they receive allows them to provide for their children and improve their social status.

"If women are able to work and earn money, they can provide their children with an education, thus avoiding the same problems that they faced as children," said Kaushik Chatterjee, an administrative assistant for Ektaan. "These women can change their fate."

Throughout the world, the URI Women's Initiative will also act as a clearinghouse of ideas, allowing women and women-led Cooperation Circles in the global network to share success stories, offer solutions to common problems and build friendships across borders.

"The Women's Initiative will give a collective voice that shall strengthen these processes," said Despina Namwembe, Coordinator for the Great Lakes Sub-Region of Africa. "It will create linkages and support teams, and build the capacity of those groups that require them."



Despina Namwembe (center - top) with members of the URI Africa Leadership team; Qutub Jehan Kidwai (below) speaks during the Global Assembly in Amman, Jordan



(top) Members of the Ektaan CC from URI Asia distribute saris to women ; (below) URI intern Mahaut de Talhouet was instrumental in gathering research for the Women's Initiative



URI CHAIRPERSON ASKS WORLD TO SUPPORT WOMEN LEADERS



Kiran Bali, Chair of URI's Global Council, speaks during a special address to the United Nations on Feb. 14, 2013

URI Global Council Chair Kiran Bali called on the world to support women leaders and leadership – in both government and religious institutions – in a special address to the United Nations.

“We are overrepresented as the victims of wars and other forms of violence perpetrated by men, and vastly underrepresented in the governing bodies that make decisions about war and peace,” Ms. Bali said in a Feb. 14 address to the United Nations General Assembly. “It is also worth noting that while women often comprise the majority of the faithful in religious communities, men most often hold the power.”

Ms. Bali joined URI Executive Director Rev. Charles Gibbs, UN General Assembly President Vuk Jeremić and religious leaders, state representatives and dignitaries from many nations participating in “United for a Culture of Peace Through Interfaith Harmony,” a special event at

United Nations headquarters in New York in celebration of World Interfaith Harmony Week.

She echoed President Jeremić in noting that interfaith cooperation is more important than ever at a time when the forces of religious and political extremism appear to be on the rise – and added that women need to be an important part of that effort.

“As a woman, I am keen to promote the leadership of women towards a culture of harmony and healing,” Ms. Bali said. “Let’s have the whole human species engaged in making our world a better place for all.”

The Feb. 14 event was hosted in part by the Committee of Religious Nongovernmental Organizations at the United Nations, including Committee President Monica Willard (who is also URI’s representative at the United Nations) and Committee Vice President Deborah Moldow, facilitator of the URI-UN Cooperation Circle.

DUBAI CC TURNS NEIGHBORS INTO CARING FRIENDS

What began as an interfaith book club has become a group of friends dedicated to helping the women of Dubai – and one of URI’s newest Cooperation Circles.

Women Helping Women began its existence in 2010 as the “Qur’an Book Club,” a group of 20 female Christian and Muslim residents of the United Arab Emirates – where expatriates outnumber native-born Emiratis by roughly 11 to 1 – hoping to learn more about the faith and culture of their neighbors.

“Although Dubai is a mixing pot of cultures, there is a great deal of separation and therefore, continued mystery, regarding each other,” said founder Trinka Wasik. “Our group is an attempt to bridge those gaps.”

As friendships within the group deepened, its members turned their attention toward helping those most in need – in particular, the Filipina housemaids whose economic and immigration status has left them vulnerable to abuse by

their employers.

Members of the group donated food, clothing and toiletries to a group of women who had taken shelter at the Philippine Embassy in Dubai. They also provided employment training as well as airfare for three of the women to return to the Philippines.

Joining URI as a Cooperation Circle in November 2012, Women Helping Women is now organizing a panel discussion on the role and rights of women. The event, which will feature four women of differing religious and cultural backgrounds, will take place on March 8 – International Women’s Day.

“We have found fundamental similarities in people of faith, regardless of what faith they adhere to,” Ms. Wasik said. “There are differences, as well – but the respect we’ve learned to have for each other runs much deeper than those differences.”

COMPASSION, COMMITMENT, COURAGE: URI MOURNS IRFAN ALI

URI members throughout the world are mourning the loss of URI Youth Leader Irfan Ali, who was killed Jan. 10 while helping the victims of a bomb attack in his hometown of Quetta, Pakistan. He was 33.

In his thirteen years as an interfaith activist and peace worker, Irfan met, taught and inspired more than 3,000 young people throughout Pakistan, traveling frequently from the cities of Islamabad and Lahore to the isolated villages of the mountainous west.

Before coming to URI, Irfan worked briefly for Amnesty International and founded his own interfaith peace organization, Roots (now a URI Cooperation Circle). His life changed, Irfan said, when he met Shazia Wahid – a fellow member of the Hazara tribe and one of URI's first Youth Ambassadors.

"As soon as I knew about URI, I said, 'This is my lost dream. This is what I was looking for. This is the voice of my heart,'" Irfan said in an October 2012 interview.

More than 30 people attended the Jan. 30 memorial service in Lahore for the man called "a devoted and visionary URI youth leader" by Rev. James Channan, OP, URI's Regional Coordinator for Pakistan.

In Africa, URI Continental Coordinator Mussie Hailu announced that Irfan had been awarded the Golden Rule Medal in recognition of "the outstanding work he did to promote a culture of peace, interfaith harmony and understanding."

"This world has not heard the last of Irfan Ali," said the Right Rev. William E. Swing, Founder and President of URI. "His story and memory will abide in our global community and will yet continue to have an impact of peace in Pakistan."



Friends attend a candlelight memorial service for Irfan Ali in Lahore, Pakistan. One of URI's most celebrated workers, Irfan was killed while helping victims of a bomb blast in his hometown of Quetta.



OUR GROWING CC NETWORK AT URI

We welcome our new Cooperation Circles!

URI's grassroots network now includes 571 CCs in 83 countries around the world.

NOVEMBER 2012

The Inter Religious Council of Burundi – Bujumbura, Burundi – Africa

Women Helping Women – Dubai, UAE – MENA

Gathering for Happiness – Amman, Jordan – MENA

First Drops – Irvine, USA – North America

JANUARY 2013

Coimbatore CC – Coimbatore, India (South Zone) – Asia

DECEMBER 2012

You Can Foundation – Blantyre, Malawi – Africa

Santhwanam Cancer Care and Palliative Centre – Kottarakkara, India (South Zone) – Asia

Aflai (Eternal) – Lumaco, Chile – Latin America & the Caribbean

The Arabic Speaking CC – Jerusalem, Israel – MENA

Radio Tram – Multi- Region

FEBRUARY 2013

Prayas CC – Hyderabad, India (South Zone) – Asia

Marawaka CC – Bolivar, Venezuela – Latin America



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Talking Back to Hate is URI's campaign against discrimination and hate. Just as violence begins with hate speech, peace and understanding begin with open, respectful conversation.

Visit uri.org/talkingbacktohate to learn more!



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PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER
The Rt. Rev. William E. Swing

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
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