



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

YOUTH INTERFAITH MISSION UGANDA

Faiths /Traditions Represented: Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox

Location of CC: Kyambogo University Kampala

Key Areas of Focus: Organize student group fora, promotion of the fraternity of persons with special needs, interfaith cooperation, and inspirational conferences for students, environmental sensitization, hygiene, sanitation, and networking with service providers.

Summary

Youth Interfaith Mission Uganda is located in Kyambogo University, Kampala with branches in Kyambogo Secondary Schools and Kira Sub County Wakiso district. The CC is focused on mobilizing young people from different faith and ethnic groups to coexist in harmony. Their primary efforts are focused on helping youth who are facing difficulties meeting school tuition fees, scholastic materials, and basic needs. Youth Interfaith Mission Uganda provides spiritual and psychological mentorship to students, youth with special needs, and orphans. They network with service providers for program support and organize student group to open communication channels for students to overcome challenges together. Youth Interfaith Mission Uganda's work has helped unite and mobilize diverse youth via spiritual upbringing and URI's purpose of interfaith cooperation.



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

Although the majority of our students hail from different religious and social backgrounds, their interaction with people of other faiths has been minimal. Our interfaith activities which include student groups, sports, and community work, have facilitated interactions with each other and raised awareness that we're all human, whether Christian, Muslim, or Orthodox. The world is for everybody to enjoy in unity with others. Furthermore, the youth's political alienation is very high; with some youth belonging to the National Resistance Movement party, Democratic Party, Forum for Democratic Change, and participation with the youth leadership platform. The students with special needs have come to appreciate themselves as equal citizens by standing to pursue their needs at school.

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

Interfaith/intercultural bridge building is needed among our youth and student bodies in order to bring groups together spiritually, allowing brotherhood/sisterhood to be appreciated. For instance, if a Muslim associates with a non-Muslim or a *Muganda* with a *Mugishu*, it leads them to discover new things about each other's background and addresses any pre-conceived perceptions and myths; thereby dispelling tensions due to ignorance. Once this gap is bridged, the people in our communities will have a better understanding of each other's values and ways of doing things.

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

Our main activities have to do with: extending services to students with special needs, student group fora community dialogue, and youth leadership programs. The services we give to the students address their diverse needs in school: fees top-up, scholastic materials, health care linkages, and counselling support. Some of our students are orphaned, and/or have special needs such as: visual impairments, physical disabilities, and sensory impairments. We link our students to service providers to provide support with auxiliary aids and services through qualified readers, interpreters, guides, taped texts, audio, visual and pictorial recording, and braille equipment. We achieve these services via partnerships with government and nongovernmental service providers. It's a long process to have a fully-fledged support system in the targeted schools, but we operate with the little we have and count on our team's spirit and love.

We link our school programs to the communities where the students reside to gain family and community efforts towards supporting the youth. We realize that some family members and the general public have negative stereotypes against persons with disabilities. Our CC provides trainings and workshops on their disabled rights. We identify resources and strategies for independent living, and letting them associate with their peers.



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The student group foras and youth leadership programs are organized to elevate the youth in particular the disabled fraternity to leadership positions both in school and within their social agencies. This enables the student's fraternity and the teaching staff to appreciate each other as human beings with equal rights to leadership participation, service delivery, health, education and associated needs.

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

We build bridges among Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox Christians and assorted ethnicities from the Northern, Eastern and Central groups of Uganda. Schools or universities convene students from different corners of the world, making interaction inevitable since they share common resources in the school. Therefore our tailor-made programs come in handy to mobilize them on the cause of peaceful co-existence through the activities highlighted above.

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.*

We interplay the use of youth-friendly strategies such as inspirational conferences, workshops, youth group fora, community dialogue. During my time as president of the Blind Students Association, I organized workshops and inspirational conferences to enhance student cooperation through discussion with a focus that was adaptable to the students and their communities. Such platforms unearth perceptions on disability and non-disability and offer coping mechanisms for harmonious co-existence. During the inspirational conferences, we convene students from at least 5 different religions that include: Christians, Muslims, Orthodox, and Adventists among others. Together with the interfaith leaders, students table their religious values, meditate on religious readings, debate, and have space for questions and answers. Students have a better understanding of each other's faiths. Lastly, the student group fora have been quite helpful in addressing our needs. The disability fraternity lobbied the university administration to commemorate the International Day of People with Disability which is enabling us to interact and share experiences with similar people from Uganda and abroad.

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

From our context with the student fraternity, we hope to achieve harmonious co-existence through daily interactions of ordinary students with the disabled fraternity and vice versa. We want to see an environment in which students with special needs dispel their disability politics; where for instance you hear someone saying; "...I cannot make it to a leadership position because of my disability, who will listen to me?" We want to see equitable distribution of resources among all the different groups in learning institutions, non-violent lobbying, advocacy strategies, and rights awareness. Ultimately, we would like to achieve high self-esteem and a change in attitude among the student fraternity. A fraternity that works for their cause in a collective manner, looks beyond religious, regional, social background or physical disability.



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

The different youth fora are yielding exceptional results in penetrating barriers to cooperation, typical among students from diverse backgrounds.

"At our inception, activities had an environment of fear. Fear for disability being transferred; students hailing from Karamoja were treated as backwards and not socially fitting. The disabled had very low self-esteem, which limited their free interaction with others. We also had some religions purporting superiority over others; but all this was gradually minimized with our continued interactions" Kibedi Hakim

The community members including parents and guardians of the students with special needs, the orphans and others have come to appreciate that fair treatment of their own children is a humane act; it is their duty and responsibility, not just a favour. When they see us extending a service to children that are not even related to us by blood, they are humbled to take up the same role.

The extra time we give to students with special needs enables them to realize their education dreams just like other students. Their own attitude is changing over time as they are able to participate in school programs in leadership, sports, community work, and others. We also teach the disabled together with their caretakers to do basic chores such as bathing, brushing their teeth, and general mobility. An example that comes to mind is of two parents who abandoned their children. We then took the children to a service provider and they are now doing well. We are working to dispel such negative stereotypes on disability with parents so it is not viewed as a burden, especially if they become more supportive of their children.

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

Actually, we have faced challenges with some faiths claiming to be superior to others by making statements such as; *"Our God listens to us more than your God!"* Such sentiments cause more confusion. Thus, through our student group fora, we give each of the religions an opportunity to say their prayers and express their values to allay violent tendencies. In the event of struggles for leadership opportunities, we organize talks on everyone's right to leadership irrespective of age, sex, gender, religion, physical appearance, cultural or social beliefs and others but the celebration of humanity.

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?

We observe enhanced brotherhood and sisterhood especially with disabled individuals mixing easily with all other populations. There is notable change in attitude as seen from Persons with disabilities (PWDs) sharing rooms with the students (what we call uni-cells) even some PWDs who used to request for special rooms are no longer doing so. The general atmosphere too is



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that of inclusion of everybody, although there are some isolated cases of discrimination which we are committed to address.

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?

We used to experience heated debates among the students about the superiority of their religions. This would cause conflict to an extent that some would not greet each other or use materials from people with different religions. I remember my first strategy to stop such fights, I tossed a dice for the students from the different religions to pick and eventually I asked the first person to pick, and to the last one to say their prayers and share a sacred religious value as well. It was from that meeting that the students realized that all their religions had some common values of love, respect, peace and harmony for all humanity. I decided to integrate other uniting strategies particularly looking at common values to draw students closer.

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

When we make learning institutions appreciate the different needs of the school community, we are supporting the recognition and inclusion of all humanity in existing programs. Through networking and collaboration with like-minded organizations such as grassroots interfaith connection with URI, the Uganda Bible Society contributed Braille materials for free, and the Uganda National Examinations Board mainstreamed disability needs into their programming. We are helping to achieve the URI mission of daily interfaith cooperation and social justice.

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

The youth from the diverse religions and cultures have come together for unity and peace by regarding themselves as brothers and sisters. For example, before inception it used to be very difficult for any Community Based Organization to facilitate Muslim students with education, now I am one of such testimonies of a Muslim being funded by a Catholic foundation. That is something that we find humane!

“As a staunch Muslim I had to rest my religious principles to walk away from this funding opportunity from a Catholic Foundation. On their accord they keep emphasising to me that they were not trying to convert me, but instead were meeting a need. This has inspired me to mobilize fellow youth to celebrate religious diversity” - Musa Mwambu

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

URI recruited one of our students as a youth ambassador to the youth leadership program, who benefited from the learning visit to India. The encounter elevated her understanding of diverse cultures and religions. She was able bring some of the knowledge home, and also secure a job in Kigali. We benefited from tree seedlings from URI to support our environmental campaigns within the learning institutions, and it's from such campaigns that we came to appreciate the importance of preserving nature for human survival. The rich platform of information and



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experiences through sharing both on the website, local, and international fora offer us more synergy creation as we can ably identify individuals and institutions to support our cause.

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

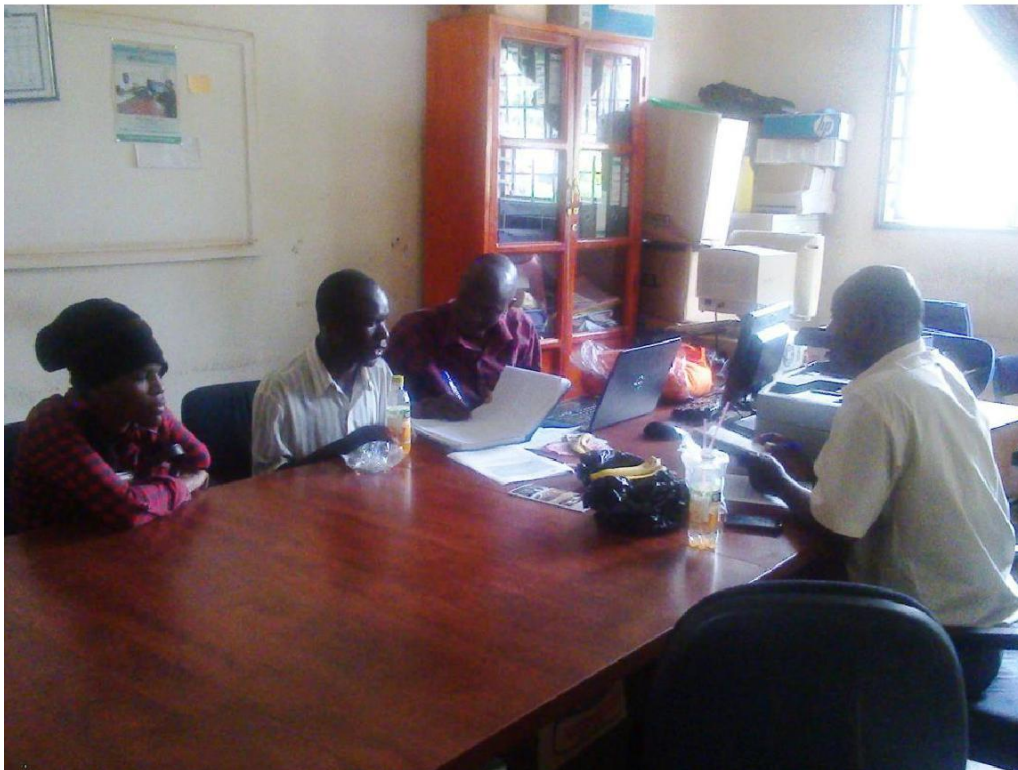
We look to URI for creating more opportunities for youth in: capacity building, conflict resolution, youth leadership, lobbying, and advocacy. URI can also support our fundraising efforts by amplifying our work to its diverse networks as well as creating special programs targeting students with special needs. URI can go the extra mile by mainstreaming disability needs in its programming.



Top and Below: Musa Mwambu (second from right) and team mates receive a Brailled Bible and other religious books from URI together with Youth Interfaith Mission Uganda CC and Uganda Bible Society and as a sign of gratitude demonstrates how its read as members URI-GL staff and members look on.



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