

United Religions Initiative: Global Community Emerging

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Abstract: This article provides a brief introduction to United Religions Initiative (URI), a global grassroots interfaith network that promotes peace and justice through intercultural and interreligious dialogue using a process known as ‘appreciative inquiry’. While accomplishments of URI are highlighted, it is emphasized that more cooperation, more compassion, and more commitment to good relationships will be needed across the world for global unity, justice and peace.

Keywords: United Religions Initiative; URI; Global Community; Interfaith Movement; Interreligious Dialogue; Cooperative Inquiry.

In the mid 1990s, as a new consciousness was emerging that advocated cessation of killing in the name of religion and cooperation for peace, a frequent response was: “impossible”! People bantered that the history of humanity overflows with different religions fighting each other. Clearly, something different was needed if “impossible” was going to give way to inevitable.

What can help shift historic patterns of hostility, ignorance, isolation and political manipulation among religions to unprecedented levels of friendship and collaboration among people of different faiths?

In 1995 upon the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations (UN), Bishop William Swing, the Episcopal Bishop of California, boldly asserted: “If the nations of the world are working together for peace through the UN, then where are the world’s religions?” (http://www.uri.org/about_uri/charter, Para.1). Experts heard his call. Dr. David Cooperrider, Professor of Organizational Development at Case Western Reserve University, donated four years of commitment, expertise and talent. Dee Hock, founder of VISA turned organizational visionary, brought a design plan and confidence that a “bottom up” organization was not only possible but imperative to accomplish the goals of interreligious harmony. People from all parts of the world were invited to assess the strengths they brought to this possibility and envision a new kind of organization into being. The organization came to be called United Religions Initiative (URI). It was to be: inclusive, self-organizing, dependent on people at the grassroots,

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honor equal participation of women and men, encourage youth participation, and bring together a maximum mix of stakeholders from all sectors of society.

The first phrase of URI Charter's Preamble grew from thousands of conversations. "We, people of diverse religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions throughout the world, hereby establish the United Religions Initiative 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.

(http://www.uri.org/about_uri/charter/preamble_purpose_and_principles, Para.1).

Since its Charter was signed in 2000, the United Religions Initiative has grown to include more than 550 grassroots groups and organizations in 79 countries. Each group or organization is self-sustaining and retains its own identity but is also part of URI's global network of Cooperation Circles (CCs). Each Cooperation Circle has its own name, size (minimum of 7 members), governance structure and mission, and they all share a commitment to diverse participation and to advancing the central purpose and principles of URI. As a URI core staff member for over 16 years, I've had a good seat from which to participate in developing a global organization that believes in the power of people to self-organize in order to fulfill their aspirations for peace, justice and healing.

So, what are we seeing? What is our experience teaching us?

A Common Document Rooted in Shared Values Provides Stability

Diverse people are compelled toward action by purpose and principles that articulate their core values, passions and longings. In the United States, citizens are stirred by the words of the Preamble to the Constitution: "We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union..." (http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html, Para.1). In the same way, people have consistently been drawn to the United Religions Initiative by the words of its Charter. URI's preamble, purpose and principles call people to a common cause, guide behavior, bind people together and open opportunities for long-term, diverse, and high-functioning grassroots activities.

Recognition and Appreciation: Focusing on What Works Rather Than What Doesn't Work Is Worth More than Money

An enduring reality of a grassroots activity is that most people involved are not paid but act from personal commitment. Working with hundreds of groups in URI and watching when folks come alive and when they wear out, I realized that people, like flowers, respond to essential 'nutrients', among them the need to be recognized, to be successful, to have their value amplified, and the meaning of what they do deepened.

URI as an organization embraced an approach to positive change called Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperinder & Whitney, 1996, 2005; Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008). Wilted from tedious work, crises, hatreds and injustices that overwhelmed their dreams and positive efforts, we found people coming back to life when a simple organizational process gave them a chance to

remember their core values, renew their sense of personal power, and imagine a world worthy of their children.

At its birth, URI was gifted with Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a leading approach to organizational development. Methodologically, AI is an approach toward positive change, as well as a point of view that seeks to emphasize: a) what is working well in an organization; b) important values that people bring to their work; and c) the aspirations and visions of achievement that are shared by all of its stakeholders. According to David Cooprinde the founder of AI, “In its most practical construction, Appreciative Inquiry is a form of organizational study that selectively seeks to locate, highlight and illuminate what are referred to as the life-giving forces of an organizational existence. Appreciative Inquiry seeks out the best of what is to help ignite the collective imagination of what might be”(Cooprinde & Whitney, 1996, p. 3).

Appreciative Inquiry became part of United Religions Initiative’s DNA as it found its footing in creating safe spaces for people of different traditions and faith backgrounds to come together in respect and cooperation. In its early years, when the voices of doubt were loudest, Appreciative Inquiry helped URI focus on the quality of our questions and the ability to spark people’s imagination toward what is not here yet, but what might be.

Maintaining the Tension Between Giving Guidance and Leaving Freedom to Innovate Produces Positive Results

Giving unlimited numbers of people the freedom to innovate creates an amazing and unanticipated diversity of activities and impact. Cooperation Circles (CCs) take on activities as diverse as creating a Golden Rule Day Proclamation for their city, to maintaining ambulance service for a village, to calling scholars to share papers on the intertextuality of Holy Books. However, grassroots support also calls for systematic guidance and training. An organizational culture that welcomes this tension by encouraging unbridled innovation while providing guidance and training, is challenging but constructive.

URI has learned that people in Cooperation Circles run out of steam, leadership changes or expertise may be lacking to fulfill aims. In addition to providing an open field for initiatives to flourish, a grassroots-led community also needs to provide emotional support, bright ideas and training in various kinds of competencies. To support people in CCs, URI provides some training in such as areas as peacebuilding, fundraising and management.

Conversation and Dialogue Balance Action-Oriented Programs

Early analysis of URI interfaith groups indicated an even split between those organized around conversation and sharing spiritual practices, and those involved in action/service-oriented programs in their communities. Over the years, however, a pattern emerged across cultures that grassroots groups involved in interfaith work often choose a combination of “inner work” and “outer work.”

Recently, speaking with members of the Interfaith Council of Bainbridge Island in Washington State, I experienced renewed commitment as we went around the circle sharing stories of faith and life experience. Active interfaith work that takes on vexing local issues will continue to be reinvigorated, balanced, and anchored by such sharing. Most often, especially in areas of entrenched conflict, such as in the Middle East, grassroots interfaith organizers find that their personal relationships with so-called “enemies” make the biggest difference in their lives and propel their work.

Platforms to Connect Grassroots with Policy Makers Are Critical

Over the years, URI has seen effective alliances among students, religious leaders, civil servants, government officials, the military, the media, and corporate executives. Making an effort to reach out to ‘sectors’ we don’t normally interact with is invaluable in creating opportunity for significant change. In August 2011 in Kampala Uganda, URI leaders in the Great Lakes region of Africa organized a two-day gathering where an Ugandan army colonel, students from Makerere University, locally based NGO leaders, diverse religious leaders, political officials and the Vice President of Uganda joined in common cause in an unprecedented meeting to raise different perspectives and share commitment to securing peace and reducing terrorism in Uganda. People who might have been considered others in the room to be ‘the enemy’ or ‘out of reach’ began to experience themselves as allies.

Strong Relationships Create Community Resilience

Strong community relationships help unleash people’s resilience, creativity, and hope whether preparing for disaster relief, responding to crises, or sharing the doom and gloom surrounding issues like the economy, peace, and the environment. Grassroots organizing among people from different faiths creates such relationships and strengthens communities in times of difficulty. When terrorist bombs hit the island of Bali, an already established interfaith community ran to the scene to offer joint prayers of grief and support. In New Orleans, it is well documented that faith communities, networked to some degree with one another, provided the most successful response to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. We may be living in a dangerous world for quite a while. Grassroots organizing emphasizing relationship-building and cooperation skills is a sterling investment in community resilience and ultimately survival.

What Does the Future Hold?

Grassroots organizing has the opportunity to wield new power as communication tools emerge connecting humanity across continents and to bridge historic divides of all kinds. New networking and new relationships are developing everywhere and interfaith activists have gotten the message. More and more, responsibility for positive change will be distributed among the many taken up by “we, the people.” More competence, more cooperation, more compassion, and more commitment to good relationships will be needed across cultures and among people everywhere as we learn how to tap “the better angels of our nature” and exert our collective influence to make a better world.

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