The purpose of the United Religions Initiative is to promote enduring interfaith communication with the intention of ending religiously motivated violence in order to create cultures and communities of peace and understanding for all the living beings of Earth.

URI Midatlantic/Appalachia CC Gathering

April 14-16, 2007

by Susanna McIlwaine
Interfaith Explorers, Northern Virginia.

“Would you be interested?” A chance question in a phone call led nine CCs to take the initiative to gather a year later in a beautiful little valley in the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia for a “family reunion.” URI CCs blossomed in the Carolinas and Tennessee with the inspiration and guidance of Mary Page and Bennett Simms, and had gotten to know each other through quarterly meetings. So when Mary Page said “let us gather and meet our northern brethren,” gather they did, joined by CCs from Virginia, Baltimore, Washington DC, as well as Margi Ness and Sally Mahé.

We gathered to get to know each other and share inspiration and renewal. We shared our CC’s best practices, stories and questions. We brought our drums, flutes, prayers and sacred poems, hymns, chants and humor. We shared our silence and contemplative presence, and our passion for love-in-action. Most of all, we brought our love, our respect, and our openness to each other...

those morning clouds
hanging down between the mountains
in the prayerful quiet of running water and birdsong
lifted
as our united hearts radiated joy

a wellspring dedicated
to the healing of humanity.

--Stream Ohrstrom, URI-DC, at the healing spring.
It is said the many different materials used in making a basket can also teach us about living peacefully together for a common good.

The Yucca grows out in the sun. Its face is bold and determined; its fibers are strong and will last a long time. The Juncus needs the shade of the oak tree and moist rich dark soil to grow tall and sturdy and will bend as needed. The Deer Grass grows in the open meadow where the wind can blow it to and fro and the sun can dry it just enough.

When the Weaver gathers each of these, prayers are said.

And then taking them each differently prepares and begins to weave. Each material with its own characteristics begins to form one thing: a beautiful basket used for a common purpose. Creator, here we are together, each of us unique in our own way. Gather us up like the weaver gathers to make a basket. Weave us together as ONE this morning as we pray.

-- A Teaching & Prayer for An Interfaith Gathering
By Rev. Kathy Sandoval

What Powers Us?
What Makes Our CC Gears Turn?

We began by ‘locating ourselves’ in the URI universe and its chaordic principles: (The Chaordic Commons: http://www.chaordic.org)

- Enduring in purpose and principle.
- Powered from the periphery, unified from the core.
- Existing to enable constituent parts.
- Equitably distributing power, rights, responsibilities and rewards.
- Fluid webs of cooperation and information.
- Cannot be managed, can only be led.
- Compatible with the human spirit and biosphere.

We reviewed how URI designed itself as a chaordic organization and chaordic principles are embedded in the Charter.

We located ourselves as CCs and as parts of URI in a “life cycle” – Where are we in the life developmental stages of URI? Some of us are exploring, some launching, some evolving, some transforming, some re-creating.

We borrowed a metaphor from a children’s toy in which beautiful, unique, brightly-colored gears connect in an infinite number of ways.

They weren’t all connected initially, but all it took was for one gear to move a fraction of an inch and it would connect with other gears and increase interaction between all of them. The lightest touch
could connect a lone gear with all the others and enable all the gears to be operating together. This was an excellent analogy to URI and showed the impact of our reaching out and embracing each other. – Julie Gordon, Hendersonville

The toy gears were powered from a central gear run by a battery, so we asked ourselves: “What powers us?” “What makes our CC gears turn?”

- What is it that gives your CC its power and positive potential?
- Something you do? The way that you are? Is it a key person?
- What gives you the power to hook up with others? In your community, in URI?

Here are some of our answers. They were so rich and so many, that it is difficult to do justice to them all. I hope others will find inspiration in this rich list, and contact the CCs mentioned for more information.

**LEADERSHIP**

- You have to cultivate and seek out your leadership. “grow a leaderful group;” Look for the skills someone has. We believe everyone has leadership capacity, and if we believe that, we will get it -- and that’s true for all URI.
- What kind of leadership is needed? Shared leadership; shared decision-making; every imaginable kind of leadership.
- Need to plan for sustainability, prepare for transition; Need to attract people willing to be “grown;”
- Often a founder or main worker gets things going; Need to pass on leadership, need to divide tasks;
- Built-in succession, formal structure – (serve two years on Board, then move off) - Greenville;
- “Circle Model” – Hendersonville;
- Take turns leading meetings- (bring food, take notes, lead meeting) Charlottesville.

**COMMUNICATION**

- Consistent, clear, accurate, simple, inclusive;
- Appropriate for different styles: phone calls, face to face, emails;
- Outreach: large mailing list (members, friends and supporters);
- Interviews for magazines;
- Inviting local newspaper publisher to participate;
- Connections with local academic community.

Avoid burnout by timing of annual cycle (Hendersonville)

“We breathe in – in the fall, and breathe out in the spring. With breathing space of no activities in the summer.”

- Fall – planning;
- December – major event;
- Spring – workshop series; (cooling down)
PROGRAMS/EVENTS/ACTIVITIES

• Programs attract people, broaden the scope of the group;
• Nonviolent communication – Hendersonville; grew from individual interest, spread to others: “passion sparked passion;” personal learning and growth; attracted others to teach and take this out;
• Events that blend into community – Charlottesville: All-faiths invocations before community events, Kick off festivals (films);
• Interfaith Concert- URI-DC;
• Project to foster dialogue - 90-minute workshop on Golden Rule – Greenville;
• Monthly prayer for peace, sponsored by different groups;
• Movie night; Reading books together; Going to each other’s place of worship or practice;
• Intl Day of Peace event – something to work together on ;
• Essay contest; Collaboration with schools;
• Enjoyment of each other – potluck at home, meal, hospitality.
• Study together: “Force More Powerful” series, “Deepening the American Dream,”
• Personal sharing and connection.

OTHER

• “We would put problems on the table, and if we were stuck we would go back and pray about it. And when we came back, it would be solved.”
• Read URI Preamble every time;
• When people are too busy to attend the meetings, they still show up at other places, talk about URI, and stay connected.
• Something people can join - give people involvement, voice.

15 workshops in 4 hours... we ran around a lot, but it was fabulous!

• How to hold dialogue groups;
• Religious influence in world affairs;
• Introduction to nonviolent communication;
• Creating an interactive interfaith service;
• Using the Golden Rule Workshop;
• Communication;
• Circular model of leadership;
• The Trinity – connection of all great religions;
• Q & A about URI;
• Listening;
• Introduction to the work of Byron Katie;
• North America workplan input;
• Interfaith Jeopardy;
• Video of Festival of Faiths (Charlottesville);
• URI videos and URI- Europe slide show.

Byron Ballard,
Western NC
Interfaith Network

Frances Worthington,
Greenville Interfaith Forum
Global Council Trustees Participate in Reflective Dialogue

In February, Global Council Trustees, P.K. McCary and Kathy Sandoval participated in a dialogue introduced by the URI at the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery in Northern California. The purpose of the dialogue was to reflect upon religious experiences leading to interfaith work and to discuss the future of URI.

Kathy looks at her studies with her tribal teacher and reflects upon how that experience has affected her view of interfaith:

“She is a woman who has been given all this wonderful wisdom passed down through the generations,” Kathy begins. “She has a wonderful way of helping you to discover which direction you came into this world. When I started studying with her, I thought I was studying with her simply to work with my own people and she told me, “Oh no, Kathy, you’re supposed to work with all people.” That was a sign for me that there is something going on with interfaith,” Kathy continues. “The other thing that happened was that I began to find people along my path of different faiths and different traditions and I began to listen to them. I began to hear that their faith was very important to them. I was curious about that so I began to ask questions and then I discovered that because my faith is something so important to me, we had some commonness, some connection. That was what made it so easy for me to transition into the interfaith conversation. I saw that I was related to everyone, an idea which comes from my tradition. My tradition of the Ahoshimom is that we are related to all things and all people and there is actually a prophecy in our tribe that we are to share our knowledge of how we relate to the earth, with all people, not just among ourselves because if we just shared it with ourselves what good would it do. Because there are so many people in the world, we need to share that wisdom with others.” Kathy then shares her thoughts of where URI and interfaith can fit into the world of today:

The Fine Print

Two of us found a space, put a deposit down, and invited everyone. Four of us planned it slowly over a year, with input from everyone. Our cost was low: $135 per person for the weekend, all meals, room and board. Materials were paid for from generous donations. We received a $600 planning grant from URI-North America, as well as help with some expenses.

SHARING EVENING

From the ethereal to laughing so hard we couldn’t breathe.

The time was brief yet full of rich encounters connecting us through shared stories, hopes, dreams and red yarn.

Scattered now, we carry each other lightly into a new day forever joined.

Until the wings of time unite us once again.

- Arlene Russell

 Participating CCs:
 Interfaith CC-Central Virginia (Charlottesville, VA)
 Interfaith Explorers CC (Northern Virginia)
 Interfaith Forum (Greenville, SC)
 United Religions of Charlotte
 URI of Baltimore
 URI of Henderson County
 URI of Washington DC
 Western NC Interfaith Network (Asheville, NC)
 Winston-Salem (in formation)

MANY THANKS TO ALL WHO HELPED MAKE THIS GATHERING POSSIBLE!
“One of the things that I say or that I talk about is that we must always remember that everyone must be included in this conversation. Whether or not they choose to participate in this conversation is really up to them. We must always have a space for them; whatever that would be, whatever faith that would be or tradition, there must always be that place at the table, so to speak.”

“What I’m mostly interested in is how people relate with each other and what I see is that the URI has created an opportunity for people to be in relationship. It’s actually a really powerful structure, if you can call it that. It is just two people talking, and then two more people talking, and two more people talking, and two more people talking, until everyone’s talking and we’re having this incredible dialogue. It’s local as well as well as global.”

Similarly, P.K. became a part of Genesis, a program hosted by Bill Moyers in 1995. She reflects upon her role in interfaith:

“I sat, pretty arrogant, pretty sure of what I knew about the Bible,” P.K. begins, “not only what I had learned, but what I taught. I sat with Muslims and Jews who told me their stories and as a storyteller, the stories from a Jewish and a Muslim perspective opened up a whole world for me. When I did the Genesis program," P.K. continues, “it was like something opened up for me and I could see God as bigger than my religion, even the God that I supposedly serve. I think of myself as a servant of God. We all are, but we’re in this world to make a difference and to treat each other better, and to care about one another, and to take care of the earth. It wasn’t enough just being Christian anymore. I was invited to the United Religions Initiative and in some ways the rest is history. I’ve found my spot. I love interfaith work. I love inter-cultural work. I love being part of a greater family, a human family.”

P.K. goes on to describe her view of the future of interfaith and the future of URI:

“It’s never going to look like you think it’s going to look like, but it’s always more than you hoped it would be and that ultimately it’s going to get better. I think that's URI. It's has to get better because it's made up of people and we're not perfect, but we have a shared interest in that we're saying because we all have to live in this world together. Some people have ideas about how that works. Maybe we'll disagree about it and maybe we'll figure out that that little pieces work and we'll get something totally different than what we thought. I think we're learning that we're going to have this garden that is made up not only of things we can eat, but also of things that give us pleasure and things that we can cultivate and put on our backs. It’s going to be made up of things that give us warmth and comfort. We don't know what it's all going to be, but it’s going to be okay and that's the hope of it.”

URI receives OD Network Global Work Award 2007

April 20th

The Organization Development Network is an international professional association of organization development practitioners dedicated to leading edge work for healthy, creative organizations.

This Award recognizes an achievement which:

- takes place on a global level or in an arena primarily outside the USA
- breaks new ground or demonstrates an innovative approach
- actively leads or contributes to positive change in the world
- is sustainable
- has a well-articulated purpose
- demonstrates measurable change or progress toward change or progress toward change
- may represent either a large or small intervention of significant impact or import

For more about the OD Network visit: http://www.odnetwork.org/aboutus/awards/Global-Work.php
Purpose
We are a coalition of religious organizations seeking to:

- **PROMOTE** the exercise of faith and practice of religion in Culver City, California and adjacent areas.
- **CULTIVATE** a friendly cooperative and synergistic relationship between the city’s government and religious communities
- **BUILD** partnerships among the religious congregations to develop affective ministries for Culver City residents and to
- **WORK TOGETHER** for the benefit of the total community without compromising doctrinal values or beliefs

Description of Activities
Following some incidents of gang related violence at the high school in 1998, the City Council of Culver City, at the suggestion of Council member Al Vera and others thought it would be a good idea if the spiritual leaders of the community were summoned together to discuss ways that these problems could be addressed. Specifically the City wanted to know if the houses of worship might be able to help by providing after school care – safe spaces where children could go after school until their parents returned home from work. Several programs were started.

In those days leadership was assumed by Father Al Burnham of St. Augustine Catholic Church who had a great personal interest in interfaith dialogue. He was joined by Jim Krause a member of the United Methodist Church who let his organizational skills and his expertise as consultant to non profit organizations. They grew in number and had the support of the City that was a full partner.

The Alliance has sponsored two or three events per year. In addition to producing the events the group also enjoyed getting together to discuss various topics from the point of view of their various faiths traditions for example Charity, Fasting, Conversion, Humor etc.

In the current year we are continuing to emphasize dialogue in our meetings. Instead of putting energy into producing events of our own we are seeking to cooperate with other organizations who are producing events which we also support for example Peace Sunday in December and a Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Celebration in January in cooperation with the City of Culver City. We are intending to produce or an Interfaith Music Festival in the spring.

Welcome Culver City Area Interfaith Alliance!

February 24

North America’s latest Cooperation Circle member of the United Religions Initiative is the Culver City Area Interfaith Alliance, from Culver City, CA (near Los Angeles). Founded in 1998, the Alliance has been a local leader in interfaith dialogue and worked with other Los Angeles-area groups, such as fellow-CC Unity-and-Diversity World Council and the City of Culver City, in putting together larger events.

Reflecting on the URI Charter

Principle 21 tells us that URI members “… shall not be … proselytized.” The American Heritage Dictionary says that “proselytize” means to induce conversion to another faith, political party, or doctrine. But what does “induce” mean in this context? Does it mean simply to preach? Does it imply some means of coercion beyond mere advocacy of a particular position? I’ve heard people use the word in both senses, and perhaps the safest thing in the URI context would be to create a safe space wherein no one would feel “preached at” theologically or politically.
Interfaith TeaHouses Bridge Art and Spirituality in Dialogue in Washington, D.C.

May 9th

URI-DC has been actively engaging Washington, D.C. area residents in interfaith programs large and small since the official URI founding in 2007. Lately they’ve begun a series of Interfaith TeaHouses providing a dialogue in art and word.

Stream Ohrstrom, Chairman of the Board, writes, “Our recent Interfaith TeaHouse on April 29th had over 75 participants and a successful program with a combination of 6 moving musical, theatrical and poetry productions plus a brief introduction to Free Faith Facility Energy Audits by GWIPL and EPA.”

The program included the following elements:

- Listen to the reed flute… reading from Rumi’s Mathnawi with ney improvisation.
- Ten Thousand Joys, Ten thousand Sorrows - Buddhist performance piece by Julia Burger
- Greater Washington Power and Light – an introduction to an ecological alternative.
- Songs and Musical Celebrations with Len Seligman and Friends
- As Kindred Spirits – Sacred Songs and Chants from the Hindu Tradition.
  * Music from the Open Hearted Revolution - Stream and The Blue Dragons.

Interfaith Dialogue and Action at the University of Iowa

May 5th

What might interfaith dialogue and action look like at the University of Iowa, in Iowa City, Iowa, USA? For the ten students, faculty, and community members who recently gathered on April 15th to discuss the matter, the answers ranged from combating religious/race intolerance to providing a less-polarized venue for anti-war efforts, from learning about other religion in a safe space to exploring the nexus of science and faith.

The most difficult question of the day was how to continue the conversation. With no permanent interfaith group on campus, and the main organizer for the delay graduating shortly, who would carry on, and with whom would they work? Though a satisfactory answer was not found, a number of resources were identified who might be interested in contributing to an interfaith forum or organization on campus:
Students and faculty at the University of Iowa as well as Iowa City residents gathered to discuss Interfaith in their community.

- Iowa Dialog Center, an off-campus group promoting dialogue dinners and documentaries in several Iowa cities;
- The International Students Association;
- Resident Advisers (RAs);
- Religious studies department;
- The art department, whose museums include a number of exhibits of religious art;
- The Iowa City Consultation for Religious Communities, an off-campus coalition of congregations promoting dialogue and service.

Two additional questions dwelt on the pragmatic – what are other interfaith student groups doing? And how do groups preserve their history, especially when the membership turns over every 4-5 years? These questions were left acknowledged but unanswered as the afternoon drew to a close.

Campus Peace Centers - a UN NGO Committee Project

May 12th

The purpose of the Campus Peace Center project is to foster the development of a global, interconnected peace movement on college campuses. Members of the UN NGO Committee for Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns are exploring the means to encourage autonomous Campus Peace Centers by maintaining a website for the purpose of coordination among various Centers in the United States and worldwide, and will offer the resources available to us at the United Nations to widen the scope of peace-oriented collaboration.

This new Campus Peace Centers initiative looks like it could give a real boost to student groups interested in peace and justice — by providing a strong framework and support system, it could help bridge the gap between inspiration and action.

What motivated its creation, and when?

The NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns is the first official NGO committee in the UN system to use the word “spirituality.” It has been a wonderful forum since its establishment in New York in 2004, mainly due to the dedicated efforts of Diane Williams, who has long been associated with URI as well.

The committee encourages smaller working groups on any topics that may interest members. The working group on Campus Peace Centers originally came together around an idea of Jonathan Granoff (another longtime friend of URI) to establish conflict mediation centers affiliated with the UN at major universities worldwide. We realized we could do little to advance this idea, which was more in the hands of the institutions. But we felt we could help motivate a grassroots student network with a web presence offering networking and resources, with special focus on UN issues.
Are there any colleges signed up at this point?

We are still in the early development stage, seeking an informal advisory council of interested faculty mentors and speaking with college students to help define the vision. The next step will be a web launch held at the UN in October.

As a URI Global Council member, how do you see the Campus Peace Centers program interacting with the URI Preamble, Purpose, and Principles? Another approach to this question is to ask — what would it look like for a student group to be both a Campus Peace Center and a URI Cooperation Circle?

A Campus Peace Center is intended to be a holistic gathering place for students interested in any of the components of a culture of peace, including activism, care for the environment, community service, and, of course, interfaith dialogue and activities. Thus, it would be a natural place for students to come together as a Cooperation Circle. The URI Preamble, Purpose and Principles would be an excellent resource for the web site, which will offer practical tools for creating a Campus Peace Center.

Can you tell me more about the UN NGO Committee for Spirituality, Values & Global Concerns?

Like the URI, the CSVGC has attracted members who are interested in peacebuilding on a level that transcends all barriers of religion, nationality or culture. Thus, it has become a beautiful community of representatives of various spiritual and ethical Non-Governmental Organizations. Its current chair is Audrey Kitagawa, who also serves as co-facilitator of URI-UN.

You can see information on the various working groups at http://www.csvgc-ny.org

Goodwill Ambassador for the Golden Rule
April 29th

World renowned, holder of many world records and superstar athlete Haile Gebreselassie, was appointed Goodwill Ambassador of the Golden Rule by the Interfaith Peace-building Initiative (IPI), a peace-building organization whose purpose is to promote the Golden Rule, interfaith harmony, a culture of peace, reconciliation, nonviolence, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings.

Handing over the certificate of appointment, trophy, peace medal and the framed “Golden Rule,” the Board Chairman of IPI and Coordinator of Golden Rule Goodwill Ambassador Program Hon. Mussie Hailu said “this honor is bestowed upon athlete Haile in recognition of his outstanding contribution in promoting a culture of peace, harmony, and international solidarity among people of different cultures, ethnic groups, religions, and nationalities through the Great Ethiopian Run program.” The board Chairman further said “his exemplary work in promoting, throughout the world, the universal message of the Golden Rule which says ‘Treat others the way you want to be treated is highly appreciated and commendable.”

THE GOLDEN RULE
Treat others the way you want to be treated.
The Golden Rule has been affirmed in many religions, traditions, indigenous cultures and secular philosophies as a fundamental principle of life and the foundation upon which a global ethic is founded. It is the best tool to educate people about respect and mutual esteem in order to achieve peaceful coexistence and solidarity among members of different ethnic groups, cultures and religions, and it has played a major role in promoting the culture of dialogue so that understanding and interest may develop among individuals and peoples as these are the conditions of authentic peace. The message is simple, universal and powerful and is the most prevalent and universal moral principle in human history. The Board Chairman further said “It is high time to promote the Golden Rule throughout the world as it is a fundamental principle that addresses critical issues such as Peace, non-violence, interfaith harmony, democracy, human rights, respect for each other, gender equity, social development, constructive dialogue among nations, conflict prevention and right human relationship.

With this in mind, IPI declared this day, April 5, as Golden Rule Day and calls upon all citizens of the world, religious leaders of the world, mayors, heads of state of the world, the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union, the League of Arab States, interfaith organizations, schools, higher learning institutions, the business community and civil society to join IPI in proclaiming this day as Golden Rule Day and to live accordingly to make this world a better place for all and the coming generation”.

Athlete Haile, on his behalf after receiving the award, expressed his profound appreciation for the work of IPI and thanking IPI for the honor bestowed upon him and he affirmed to the board members of IPI that he will do all he can to promote this principle which is a key to life. Further he said, “There will not be development without peace as peace is the foundation of everything.” He strongly emphasized that, by promoting the Golden Rule, it will open up the door for peace to prevail on Earth and the betterment of this world. In response to the board’s invitation Athlete Haile accepted to be an honorary member of the Interfaith Peace-building Initiative and United Religions Initiative, an international interfaith organization which is working throughout the world to build global interfaith cooperation for a better world. IPI is a member of the United Religions Initiative.

All board members, on behalf of all the members of IPI, expressed their appreciation and gratitude for the great work Athlete Haile is doing by promoting his country and building a good image for Ethiopia and Africa through sport, and by bringing people all over the world together for the common good. This kind of collaboration is what is needed in our world to bring a positive change and create a better future for the coming generation.

The Proclamation of the Golden Rule, which was declared on this occasion, will be sent to all Heads of State, religious leaders of the world, United Nations, African Union, European Union, interfaith organizations, international organizations and members of civil society and the business Community. It is the hope of IPI that this proclamation will be endorsed through the United Nations General Assembly and that “International Golden Rule Day” will be proclaimed by the UN so that all member states can use this day as a neutral platform where policymakers and citizens of the world could meet together and pave the way for a better world.
This question you bring up is one that has been on the minds of many. For me, it comes down to this: URI has incredible value in the developing world, where interfaith is often a matter of life and death and where it does not have a long history. Here in the U.S. we have over a century of interfaith dialogue and a number of groups to support it.

URI fits in by promoting grassroots interfaith cooperation, centered on the Preamble, Purpose, and Principles, but abstaining from hierarchical agendas and decision-making. In my mind, we have a role to play over the long-run in North America, but it is understandably difficult to gain traction here.

And yet those of us called to support this notion of an end to religiously-motivated violence, this notion of enduring dialogue and this notion of a culture of peace — we need to persevere in encouraging support for the URI in North America. The rest of the world needs a strong North American URI presence. Not only does North America have the funding and resources to be of assistance to the rest of the world, but they are also looking to us. They are looking to see that we are truly attempting to change the entrenched attitudes of Americans towards the rest of the world. From that, people derive hope that the global interaction of civilizations can become a true two-way dialogue rather than a clash.

So I hope that more people like you will ask such a wonderful and sincere question. And that we can continue to develop this notion and pose the questions — where do we go from here? Where does the URI fit — practically, not just ideationally — in a crowded interfaith space in North America and beyond?

Interested in contributing to this newsletter?

Send your submissions to newsletter@uri-org by the following 2007 deadlines: September 30 or November 30. Story contributions are accepted for consideration for the website, www.uri-na.org, at any time.

Coming in the October issue: highlights from the 2007 URI Global Council meeting in Antwerp, Belgium.

Global Council elections are around the corner! Your CC will soon be receiving mail and a phone call regarding the Trustee Selection Process, as well as ballots for voting on two bylaw amendments. These decisions have a direct bearing on the future of the global URI community, and we hope you can all contribute your voice to shaping that future.