Chaordic evolution is alive and well in the growth of our Region. Both chaos and order have been playing out in recent developments.

After infrequent gatherings over the past few years, three meetings have been held this year to work on a shared agreement for the organization of our Region. In April, a meeting was held in the Colorado Rocky Mountains; in June we moved to the east coast and met with additional representatives of CCs in the Catskill Mountains of New York; and in October we'll be back in Colorado to meet once again.

Meetings With a Mission

These three meetings are part of a process set in motion last October when eight URI members responded to my email asking for assistance in developing the 2008 Work Plan (WP) for our Region. These eight became known as the WP Team.

Each year the global office provides every region with a small amount of funding. The Regional Coordinator and Trustees are charged with developing a Work Plan and budget using these funds to nurture and grow the CCs in their region.

In our Region, however, there are few avenues in place for determining the well-being of the CCs, and what support they might need to maintain their strength and vitality. The 2007 Work Plan attempted to address this by setting forth specific communication plans, but a few CC members questioned the authority of this gang of four (Coordinator and Trustees) to decide on the Plan. As a result, while attention was diverted to addressing their concerns, less was accomplished on the 2007 Plan than had been expected.
Other Regions’ Practices

Before we gathered for our first WP meeting, I attended the 2007 global staff meeting where Coordinators from around the world shared what was happening in our Regions. I was impressed with the work and leadership role of the CCs and Regional offices. A common thread in the most successful Regions seemed to be the emergence of an accepted structure and governance.

They had NGO status and were able to raise funds, hire more staff, and operate with relative autonomy from the global office. Because of having increased funding and a decision-making structure, those Regions could take positions on important issues in their areas in a timely fashion, hold more face-to-face meetings, provide additional support to their CCs, and raise the visibility of URI in their Region.

Shifting Gears and Pulling Ahead

When the North American WP Team got together the first time last October, I shared with them the current state of North America and what was happening in other Regions. It was decided that our focus in the 2008 WP would be the development of a shared agreement for the optimum functioning of North America. The process for developing this agreement has now been extended into 2009, and will culminate at the Regional Assembly planned for next May.

The two retreats to date have surfaced some very divergent viewpoints, from continuing as we have in the past, to forming a non-profit organization. At the Colorado retreat coming up October 24-26, we plan to review suggestions and draft agreements based on the input received to date. A decision on how a final agreement will be selected will also be determined.

Transparency in Process

A complete description of the process, including the Work Plan, budget, and timetable, with notes from our meetings, from Appreciative Inquiry phone calls made to various CCs, and examples of agreements from other Regions are available at www.uri.org/na. We will be adding notes and proposed agreements from the October meeting as soon as they are available.

A Chaordic, Co-Creative Process

Your input continues to be sought. I encourage each of you to …

• Go to the North American website noted above, review the materials, and offer your suggestions on the interactive bulletin board you’ll find on the site.

• If you can, send a representative from your CC to the October retreat in Colorado.

• Come also to the Global Assembly in Mayapur, India in December where we will be discussing our process and its products so far.

• Begin planning now to have at least one member of your CC take part in the Regional Assembly in Asheville, NC being planned for May 7-10, 2009.

You will learn more about the Regional Assembly and how we are preparing to help make it possible for as many of our Region’s CCs as possible to attend this important gathering in another article in this newsletter. Elsewhere you will also find more information about plans for the Global Assembly.
Heading Down the Home Stretch

Even with all the chaotic elements in active play, it appears we are on target to have proposed agreements ready for your review and, hopefully, approval by our May Assembly. I hope to see you at all three of our gatherings in the coming months – in Colorado, India and North Carolina.

NA Work Team Gathering Planned in the Colorado Rockies - Oct. 24-26, 2008

You still have time to join the NA Work Plan Team at the next planning meeting to be held October 24-26 near Boulder, CO. This, the third and final working retreat, will review all the input received to date, develop proposals, and determine a method of garnering CC approval for the final plan.

Participants from earlier retreats, as well as those new to participating in the process are encouraged to attend. To help make it possible for the maximum number of CCs to participate in this effort, funds have been allocated to pay for one participant from each CC to join us in Colorado. Expenses covered include: airfare up to a maximum of $450; ground transportation to and from the Denver airport; two nights lodging; all meals while at the retreat center; meeting materials, rooms, and facilitation. Additional CC members may attend for a $170 registration fee, plus payment of their own transportation costs.

We’ll be staying at the Cal-Wood Retreat Center near Jamestown, CO, about 20 miles northwest of Boulder. While our focus will be on our important work, the surroundings are beautiful and Cal-Wood is in the fall migratory path of several herds of elk. What a treat it is to hear an elk bugle!

Flights should be made using the least expensive option that allows you to arrive at the Denver airport no later than 3:30 PM on Friday, October 24 and leave no earlier than 4:00 PM on Sunday, October 26. If possible, pay for your flight and email Margi your confirmation with flight number, cost, and a cell phone number where you can be reached during travel. She will send you a reimbursement. This information must be received by October 10.

Whether you can attend the retreat or not, it is important for your CC to review, discuss, and provide ideas on the web site’s bulletin board at www.uri.org/na. Please contact our North American Coordinator, Margi Ness, with any questions you have, and to let her know ASAP who will plan to attend from your CC.

See you in Colorado for a URI Rocky Mountain High!
We organized on September 11, 2000 with a purpose of enabling community people of interfaith interests to come together in dialogue, to listen to each other, and in the process of sharing thoughts and concerns for peace, become more understanding of others' beliefs.

We invite all interested people to share and join in our monthly interfaith dialogues. People of all faiths, spiritual traditions, and other beliefs are invited to participate, including for example Baha'is, Buddhists, Christians, Confucians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Metaphysical/New Thought, Shintos, Sikhs, Spirit Religions, Taoists, Unitarians, Zoroastrians, and any others not listed here.

Our focus is Interfaith and inter-spiritual education, to enhance each participant's understanding of cultures and religions other than their own. Attendees of our interfaith group share their own perspectives, and speakers are invited to present programs on subjects of local, national, or global content, including current ethical, religious, educational and political issues.

Together, we seek channels to local and global peace with justice through interfaith and inter-spiritual dialogue. Our meetings are held at 7:30pm on the first Monday night of each month at New Vision United Methodist Church, 450 Chadbourne Avenue, Millbrae, CA 94030 (Unless otherwise notified).

There is no organizational structure such as president, secretary, etc., but we communicate by having two individuals who are willing to act as Co-Contacts: myself and Oscar Koechlin (who also writes our monthly E-mail News Letter), 1214 Shafter Street, San Mateo, CA 94402, okoechlin@comcast.net, 650-345-4826.

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North American Regional Assembly
Planned for Asheville, NC
May 7-10, 2009

Preliminary plans are well underway for our Second North American Regional Assembly to be held near Asheville, NC next spring. A steering committee comprised of Margi Ness, Anne Roth, Lisa Marie Main, Mary Page Sims and Sandy Westin have been meeting by conference call and email for several months to develop the event.

The purpose of this Assembly will be to enhance community among North American CCs, and to inspire Assembly participants to move the Preamble, Purpose and Principles of URI forward locally. We will celebrate the establishment of our new shared agreement, and have time for sharing our plans, dreams, and hopes for URI with one another.

If you would like to play a part in helping to shape this exciting event, the door is open for people to join any of several volunteer teams being formed now. Some teams such as Hospitality, Room Setup and Transportation will involve activities at the event itself, while others such as Registration and Communications will be helping with tasks in advance of the event. Volunteers will be able to participate as Assembly delegates, and be recognized in a variety of ways for their
contributions. If you would like to consider volunteering contact Anne Roth for the Worship Design Team, Lisa Marie Main for the Program Design Team, and Sandy Westin for the Registration Team. More volunteer opportunities will be announced later this fall.

In order to make it possible for delegates from as many of our Region’s CCs as possible to attend this important three-day gathering, a CC Development Investment Pool is being planned to make funds available to help defray travel and other costs of attending. Watch for news about the fund, volunteer opportunities, and how CCs can participate in upcoming NA-AIR emails which are sent out to the contact persons of all registered CCs.

Whether your CC is currently active or dormant, please begin discussing the possibility now of attending next May’s Regional Assembly. Advance registrations will be open from January 1 through March 31, 2009.

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**In Memorium**

A Brief Biography of Dr. T.D. Singh

Dr. Thoudam Damodar Singh was born in the remote state of Manipur, India, on December 9, 1937 to a humble family of rice farmers. When the Japanese invaded India during World War II, his family was forced to leave their farm and stay in a camp for the duration of the war. The death of his father through typhoid at that refugee camp, when Singh was just seven years old, put the family in a precarious situation.

He was forced to work in the fields to support his family and thus forego formal education, until an uncle decided to take the young Singh under his care when he was twelve. His early education was in a small village school, but his academic brilliance soon came apparent.

He won two scholarships, first to the University of Calcutta, and then to the University of California at Irvine where he studied under the famous Dr. Robert W. Taft, and received his Ph.D. in Physical Organic Chemistry.

It was while he was a student at Irvine in 1970 that his beloved mother passed away in India. This event made him reflect deeply on the meaning of life, and turned him to examine the spiritual. A few months after this event, he met his Spiritual teacher, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.

In his meetings with Prabhupada, he was deeply touched by his guru’s intimate and personal dealings with those he met, and obvious concern about the welfare of one and all. Influenced by the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita and other Vedic scriptures, Singh decided a few years later to take up the path of sannyasa (the renounced order) in the traditional Indian way. When he entered the sannyasa ashram, he was awarded the name of Bhaktisvarupa Damodara Swami. However, he maintained his interest in science and founded the Bhaktivedanta Institute, pioneering the dialogue between science and spirituality.

The Institute has organized several major conferences throughout the world, inviting several Nobel Laureates and renowned spiritual leaders to exchange their thoughts on Science and Spirituality. In Denver, the local branch of the Institute works with other organizations to organize an annual conference for the Convergence of Science and Spirituality. Interfaith dialogue is an integral part of the Institute’s mission. In that capacity, Dr. Singh has organized seminars and meetings around the world, hosting such luminaries as the Dalai Lama,
Dr. Desmond Tutu, and Pope John Paul II, among others. He is also a Charter member of the URI, and it is in his honor that our 2008 General Assembly is being held in Mayapur, India, near Calcutta, where Dr. Singh made his home.

Dr. Singh was seen as “a leader of extra-ordinary vision, gentleness, determination, humility and generosity; the sort of leader our world so desperately needs.” For more information on Dr. Singh, you will find his memorium at this link.

Dr. Singh invited URI to hold its next General Assembly at ISKCON in Mayapur prior to his death. We will be honoring him this December as we gather there from around the world.

North American Regional Delegates to Attend
Global Assembly 2008
November 30 – December 5, 2008
Mayapur, West Bengal, India

“Pilgrims of Peace: Many Paths, One Purpose”

Delegates from Cooperation Circles and affiliates of our North American Region have answered the call to come together in celebration of URI’s diversity and to deepen our global community at the second Global Assembly of URI being held this Fall. They will be joining with other delegates from around the world to co-create bold visions for the future inspired by our past successes.

In less than eight years, URI has grown from the vision of a few, to a global organization active in more than 60 countries, involving over 1,000,000 people annually. It has created an unprecedented global network of interfaith cooperation, launched countless successful projects around the world, and become the recognized and respected leader in grassroots interfaith organizing. URI’s work is carried out by over 400 Cooperation Circles, of which 70 are in India.

Scholarships have been awarded to the following North American Region delegates:

- Sister Chandru and Michael Pappas, Interfaith Center at the Presidio CC, San Francisco
- Ronnie Pepper, URI of Henderson County, Hendersonville, NC


Cooperation Circle Spotlight -> URI of Greater Baltimore!
By David W. Cammack
Fairhaven C31, 7200 3rd Av., Sykesville, MD 21784
Cammacksd@JUNO.com, 410-552-9475

Though I didn’t realize it until many years later, I became committed to URI’s 3 purposes in 1948, almost 50 years before URI’s official start. I was a young officer aboard the USS Valley Forge, the first aircraft carrier to circumnavigate the globe. This cruise brought me into contact with all the world’s major cultures, each of which I observed to be oriented in terms of its great founding religion.

In 1946 I had already decided my main life concern was to become a post-World-War II peace-builder toward a better world. My first strategy was to develop support for the newly created United Nations, as the essential political arm for peace; so in 1947 I embraced the purposes of...
both the UN Association to support the UN, and Citizens for Global Solutions to improve the UN. (I felt my Navy career could help enforce UN laws and agencies.) However the 1948 cruise convinced me to adopt an enlarged new 2nd strategy for peace, making the arm of religion a top priority, ‘because its influence on peoples’ attitudes was key for enabling all other arms to succeed. I soon started a 3rd new more specific strategy by entering the Episcopal ministry, teaching the importance of cooperative comparative religion and culture in church, colleges, and in both the UN Assoc. and Citizens for Global Solutions organizations.

My 4th new personal strategy came with the birth of URI, in connection with the UN’s 50th anniversary 1995, when certain leaders emphasized how most world conflicts were fueled by religious differences. URI’s 3 purposes (almost the same as my own since 1948) call for people of differing religions 1) to develop cooperative understanding of one another, 2) to eliminate religiously motivated violence, and 3) to build a better world generally. So I started a Baltimore Cooperative Circle in 2001, meeting monthly into 2006.

A 5th new strategy then became important to evolve. Our CC was only talking to itself, whereas spreading the URI purposes was most important. So our few core leaders instead now devote our limited time to carrying URI’s comprehensive vision and purposes to over 30 other “only partially interfaith” groups, and into Baltimore’s religious power centers. We encourage all readers to emphasize URI’s 3 purposes as primary, while evolving whatever strategy proves best to you.

THINKING GLOBAL AND ACTING LOCAL - URI STYLE

By Deri Joy Ronis, Ph.D

Has it already been over a decade since I first became involved in helping to draft the URI charter and meeting all the wonderful people involved in the early stages of the process? These days, I’m rarely surprised about the synchronicity that leads us to meet the people we are supposed to connect with – especially those with whom we share a common vision. I was first introduced to the United Religions Initiative when I was visiting San Francisco in 1997. While I had lived there earlier, I never knew I would one day work there with people from all over the world who share a collective dream of what the world can look like. The mission of the URI strongly resonates with Gandhi’s admonition, “To be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Although I have been involved in interfaith work for the past thirty years, I enjoyed a special bond with the participants that I met in drafting the URI charter; including the conferences at Stanford & Carnegie Mellon Universities. I believe my quest to understand man’s inhumanity to man first began when I went to live and work at a Kibbutz, Kfar Blum, in the Upper Galilee of Israel when I graduated high school. Still later on in 1985, I was encouraged to apply for acceptance into a Doctoral program to research Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution. I was, and still am trying to understand religiously motivated warfare. To that end, my research culminated in a book, Bridging the Gap to Peace: From a New Way of Thinking into Action, 1988, University Microfilms.

Meeting people like Reverend William Swing, Charles Gibbs and Sally Mahe to name but a few, is a reward in itself. We are all fortunate in knowing and working with kindred souls; people you understand and who understand you. If you multiply that by all the people who still keep in touch over the years, I am left with a belief in the goodness of people in spite of the newscasts that suggest a different reality.

I am very grateful to URI for many reasons. I am still involved today with a Cooperation Circle in Sarasota, FL. with the Center for Religious Tolerance. I am also thankful that my quest has continued to attract more opportunities to expand my soul and help others. A recent example
was the good fortune I had last year to be chosen as a Rotary International Professor and Goodwill Ambassador. I taught courses in Conflict Resolution and Group Dynamics at Galen University in San Ignacio, Belize.

I observed that people the world over still have conflict, and they need a safe space to heal it. In Belize students were sharing in URI’s vision through the videos they watched and discussed while planning community projects based on what they learned. It is my hope that all of us involved in URI will help to usher in a new age of peace where we shall know war no more.

Editor’s note: Visit this webpage to learn more about Dr. Ronis’s work in building peace.

URI North America Adds a Technology and Communications Coordinator to the Team

As the North American Region grows, the need to enhance communications has also grown. Sandy Westin of Hendersonville, NC has agreed to serve as the Technology and Communications Coordinator for the North American Region. Sandy has an extensive background in publishing community newsletters, both electronic and hard copy, as well as producing numerous commercial and nonprofit websites through her business as Village Communications.

Sandy has also been the Co-Convener of the URI of Henderson County in North Carolina for the past two years, and is personally committed to the Preamble, Purpose and Principles of URI. She will be a delegate to the Global Assembly this Fall in Mayapur, and has plans to assist local CCs in our Region learn how to make great use of new features of the URI Global website coming this fall.

As we welcome Sandy to her new role, we also say a big thank you and best wishes to Bailey Barnard, retiring newsletter editor. As a recent college graduate, Bailey is beginning a new career and is unable to continue with URI in this role. Over the past year, Bailey gave an enormous amount of time and energy to our Region, and his contributions are sincerely appreciated.

To offer comments, suggestions, or an article for the next edition, contact Sandy at swestin@village-assistance.com, (828) 749-3581, or by toll-free fax at 1-888-498-7485.

Share this newsletter with a click of your "forward email" button. Let others in your CC or community know about the peacebuilding work of URI. If you prefer to not receive future editions of this e-newsletter, please let us know. We would be sad to see you go, but will honor your preferences.

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