North America Represented at Global Assembly 2008

By Margi Ness, Regional Coordinator

The week of Global Assembly, held December 1-6 in Mayapur, India, was an exciting adventure in building meaningful and productive connections with delegates from all regions of URI, especially the 34 of us from our own region who represented 7 different Cooperation Circles, as well as staff from the San Francisco office.

Bishop Bill Swing, our President and founder, opened the Assembly on Monday by sharing the following four priority areas which URI will be focusing on in the next few years.

Four Developmental Focal Areas for URI Announced

- **Growth** – In the number of active CCs
- **Leadership Training** – to enhance the viability of all CCs
- **Communication** – strengthening the ties and network among all CCs, and between CCs and the global office in San Francisco
- **Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding** – leading the way in putting URI’s principles, purpose and preamble to work in bridging divisions among faiths.

We expressed our thanks to all the outgoing Global Trustees including our own Rev. Heng Sure, PK McCary, and Adelia Sandoval for the incredible job they’ve done over these past four years. We then witnessed the commitment ceremony of our new Global Council, including our new North America Trustee, Susanna McIlwaine, and the re-commitment of Adelia Sandoval as she began her new term. PK McCary is continuing to serve as Secretary to the Global Council as an At-Large Trustee. We were saddened that our new Trustee, Rebecca Gonzales-Tobias was unable to attend due to her mother’s illness and subsequent passing, and extend our deepest condolences to her and her family.

In the week preceding Global Assembly, 93 members of the Young Leaders Program of URI gathered for their own assembly titled “Taking the Initiative...The Role of Youth in Global Interfaith Action”. And take the initiative they certainly did! These young leaders not only played an active part in all the deliberations and discussions of Global Assembly, contributing new energy and innovative, stimulating ideas, but also came forward with “An Interfaith Open Letter to the Leaders of the World”. Here is just an excerpt from that statement. It can be found in its entirety on the [www.uri.org/na](http://www.uri.org/na) website.
Excerpt from a letter written “to the leaders of the world” by the Young Leaders present at Global Assembly 2008.

“As a leader you have the ability to inspire a new era of religious tolerance. We ask that you actively engage in the development of interfaith cooperation and understanding.

Leaders and countries around the world are recognizing the security implications of good interfaith cooperative efforts. Your role is not to lead one religion to victory, but to assist all the people of all the faiths to live in a more hospitable world.

We emphasize the role of individuals in this process. Peaceful individuals create peaceful families.

Peaceful families create peaceful communities. Peaceful communities create peaceful nations. And peaceful nations create a peaceful world. You are in the unique position to spread this message far and wide.”

The four developmental areas Bishop Swing announced served as the backdrop of work done by the delegates in 13 “Affinity Groups”, small groups which convened around the themes listed below. Each group prepared a statement representing their priority concerns and recommendations which they then presented to the new Global Council. Several exciting new ideas and directions emerged from this process, including:

- CCs reaching out to other peace and faith organizations in our own communities with the possibility of collaborating on similar projects, inviting their participation in our programs, and building deeper community connections.
- CCs connecting with other CCs in their geographic area, or who share a similar program focus for mutual support and encouragement.
- Establishing a “Sister CC” link with another CC within one’s own region, or in another region around the world to provide mutual support, sharing of ideas and resources.
- Homestays with members of another CC while traveling.
- CCs doing outreach to nearby communities with the possibility of launching new CCs.

In general, a new paradigm was emerging – one in which the delegates were advocating that CCs begin looking to one another for leadership and resources, rather than solely to our hub office in San Francisco.

The week was energizing, to say the least. Twenty delegates, including several of us from North America, extended our stay in India for a tour of sacred sites across Northern India during the second week in December. Collections of pictures taken at Global Assembly and our tour week are available online at a new link added to the URI website (www.uri.org) for “The Global Assembly Experience.” The link takes you to a new Global Assembly webpage with more links to the URI Online Community, YouTube.com, Flickr.com and Facebook.com, where a lot of our memories are being stored and shared.
Affinity Group Themes at Global Assembly

1. Healing for the Environment
2. Peace and Values Education
3. Peace Building and Conflict Resolution
4. Poverty Reduction
5. Women’s Empowerment
6. Developing New CCs
7. Strategic Partnerships, Engaging Policy Makers
8. Connecting CCs and Sharing Resources
9. Capacity Building and Sharing Resources
10. Youth in URI
11. Visibility, Identity and Image of URI
12. Fundraising: Local, Regional and Global
13. Shared Global Action

Reflections on the Global Assembly and Global Council Meetings in Mayapur

By Susanna McIlwaine, Incoming Global Trustee, North America Region

The Global Assembly was a miracle - at many times it must have seemed logistically impossible. We cannot thank the URI staff and volunteers enough for pulling it off with grace, competence and as true examples of selfless service. To maximize the benefit and the impact of these gatherings and to bring the energy back to the CCs and members who couldn’t be there, I encourage all to explore the wonderful postings have been put on the Internet on websites, blogs, Facebook, Flickr and You-tube resources by Barbara Hartford and others. I hope those who were able to attend will continue adding photos and materials to share their thoughts on the meaning of their experiences in Mayapur, and the new relationships and energies formed there.

Once the transition ceremonies had been accomplished and the new Global Council had a chance to sit in a circle together for the first time, I was pleasantly surprised that the energy of the group coalesced immediately at a subtle level. It felt that there was something real happening. The first meetings were held in time stolen from resting and other Global Assembly activities. They were spent in tentative steps of getting to know each other, walking through procedures, elections of officers and selection of committees. While there were a few chances to talk briefly about topics beyond the procedural, what I see now that I miss most was having a chance to hold longer open dialogues about pressing URI issues. The outgoing trustees left us thoughtful lists about their challenges and hopes which I hope the incoming council will have a chance to pick up on at our next meeting.

A meeting of all the regional staff was held separately during the Global Council meeting, but there wasn’t time in Mayapur for the two groups to share their respective meetings with one another. I hope this will still happen. From what I heard in Mayapur, CC members, regional staff and global staff are all passionate about new ideas and plans, and are committed to URI’s purpose even in very difficult situations. If we are to maximize the strength and benefit of our unity and diversity, our local and global cooperation, I feel we all need to be as conscious and reflective as possible. There are very large and important questions and decisions on the table, and I think URI will be strongest if we are all at the table, understanding and contributing.

My personal experience in URI has included both inspiration and joy, helplessness and frustration. As a new Global Trustee, I will try to ground myself in what I promised Mary Page Sims, that I would work to increase communication among the different parts of URI, beginning with my own experience as a Trustee. I will do what I can to increase dialogue, and ask for your help and that of my fellow Trustees to make this possible.

With love and thanks – Susanna, smcilwaine@uri.org
A Peace Pilgrim’s Journey to Mayapur

By Adelia Sandoval, Global Trustee, North America Region

One cannot be a Pilgrim of Peace alone. Although I was alone as I embarked on my journey to Sri Mayapur, West Bengal in India, I knew I would be seeing those I have come to love and cherish as fellow Global Trustees on the URI Global Council. I also knew I would be meeting many new and wonderful people who cherish the Preamble, Purpose and Principle's of URI and would be sharing their own cooperation circle experiences. Once I entered the gates of Mayapur I knew I was in a place of wonder. Sacred hospitality was a gift given and gratefully received each day of my entire stay there. The day the Assembly began, we wayfaring strangers became Pilgrims of Peace as together we processed to the Ganges River where we held ceremony to honor the sacred waters and sacred land.

During my 12 day stay, there was much work accomplished in our Global Council meetings. The completion and honoring of the 2005-2008 Global Council was held, and when we came together in our sacred circle, the new Global Council for 2008-2012 coalesced. The vibrant energy the Young Leaders created prior to our arrival was felt throughout the whole Assembly. I have never been so moved by young people sharing their vision of URI and the amazing work they do at home in their cooperation circle projects.

One of my most cherished moments was being able to speak at a special birthday remembrance for Dr. T.D. Singh, a fellow Trustee, now gone, whose vision made it possible for the Global Assembly to be held in Mayapur. I came across a poem entitled LOTUS written by an India poet, Rabindranath Tagore. In it he writes...

"On the day the lotus bloomed, alas my mind was straying... I knew not then that it was so near, that it was mine and that the perfect sweetness had bloomed in the depth of my (own) heart."

I don't think I was aware of the beauty and depth of the whole Sri Mayapur experience until I came home to southern California. The richness of the one-on-one dialogues, the small group interactions, the necessary and vital work of the Global Council, the warmth of sacred hospitality, and the memory of many blessed moments continue to bloom in my heart. They have given me the impetus to serve, and to be a Pilgrim of Peace in all I do. Peace be to all – Adelia, asandoval@uri.org

About This Issue of the Newsletter

To save the mounting expense of printing and mailing our regional newsletter (about $2.00 per address), this is the first issue that will be distributed only electronically.

If you would prefer to receive the newsletter in hard copy only, please contact Sandy Westin. We will honor your preference. Those who do not contact Sandy will continue to receive future issues only electronically.

Please share this and future issues of your newsletter with those in your CC and others by forwarding or printing and copying it so it can reach all who are interested in learning of our region's activities.

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Number of Global Assembly delegates....280
Regions represented....................All 8
  Africa 29 delegates
  Asia 99
  Europe 18
  Latin America 32
  Middle East/North Africa 23
  Multi-Region CCs 14
  North America 47, including global
    staff from San Francisco
  Southeast Asia/Pacific 18
Nations represented....................45
Different faiths represented...............14
  (from Ba’hai to Zoroastrian)
Something to Think About: Contrasting Two Terms

**INTERFAITH** –
Bringing together persons of two or more faith traditions to experience ideas, rituals, and programs which explore common ground and transcend differences.

Example: The Universal Prayer for Peace.

**MULTIFAITH** –
Bringing together persons of two or more faith traditions to experience ideas, rituals, and programs from each of their traditions with the purpose of building mutual understanding and appreciation of diversity.

Example: Interfaith Celebration of Peace.

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Gearing Up for the URI North America Regional Assembly

May 7 – 10, 2009
Asheville, NC

Have you heard? Scuttlebutt has it that the Lutheridge Conference Center in Arden, North Carolina, located halfway between Asheville and Hendersonville, just two miles from the Asheville Airport, is going to be a-buzz with activity the second week in May this year. Delegates from Cooperation Circles throughout the US and Canada – potentially at least one from each and every CC - are expected to descend on this beautiful, forested, 160 acre campus in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina.

From dinner on Thursday evening, the 7th, through lunch Sunday afternoon, the 10th, the Assembly will see a mix of playing and planning, daydreaming and deliberating, networking and crafting new visions for our region of URI, - a kind of summer camp for interfaith activists. And here’s the best kept secret – It’s possible for one delegate from each CC to attend this fun four days with virtually all their expenses paid by URI’s North America Development Fund!

To find out more, ask your CC’s Primary Contact person to share a copy of the materials with you that s/he recently received in the mail, then get the discussion started in your CC about who’s going to get to go to Asheville this May. To learn more, you can also go to the NA website at www.uri.org/na.

We will be voting at the Assembly on the choice of an administration structure for our region. Primary CC Contacts have received a Certification of Eligibility to Vote form via US mail which is to be returned by March 1st. In mid-March, a mailing will go to each Primary Contact that will include the following important materials:

- Regional Assembly Registration Form
- Development Fund Application and Reimbursement Form
- Proxy Designation Form for those CCs unable to send at least one delegate
- Descriptions of the five organizational models to be voted on at Regional Assembly (currently available at www.uri.org/na.)

All registrations and requests for expense reimbursement from the Development Fund must be received by April 15, so begin thinking now about coming to this fun and important Regional Assembly. See you in North Carolina when the rhododendrons are in bloom! ⭐
Cooperation Circle Spotlight -> Unity Made Visible
By Rev. Deborah Moldow
Somers, NY - revdeb1@comcast.net - (914) 669-0133

Unity Made Visible officially announced its acceptance as a Cooperation Circle within the worldwide United Religions Initiative on September 21, 2008, the International Day of Peace, at Antioch Baptist Church in Bedford Hills, NY. The church was celebrating its 114th anniversary by planting a Peace Pole, which was dedicated in a ceremony organized by Pastor Paul Briggs, a founding member of the CC.

It was a glorious September afternoon as diaconate members processed from the church where the Peace Pole had been blessed in the Sunday service and large, colorful flags of the world were distributed to 150 congregation members. Paul Storfer introduced Unity Made Visible. Deborah Moldow, who is both a member of Unity Made Visible Cooperation Circle and the Representative to the United Nations for the World Peace Prayer Society, which initiated the Peace Pole project, explained that there are 250,000 Peace Poles all over the world, and that many people gather at their local Peace Pole for a Minute of Silence on the International Day of Peace and the prayer, “May Peace Prevail on Earth.” She also introduced Monica Willard, UN Representative for the URI.

Unity Made Visible is a three-year-old Westchester organization formed by the common goals of the Antioch Baptist Church of Bedford Hills, the Katonah Presbyterian Church, St. Mary’s Catholic Church of Katonah, the Upper Westchester Muslim Society of Thornwood, and the Jewish Family Congregation of South Salem, NY. It has now expanded its mission to create opportunities for education, dialogue and community among people of all beliefs, and will serve as a forum through which all members of the community work, side by side, towards genuine peace and understanding.

On November 22nd, fifty people of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds came together at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Granite Springs for “Food and Faith: Sharing the Harvest of Our Traditions,” an event organized by Unity Made Visible. Everyone brought food from their own tradition and had the opportunity to explain the dishes and their particular significance, providing tasty glimpses into different cultures. For more information about programs offered by United Made Visible, contact Paul Storfer at storf@msn.com or (914) 729-6333. *
Help Build a Virtual Peace Library
For URI in North America

We all have collections of our favorite books, journals, CDs and DVDs that we find value in as resources for our growth in our interfaith work. The idea has been put forward that we could share at least the titles of such resources with one another in an online “virtual library”, a bibliography of the best we’ve found. Would you like to play a part in building such a resource? Here are some steps you could help take to make it a reality.

1) **Look or think through the collection of CDs, tapes DVDs and books** known to you to identify those titles you would recommend to others. The common theme and criteria would be those publications that provide stimulating ideas and/or information around the topics represented in URI’s preamble:

   “…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.”

2) **Pull together the following information about each one**: Title, Author, ISBN catalog number (if a book), and any other information needed for a person to locate the publication through their local library. If you could take the extra step of checking with Amazon.com or other online resources and noting if it’s available there, that would be a great addition.

3) **Send your list to Sandy Westin** (swestin@uri.org); she’ll pull everyone’s recommendations together and post them on our region’s website at www.uri.org/na.

4) **Bonus**: If you’re captivated by this idea and would like to play an active part in making it real, you might volunteer to serve as “virtual librarian” for this collection going forward. You would receive people’s suggestions by email, categorize them in a system that makes sense to you, then send them to Sandy to be added to the website.

A number of possible applications come to mind for how such a bibliography might be of use to us as individuals and as Cooperation Circles, including providing material for book, video, or CD/tape study and discussion groups among members of different faiths and even generations.

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.

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**Share this newsletter with a click of your "forward email" button.** Let others in your CC and community know about the peacebuilding work of URI. If you are not a Primary CC Contact and 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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