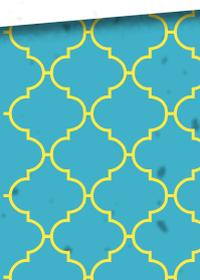


# Humans of URI Europe

Inspiring, Acting, Changing  
for Peace, Justice & Healing





Editor: Lejla Hasandedic-Dapo  
Proofreading: Mark Ereira-Guyer & Martina Molinari  
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United Religions Initiative Europe  
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# Preface/Introduction

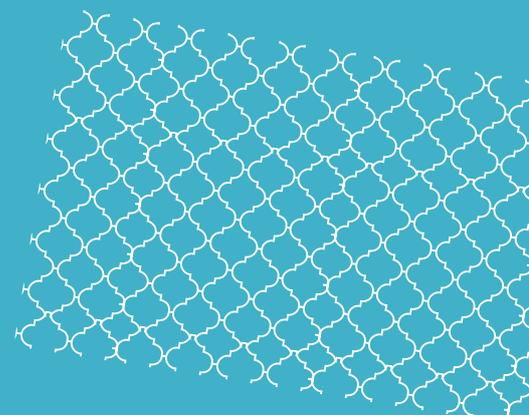
It is a big joy to share stories from humans of Europe. The humans speaking in this brochure are driven by the desire to bring people together in respect. They are founders, pioneers, leaders, regular heroes. Or, from another perspective, ordinary people doing extraordinary work.

Peace, justice and healing – URI's foundational values – are not just words for them, but have deep significance in their life and actions. They realize them in their work with their fellows, friends, families and communities. They are exemplars of amazing activists – and we know that there are uncountable others in the world. You, who reads this, may well be one of these, too.

So, be welcome! Dive into the stories! Read and look for yourself! And get to know humans of Europe! And if you are inspired and feel drawn, contact us and consider joining the network, the pilgrimage, the net of positive-minded people who work with courage, curiosity, dedication, creativity and perseverance, day to day, to build cultures of peace, justice and healing.

This publication was done in a wonderful partnership with ENORB – European Network On Religion and Belief. We are very grateful to ENORB's director, Mark Ereira-Guyer, Martina Molinari and Eleni Palioura for the great collaboration. They provided advise, English language proof-reading and have connected us with the designer. – Jordan Blyth of JB Studio has done a fantastic job on designing the brochure, given the content a beautiful, fitting frame. – A big thank you goes to Lejla Hasandedic-Dapo, URI Europe CC Liaison Officer and URI Individual Membership Coordinator, who has led the team on this project in her unique communicative, skillful and empathic way. The interviews were conducted and stories collected by various URI Europe team members, namely Dr. Duncan Wielzen and Marianne Horling (URIE president and board member); URI Europe staff team members Karimah Stauch, Lejla Hasandedic-Dapo and Angelina Vladikova. Deepak Naik provided advise on the go – and so did other URI Europe board members: Jaume de Marcos, Vjekoslav Saje, Daniel Eror, Sheikh Bashir Ahmad Dultz, Father Petar Gramatikov. – We warmly thank our colleagues of URI global: Alice Swett, Director of Global Programs in San Francisco, for always providing valuable tips and insights and Maria Crespo, Director of Member Support in Buenos Aires, for writing the epilogue. – Last, but not least, we thank our wonderful network members: the people in URI's Cooperation Circles, for doing the great work they do, you do, with dedication, being rays of hope and shining your light for us and the world. We are happy and proud to be on this journey together!

Karimah K. Stauch, URI Europe Coordinator



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# URI Europe President

Humans and civilizations exist through stories. All civilizations have stories at the base of their creation. The human spirit, the human imagination and commitment to social transformation are all captured in stories. Whether in written language, or transmitted orally, stories prove to be a powerful learning tool. Storytelling is an age-old technique. It enables to excite, empower, inspire and entice people to commit themselves to a noble cause.

The story of United Religions Initiative (URI) is one of birthing, growing, and inspiring. It is a story of making a change from the grassroots level of village communities, cities and countries. People of all walks of life, from diverse religious and philosophical backgrounds come together to write these stories. They write them with acts of friendship, tolerance and acceptance of diversity. Written in a language of compassion and human solidarity, they become real life stories.

URI's Preamble, Purpose and Principles ([www.uri.org/who-we-are/PPP](http://www.uri.org/who-we-are/PPP)) inspire these acts of compassion and solidarity. They give people a sense of meaning and purpose in their life. They inspire people to become engaged with the wellbeing of their fellow citizens, communities and environment. Working together across religious and philosophical boundaries enhances mutual understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity. It constitutes the grammar of educating for peace.

In this publication you will read about the motives that undergird people's engagement with URI in Europe. Its twentieth anniversary has given reason to collect first hand stories and best practices of living and working together amidst diversity. With a war raging in Europe at the moment, commitment to peace has become a resolve of utmost importance. In partnering with likeminded organizations URI aspires to pave the way toward healthy and peaceful societies. Therefore, as President of URI Europe I am delighted that this publication comes through the friendly collaboration with the European Network on Religion and Belief (ENORB). This reflects the fruits and strength of peoples and organizations working together. The stories in this book also reflect grassroots endeavours toward interfaith cooperation and peaceful living together amidst cultural diversity.

**Duncan R. Wielzen,  
President URI Europe**

[www.uriurope.org](http://www.uriurope.org)





# European Network on Religion & Belief

Everyone likes a good story, we can all learn so much from what they convey. They provide us with windows into the world – with all its richness, grace and complexity. The stories revealed here help us all to learn from what has been achieved by people of faith and the enduring warmth of human connection emanating from this commitment to humanity, peace and social justice. Personal experiences abound.

The European Network on Religion and Belief is delighted to be involved in this splendid initiative designed to mark URI's special 20th year anniversary. We have relished the opportunity of making a small contribution to it, helping the stories come alive and to see the publication come to fruition. Like URI Europe, we share a sense of commitment to instigate and nourish interfaith dialogue that, however challenging, enriches all of us and contributes to the wellbeing of all communities across our wonderful European homeland.

We see three main standout features of URI Europe's work highlighted in this publication. First, it all springs and originates from grassroots realities, with experiences charmingly narrated in the first person. The reality, therefore, has no intermediaries and URI's action emerges as it is, unfiltered. From the stories, it is possible to read about all the commitment that URI offers to promote peace and justice through the strengthening of interfaith dialogue.

Secondly, it is precisely the fact that the stories come from personal life experiences that makes the publication not only consider the theoretical dimension of diversity, peace, and justice but goes beyond it and explores what ontologically characterises the lived experience of URI members. Third, each of the stories, like jigsaw puzzle pieces, is very different from the others, but they all fit together perfectly to give a broader warm picture – showing clearly what URI really is and does – giving shape and form to the richness of diversity.

We would like to thank those who allowed us to participate in this publication because, through direct involvement, we realised that behind the URI acronym there are willing enthusiastic people, who (like us) hold the high human values and interfaith principles at heart. To the URI family, we hope that these stories can reach as many people as possible, stimulating further local interfaith actions – and that we continue this path together.

**Mark Ereira-Guyer & Martina Molinari**  
European Network on Religion & Belief

[www.enorb.eu](http://www.enorb.eu)





# URI Europe 20 anniversary – Vision and mission

## URI Europe – a grassroots movement for peace, justice, healing

URI Europe is inspired by the global network of the URI and shares its grassroots approach, the principles of the URI Charter, its vision and mission. We belong to the global URI network which we have co-founded, and are at the same time rooted in Europe, giving our work a distinctive European dimension and flavour.

## Our Vision and mission

URI's vision is a world at peace, sustained by engaged and interconnected communities committed to respect for diversity, nonviolent resolution of conflict and social, political, economic and environmental justice.

Our mission: URI is a global grassroots interfaith network that cultivates peace and justice by engaging people to bridge religious and cultural differences and work together for the good of their communities and the world.

We implement our mission through local, regional and global initiatives that build the capacity of our member groups and organizations to engage in community action such as conflict resolution and reconciliation, environmental sustainability, education, women's and youth programs, and advocacy for human rights.

## URI members – Cooperation Circles

A Cooperation Circle is a group or organization which has at least 7 members of at least 3 religions, spiritual expressions or indigenous traditions – including strands like Humanism – working in line with the URI Charter.

URI global proudly boasts having over 1.100 member organizations called Cooperation Circles (CC's) in more than 110 countries on all continents! URI's impact is felt by more than 2,5 million people around the world! URI is the world's largest interfaith network.

In Europe we serve a European network of 62 URI Cooperation Circles in 21 countries. Our member organisations work daily on the ground, each in their unique ways, 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. The countries where URI is present in the Europe region, include Northern, Southern, Western, Eastern and South East Europe as well as countries of the former Soviet Union:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The countries where URI currently has a presence include: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Kosovo, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Spain (Basque Country and Catalonia), Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine and United Kingdom.

## Collaboration with the UN

URI was inspired by the model of the United Nations, and its history is related to that link. The URI Charter was deliberately signed on 26. June 2000, i.e. the same day and month as the UN (United Nations) Charter, which was signed 55 years earlier in San Francisco.<sup>2</sup>

To further our aims URI collaborates with like-minded NGOs and international organisations. We have consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UN ECOSOC) and UN representatives in New York, Addis Ababa and in Geneva.

## URI Europe – promoting peace and social cohesion in Europe

URI Europe supports and promotes URI's peace work in Europe.

Our member organisations engage in community action locally, regionally and internationally.

URI Europe builds their capacity, fosters exchange and joint learning and practical collaboration.

Each year we organize a face-to-face assembly for building skills, interfaith and intercultural competencies, respect and solidarity, plan collaboration and joint projects, offer mutual support and facilitate mutual learning. We also organize online trainings and exchanges of good practices. We offer coaching and mentoring to our member organizations on a daily basis.

URI Europe is registered as international non-profit association (ivzw, AISBL) under Belgian law. Officially founded in the year 2000, registration was completed in January 2001. URI Europe's seat is in Damme, Belgium.

Visit [www.uriurope.org](http://www.uriurope.org) to learn more about our work.

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<sup>2</sup> The UN Charter was signed on 26. June 1945 in San Francisco.

**On the shoulder  
of the URI Europe  
founders and  
inspirations for  
the future**

**Sheikh Bashir Ahmad Dultz**

To see all the beauties of our world

**Patrick Hanjoul**

Intolerance must be overcome

**Karimah Stauch**

Feeling of being one big family

**Deepak Naik**

Being part of URI is a journey of personal discovery and development

**Marianne Horling**

To see that we can really do something, not only to talk, but to act!

**Bart ten Broek**

Our common responsibility for the wellbeing of the earth and all living beings

**Ari van Buuren**

On the road with URI – before and after 20 years of URI Europe

**Jonas Slaats**

The world is full of smart people, but it lacks wise souls

**Duncan Wielzen**

URI is a happy family

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“Don’t judge by the cover!” because there are so many layers

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Be able to know people as what they are and not by the religion they believe in

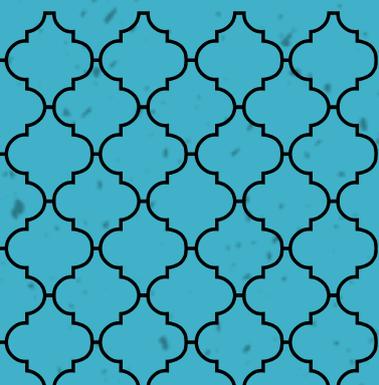
# To see all the beauties of our world

## Sheikh Bashir Ahmad Dultz

Sheikh Bashir is one of the founding fathers of URI. He was an elected Global Council member for Europe. In Germany he founded the first Cooperation Circle with his association "Deutsche Muslim Liga Bonn e.V." and later URI Germany. He was significantly involved in the formation of the CC "URI-Europe" and works there as a board member until now.



*Sheikh Bashir Ahmad Dultz*



Dear Sheikh Bashir, we are very proud to have you amongst us as one of the founding fathers of URI and appreciate your activities till now, especially recognizing your age of 87 years. We all know you as a good storyteller. Therefore, I'd like you to tell us about, how you came to URI.

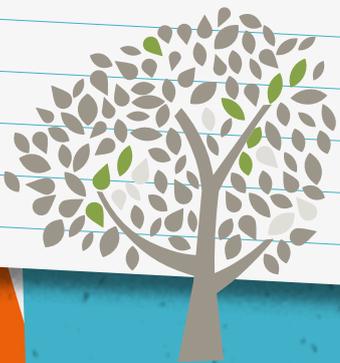
Long before the founding of URI I was member of the World Parliament of Religions. This started in the beginning of the 1960s, the time when I lived in Libya. At that time, I worked in the American Embassy in Tripoli and an American Diplomat told me about this organization I should become a member of. He knew about my interest in different religions working together. Later, when I lived in Germany again, I came into contact with "A Center for World Religions" in Bad Münstereifel, founded by Soami Divyanand. The center's managing director, Anke Kreutzer, asked me to join the URI summit at Stanford. She introduced me to URI. I was thrilled at once.

The following year I sent Karimah Stauch to the conference at Stanford, wanted to introduce her, too, in taking part in the forming of this new international network, URI. I am still amazed about her, for being taken in so fast, so completely, so active ... at a loss for our Tariqah/German Muslim League.

When we founded URI Germany and when Karimah and I had become co-founders of URI Europe, I requested from the beginning that we become "legally registered associations" according to the state laws and the charter of URI.

**What was your most inspiring experience when you first got to know URI?**

At this first meeting, I got to know a native American leader, Thomas One Wolf, and he invited me to his people in Taos. I was deeply impressed by his father and soon we connected in a great friendship. There were wonderful moments and I could tell stories about it - which I sometimes do...



**You yourself are a role model for many young followers. But did you also have role models?**

First, there is Rita Semel, a wonderful woman! The first chairperson of the Global Council of URI. When The Charter was signed in 2000 at a Global Council meeting, and in the evening all the participants gathered, Rita said to me: "Tonight is your night, Sheikh Bashir!" In a circle of about 15 people - among them Bill Swing, Charles Gibbs, Sally Mahé, Doug Khan and others - I had to tell about my life. I was amazed: they all listened with fascination.

I was very inspired by all these wonderful people, the contact with them and their behavior. I was overwhelmed by the many conversations and all the people of different faiths and cultures and fascinated by their wisdom and knowledge.

And then I discovered at the entrance of the Stanford Memorial Church a commemorative plaque of brass with the names of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í religion, and the famous Hindu Swami Vivekananda. And there was a third name - a Muslim - which I can't remember. They were the first religious teachers from other religions, who had the permission to travel freely and to give lectures about their religion in the USA.

A great celebration happened in the Church at Stanford at the URI summit. In the middle of it, the doors burst and a horde of people rushed in screaming: Pagans, witches, devil worshippers, enemies of the Christian religion, agents of Asia, etc.

The reaction: some of our participants stood up silently, faced the onrushing mob and, silently linked together, walked slowly against the incoming masses of angry people. Some clapped to drown out their shouting. These slowly backed away and left the church. That was very impressive and unforgettable for me.

I was deeply impressed by these people of the founding years. I'm sorry not to be able to mention all of them. But I have the feeling without these leaders of URI's start like Bill Swing, Charles Gibbs, Rita Semel, Sally Mahé and including all the others, URI wouldn't exist anymore.

What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about URI and what will you mention in order to invite und inspire this person to join URI?

The basic idea, that it is a grassroots organization still keeps me going with and in URI and I'm proud to be part of it from the beginning on.

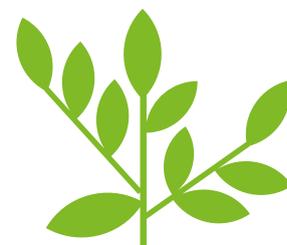
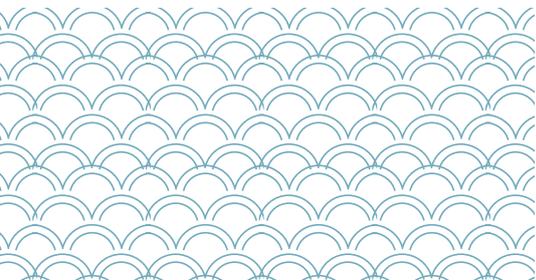
What excites me about URI are the opportunities to travel, to meet and make friends with people on all continents, and to see all the beauties of our world that are in danger if we don't pay attention to them.

One of my most beautiful journeys was about 20 years ago to Chicago via Texas and El Paso. I always had the desire to travel by train across the USA from south to north. After the URI meeting, I was invited to give a talk at the Jewish University of Chicago on "Muslim-Jewish Relations in the Middle East and the Western World". The Indian Sheikh Dr. Irfan Ahmad Khan asked me for the honor of being my host during my three-week stay in Chicago.

It was my first time at a very large Jewish university. For my fees I bought three big suitcases full of books on the Jewish history of North Africa.

***"What excites me about URI are the opportunities to travel, to meet and make friends with people on all continents, and to see all the beauties of our world that are in danger if we don't pay attention to them."***

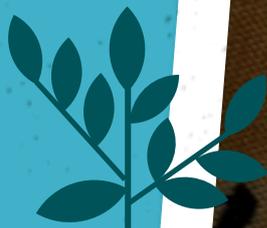
Sheikh Bashir, one of the URI Europe founders



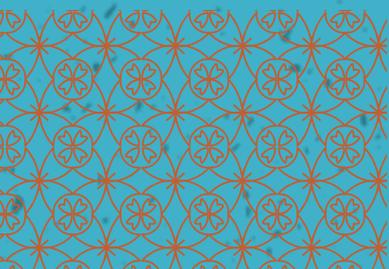
# Intolerance must be overcome

## Patrick Hanjoul

From 2001 to 2017 with some interruptions, Patrick was Director of the URI European Board, and he belongs to the founders of URI Europe. As a Belgian Citizen, he could sign in the association at Brussels, the Headquarter of the European Union, the perfect place for a CC acting in all of Europe.



*Patrick Hanjoul*



**Dear Patrick, you are a Catholic priest and I heard, you had spent some time in Calcutta at the Missionaries of Charity and met Mother Theresa.**

Yes, that was in 1985, when I was 31 years old. I had a time of inner vacation and wanted to do something for society. I know, poverty is also a problem in Western countries, which made me want to work for Bond Zonder Naam. But at that time I wanted to know how poverty is in the world. Helping in the foundation of Mother Theresa and her sisters, I was confronted with a never seen poverty. That was a big challenge and I have a deep respect for the work, which they have done and do further after Mother Teresa has passed away in 2005. I was there only for several months, but I learned a lot from this experience, how the idea of Saint Francis of Assisi is growing in the world.

**What has brought you to URI?**

In 1996 I was invited to a Conference "Management and Spirituality", and I was convinced that Christianity as a larger religion could dominate this 8-days-conference. But then a sister came and told me about URI and its organization. I did not need to be convinced so much, and I became curious, how they wanted to realize the idea of a Global Network. Fascinated by the vision and strategy and future dreams I wished to be part of it. I went to a meeting in Oxford, where about 40 to 50 people from all over Europe met. Although I was not invited I was welcomed. Great Britain had a lot of interreligious experiences in particular. So I met Deepak Naik.

In the end, we organized the first European Conference in Antwerp with 8 people from Europe. We were so energized that we started the network at once. The only thing we had was our voluntary energy, our friendship, and our ideals.

Like in all organizations, some leave, and some new come in.

In 1997, I was invited by Charles Gibbs to San Francisco and in 1999, we officially launched URI in Pittsburg. But before there was a preparatory Conference in Stanford University, where the PPPs were passed. 400 people from all over the world met there.

This was an amazing experience!

### How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

On the first day of the Conference, I stood next to an American indigenous woman. At the end of the day, I saw her weeping and she told me that California before the white people came, had been such a beautiful place. The next day she invited me to her tribe for a prayer. It was held by a Sioux Chief. The way he prayed was very impressive. This man had such a deep religious experience and I understood how much his faith is related to the religious truth. We sat around a fire and the peace pipe went around, and I felt the spiritual moment in this ritual.

I also came to know Buddhist people and found out that Buddhist and Christian experiences are capable of enriching each other.

These experiences made me feel like I was in a family. I think this is the first step for interreligious dialogue. It's the feeling that the outside of another religion has an inside, which relates to mine. I need the other and different people to learn what is the proof in life.

I was so inspired that I organized an Interfaith Sinfony Gathering, which could take place in Antwerp in 2007: A real highlight with 2000 people. - This gave a boost to URI Europe. 14 conferences were organized after that in the last 21 years. The years from 1997 to 2005 were a very tough time and a huge challenge.

I am convinced that the combination of trust and friendship gives the energy to realize the European dream. Then it will have a future...

I've seen in our meeting in Ohrid in October 2019, that we'll have a future with the wonderful young people engaged in URI Europe. And with Karimah we have the right coordinator. So we can move forward.



Looking at the PPPs. What stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

The PPPs at all meet my own values, my principles in life as a man and as a priest. It's wonderful that it was written by 400 people. All human rights are expressed in the PPPs.

Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement?

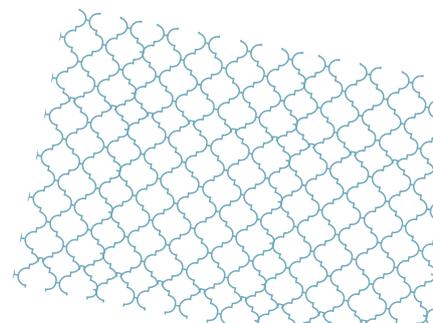
First of all, there is Charles Gibbs. For me he is an in-picture of a priest. I always admired how he dealt with nearly impossible situations, and how he managed to encourage people, especially in the first years of URI.

And there is also Annie Imbens-Fransen, one of the founding leaders in URI Europe. She had done great work. May she rest in peace.

To the next generation, I would appeal that they should do everything, that in this very strong diverting world intolerance must be overcome!

***"To the next generation, I would appeal that they should do everything, that in this very strong diverting world intolerance must be overcome!"***

Patrick Hanjoul, one of the founders of URI Europe







# Feeling of being one big family

## Karimah Stauch

Karimah is the coordinator of URI Europe. She has been with URI from the beginning in Stanford, Budapest and Pittsburgh, where the URI Charter was signed on 26 July. In 2002, she was elected as a member of the Global Council until she took a leave of absence, when she was asked to become the European Coordinator in 2003.



*Karimah Stauch*



**What has brought you to URI?**

First, there is Sheikh Bashir, the leader of our Sufi Tariqah As Safinah. He attended the Global Summit at Stanford University in 1997. He was enthusiastic and convinced when he came back. He made me curious and sent me to the next summit the following year. Through him, I was introduced to URI and I am very grateful to him for that till today.

**So this was obviously your most inspiring experience, wasn't it?**

Yes, indeed. But many followed... Every meeting with this international and inter-religious community was a big gift.

I also remember well the European conference in Dobogokö in spring 2000, which took place in the hills above Budapest and the Danube Bend in the Manreza Conference Centre surrounded by forests. This was the official launch of URI in Europe, where the Charter was signed by European URI members. I was deeply impressed by this spirit of optimism and determination to spread the ideals of URI in Europe. It was a time when Eastern and Western Europe were coming together after the end of the Soviet Union when there were more opportunities to meet each other. People were coming from Hungary, Tajikistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina and also from Catalonia, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and other countries. There was an atmosphere of hope and excitement. I appreciated that everyone was included and all contributions were appreciated. There was a feeling of being one big family.



### What empowers you to remain engaged with URI?

URI is constantly evolving. URI gives you the chance to meet very different people with their talents and experiences. It remains exciting.

For example the last URI Conference "Accelerate Peace" in Stanford gathered URI's grassroots community, youth activists as well as policymakers and academics. And it was amazing to see, how URI is recognized, e.g. when the Under-Secretary General and Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Mr. Adama Dieng, praised URI in his speech. Many members of the global URI grassroots community gave talks in which they shared their work and experiences. And among them were many fantastic young people doing excellent work.

### Do you have a role-model? And how is he/she/it inspiring you?

First of all, there is Sheikh Bashir, who brought me to URI. He is my best mentor, combining heart, judgment, and wisdom, who is always ready to support me and others. He reads widely and has a wealth of knowledge in the political, social, and historical realms. Also his humor and ability to tell stories are wonderful. In his astonishing and turbulent life, he has gone through many extraordinary experiences and overcome many difficulties. Marianne also inspires me with her ability to connect people. And then all the people from the beginning like Bill Swing, Charles Gibbs, Sally Mahé, Patrick Hanjoul, Deepak Naik, Vjeko Saje. And the people I work with today as part of a team are wonderful. The web continues to be woven, and I see how URI inspires people and how serious and committed the next generation of activists is. There are beautiful people working in the Cooperation Circles, giving their everything to help people, bring them together, and do good. They are all role models for me. All of this together makes me happy to work for URI.

Looking at the PPPs. What stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

I really like the preamble that says: "Therefore, as interdependent people rooted in our traditions, we now unite for the benefit of our Earth community". I am convinced that this is true: we are interconnected and together we can make life good. And this includes the Earth, nature, and other living beings.

What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?

URI brings the world together. In URI, very different people meet with their different backgrounds, experiences, issues and problems. What unites us is the conviction that cooperation and respect are the right way for humanity. Everyone has talents that they can use for the community. Through these encounters and friendships, the world is moving closer together. Events in a country that one knew little about before take on a completely different significance. It is very enriching and inspiring.

**"URI is constantly evolving. URI gives you the chance to meet very different people with their talents and experiences. It remains exciting"**

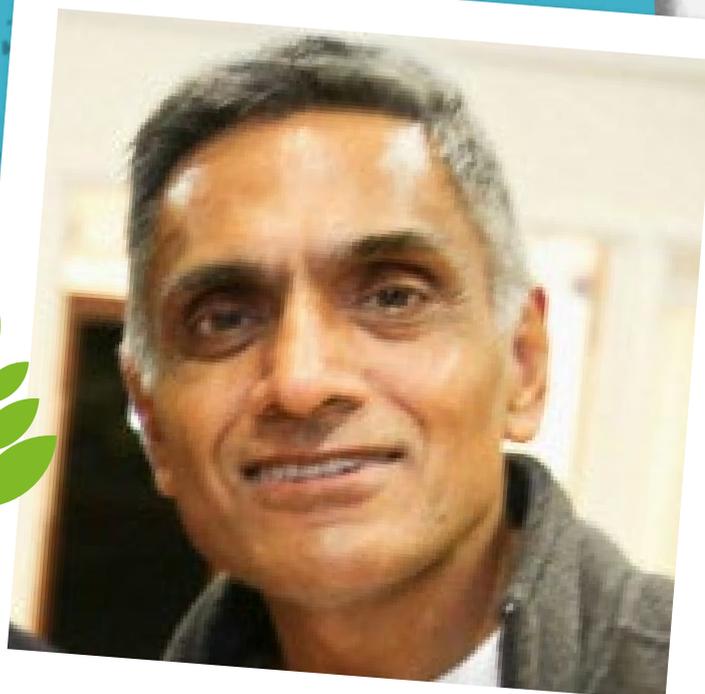
Karimah Stauch, URI Europe Coordinator

# Being part of URI is a journey of personal discovery

## Deepak Naik

Deepak Naik is the Executive Director of Together in Action Trust (tiatrust.org) in the UK. He is the Chair of the Board of United Religion Initiative (UK), and a Board Member of URI (Europe) since its inception. Deepak has over 40 years of experience in the inter-faith, community, and voluntary sector.

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*Deepak Naik*

### 1. What has brought you to URI?

My life's calling has always been to build relationships, to bring people together for a common purpose that would inspire us all to achieve more than we would individually. I have always believed and admired the values of URI and other organisations doing interfaith work. We work at grassroots and then see how the seeds of locally driven work can turn into a much bigger project anywhere in the world. URI provides us the means to learn from each other and the wide variety of networks of people who are doing amazing work. Essentially, we are all inter-connected and this bridge is the tool to learn from each other and share ideas. URI again provides us the mechanism to transfer good practice leading to expanding the role of religion and interfaith activities globally. In my case, much of my work has been linked to Coventry where I have resided most of my life. The city has grown immensely. It has a rich history of diversity of people and ideas. And for all these reasons, it has been named the UK City of Culture 2021. Come and visit.

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

URI has offered me and others the unique opportunity to meet so many different types of people from across the world, each with the same vision and mission, yet different realities. The experience and memories are priceless.

### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

It is a journey of personal discovery and development. This gift allows me to continue to be inspired and develop new ideas and experiences for the benefit of society. Thus, with this badge of URI, many of my own aims run through the same journey, where I work hard for the following:

- to work for the greater good.
- to help create opportunities that transform lives.
- to help design and deliver projects and services that have a lasting positive impact.
- to help incubate and maintain harmony between people and communities from different cultures, beliefs, and backgrounds.
- to promote conditions that help organisations to grow, flourish and generate prosperity for all - prosperity that is shared and enjoyed with dignity, in hope and shanti.
- to establish, maintain and support NGO's that aim to deliver some or all the above.

### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

There are too many people to mention. The diversity of URI as an organisation is a role model in itself. The collective experience has helped shape my life and inner strength to continue. Through special glimpses and in special moments, different people have helped to understand myself better and follow my own path with greater commitment and energy.

Connect with the spirit and energy. It is a personal journey with the protection of the collective experience of role models within URI.

5. Looking at the PPPs. What stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

Having been involved in the writing of the PPPs, it is the last phrase of the charter of 'cultures of peace' which resonates deep within me. It took a long time to get these words right and they reflect in different ways with different people. Each one of us goes on the path to peace or finds peace in a different way. If we continue to expand this kind of thinking, we are on a safer road - and the daily pursuit of this can really help change the world.

**"Being part of URI is a journey of personal discovery and development. This gift allows me to continue to be inspired and develop new ideas and experiences for the benefit of society."**

Deepak Naik, Board member of URI Europe

# To see that we can really do something, not only to talk, but to act!

Global Council Member since 2012. Boardmember of URI Europe, of URI Germany and running her own CC Intercultural Circle Bonn.



Image: URI Global Council meeting in San Francisco, March 2013 with three elected European Trustees, Marianne Horling, Ari van Buuren and Father Petar as well as Kiran Bali from Europe as Chair of the URI Global Council, and URI Europe Regional Coordinator Karimah Stauch.

## 1. What has brought you to URI?

As a young girl growing up in a nice atmosphere and environment, I felt very privileged and I asked myself: Why haven't other people the same chance? How can we bring more justice into the world, that all can participate? I felt sad that this was only for a few people. At school one of my favourite lesson was Religion with the stories about Jesus and his doings. The story with the merciful Samaritan especially impressed me. But when I was preparing for confirmation, the priest told us that all people who are not baptised will not be released. Only those who are baptised will go to heaven. „This cannot be! There are so many different religions, so many different people in the world, people who are not baptised! Good people, honest people, and they all go to hell!“ I started to reflect about my evangelic religion and read about other religions and talked with people about them. So other religions and spiritualities fascinated me and brought me to other places like India, and Israël. That brought me to conclude that all people have an ethical frame in which they aspire to do good for each other and to make the world a better place.

Later in life, besides my professional work, I also studied painting and then started giving classes in painting and interpreting fairy tales. So I came to know Sheikh Bashir, who was by then already a member of URI's Global Council, and one of the founders of URI. At many evenings he told me about his life and about URI. Then he invited me to come to one of the meetings of URI Germany. The idea behind URI met with my opinions and experiences. And because I still had a circle of people from different backgrounds, who met once a month, I decided to ask them to become an URI circle. This was not so easy, because some of those people didn't want to have anything to do with religion, and so they left, but others then joined. We started with 11 members from different religions, including those who consider themselves to be atheists, and meanwhile, URI Intercultural Circle Bonn has more than 50 friends.

## **2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?**

That was at my first visit in Sarajevo, where we had our board meeting of URI Europe. Sarajevo was so badly affected by this horrible war. At that time Vjeko Saje organised a conference for which he invited people from all the separated countries who were enemies during the war.

It was very touching to see how people were willing to work together for a peaceful future, despite all the horrible things that had happened between their peoples. They came together to work for better understanding and healing. And they were inspired to join URI. So I said to myself:

“That’s really why I am a member of URI“.

## **3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?**

This experience empowered me a lot. To see that we can really do something, not only to talk, but to act. It’s nice to have discussion circles, but it’s also good to look at what we can do to help build the community. I think doing something together gives people a better feeling of being a community, rather than only talking or making some actions. The challenge in my community came when thousands of refugees arrived to our country and also to Bonn. We started to work in the camps, collecting clothes and toys and playing and painting with the children, while their parents had to go to the offices. Till now we work together with an association helping young refugees learning for school. This helps in the long term to make things better.

## **4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?**

First, it is Sheikh Bashir who brought me to URI. We also spend a lot of time together. But also his wife Chadigah. Sometimes and in some spaces she inspires me more than he does. She is a wonderful woman and a good teacher in meditative dancing, Yoga and QiGong. She is the strong woman behind Sheikh Bashir and is also getting involved in intercultural and interfaith matters. But also Karimah, who is so busily working for URI. A wonderful person! Then Vjeko and his people, working in this special area on the Balkan. Indeed I feel very happy with all the people building the URI family.

**5. Looking at the PPP's, what stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?**

I feel very much attracted by Principle #9, "We practice healing and reconciliation to resolve conflict without resorting to violence." This, I think, is really a big challenge, because it is not easy to solve problems and to create equivalence by bringing people together who are completely different from one another. It must be trained. I would like for us in URI Europe to have such training that gives us tools for how we can make peace by solving problems or difficulties. I think this is very important for healing.

**6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about the URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?**

When I speak to people to introduce URI, the first thing that comes to my mind is "grassroots organisation". It is not something you discuss on a higher level, but you do something together. Like in a family, it binds you together when you do something positive for the society. And you are a member of a big world community. You learn a lot about people of other religions and other cultures and come to know about their challenges and how they are handling their problems.

All this gives you the feeling of not being alone in a lonely place. You are in a good company, and it is so interesting and enriching to be together with all these wonderful people.

**"When I speak to people to introduce URI, then the first thing that comes to my mind is "grassroots organisation". It is not something you discuss on a higher level, but you do something together. Like in a family, it binds you together when you do something positive for the society."**

Marianne Horling, Former URI Global Council Trustee, URI Europe Board member

# Our common responsibility for the wellbeing of the earth and all living beings

## Bart ten Broek

### 1. What has brought you to URI?

During my professional career, first as principal of the Nassau primary school in the city of Waalwijk, and later as director of the Juliana van Stolberg primary school in the city of Ede, both in the Netherlands, Muslim immigrants parents began enrolling their children. The Juliana van Stolberg school became the first interfaith primary school, with Christian-Islamic education. Since the 1980's many children from primarily Islamic background were enrolled. As a result, I frequently represented the education field at interfaith consultations in the Dutch society and at universities abroad. Because of my experience the religious organization of the Brahma Kumaris invited me to one of their interfaith conferences in 1997 in Amsterdam. Earlier that year two Dutch representatives, Annie Imbens and Ari van Buuren, had spoken with bishop Bill Swing at a meeting held at the Brahma Kumaris Global Retreat Centre in Oxford.

In 2001 I relocated to The Hague and got involved in the Council for Religions and Life Orientations. Shortly thereafter I met Mr. Ari van Buuren at a birthday party of a mutual friend. It was there where we started our conversation about interreligious matters and considered a plan to introduce URI in the Netherlands. We contacted a few other people who also had a keen interest in interreligious affairs and started the Steering Group URI Netherlands. Ari van Buuren and I formed a kind of daily board of URI-Netherlands from 2000-2018.



Image: Mayapur campus, play of URI's Global Assembly 2008, on the left the tent where the plenary gatherings took place

## 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

I have had many inspiring encounters during my time at URI. But one of the most memorable has definitely been the gathering we initiated as the Steering Group URI Netherlands. That was on April 27, 2003 at the Oranjekerk in Amsterdam.

The current mayor of the city of Rotterdam, Mr. Ahmed Aboutaleb, of Moroccan origin, attended, together with some other influential persons. We then had an outstanding presentation of URI to the Dutch public and focused on the theme: 'Cohesion in Society: Who Believes in it?' There was a strong awareness of connecting people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds together via grassroots activism and organisation. There was also a need and a shared desire for joint collaboration aiming at sustaining a more inclusive society. Many people involved acknowledged that religions and life orientations could play a key role in this endeavour.

Another inspiring experience came from the 2008 URI Global Assembly gathering at the ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) World Center in Mayapur, India. About 300 grassroots interfaith leaders, from 44 countries, including over one hundred young leaders came together around the theme Pilgrims of Peace: Many Paths, One Purpose. This was URI's second Global Assembly which lasted from November 25th - December 6th, 2008. There, I met Patrick Hanjoul who at that time was URI Europe Chairman, and Charles Gibs, URI Executive Director then. I was enormously touched by such a meeting with them and with people from all over the world. The atmosphere of Hinduism also connected me more with the Hindus in the city of The Hague. It strengthened my resolve to make the Interreligious Council Segbroek (IBS) a CC.

I was deeply impressed by the enormous richness of interreligious encounters that became visible at the opening ceremony. People from all walks of life and of diverse religious and philosophical backgrounds jointly and harmoniously brought offerings to the river Ganges. People from India, South America, United States of America, Europe and Africa were all acknowledging the sacredness of the Ganges, and expressed their reverence through that ceremony, in a climax of enthusiasm.





### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

These experiences connect neatly to my previous experience when I started my own interfaith journey as a director at the Juliana van Stolberg primary school in the city of Ede, Netherlands. I was witnessing Christian and Muslim children arguing about Jesus and God. I saw the growing tensions and disparities among these children. That led me to invite their parents to talk about these issues.

They all attended the meeting: Moroccan, Turkish and Dutch parents. At the start of the meeting all seated separately in their respective group of origin. But since they all were aware that collaboration and working together was in the interest of their children, the atmosphere changed positively during the course of that evening. Towards the end of the meeting all parents were engaged with one another in a friendly manner.

Having witnessed this change made me become even more convinced of the importance of collaboration across religious and cultural frontiers. The Mayapur event amplified that conviction. At the same time I was also witnessing a growing hostility towards people with an Islamic background, since the '9/11 tragedy'.

In the Dutch society, a rising populism ensued, which fuelled biases and exclusion towards people with an Islamic background. As long as these social tensions exist we cannot achieve a peaceful and inclusive society. Therefore, we must continue promoting the principles of URI, and that is why I feel empowered to remain engaged.

### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

I have had many inspiring interfaith encounters before and after joining URI. Even though these have been important for me personally, they never urged me to feel the need for having a role model. In all modesty I must say that Mr. Ari van Buuren and myself have been role models for others. Yet I cannot overlook and underestimate the many personal conversations I had with bishop Bill Swing, founder of URI. These conversations confirmed what I understood



to be my role in life, i.e. to work towards peace and inclusion by bringing people together and educating them from an interfaith perspective. The conversations with Bill Swing inspired me and strengthened me in that role. In that sense, I perceive Bill Swing as a role model.

If a role model is a person that inspires, then I can also mention a few others.

I remember vividly the conversation I had with Mrs. Lejla Hasandedic-Dapo, the first time I met her. What she told me about her home country Bosnia, about her vision and role for the future, her experiences as a young person during the war, all that made a lasting impression. I was touched deeply and inspired enormously by her testimony.

### **5. Looking at the PPPs. What stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?**

There is not one single principle or purpose from URI PPS's that stands above another. They are all important to me. They reflect and evoke the spirit of URI as a bridge building organisation. They help one to avoid approaching another based on prejudice. Together with Mr. Frans Ootjers, I had translated the PPP's in Dutch. At each meeting event that we had in The Netherlands, and where I was present, I would hand these out to all the participants. That was my way of reaching out and propagating what URI resonates within me.

### **6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?**

I personally find it difficult to pinpoint one single aspect. I would rather start with my personal involvement, and expressing what it means to me. I would also advocate the importance of reaching out towards one another across cultural and religious frontiers, and the richness that comes from such encounters. Vis-à-vis the mounting problems that we all face in today's world, to become aware of our common responsibility for the wellbeing of the earth and all living beings. Whoever shares this pressing need would feel welcome and invited to engage with URI's mission.

**"I would also advocate the importance of reaching out towards one another across cultural and religious frontiers, and the richness that comes from such encounters. Vis-à-vis the mounting problems that we all face in today's world, makes it crucial to becoming aware of our common responsibility for the wellbeing of the earth and all living beings."**

# On the road with URI – before and after 20 years of URI Europe

**Ari van Buuren**

*around one source*

*speaking, learning, celebrating has begun  
worshipping God like holy exercises under one sun  
and rainbows are bridges connecting soon  
while compassion butterflyed out of her cocoon*



## **1. What has brought you to URI?**

It started in 1997. Annie Imbens, feminist theologian, and I are invited as representatives of the Netherlands to the first URI consultation in Europe. It takes place at the Brahma Kumaris Global Retreat Centre in Oxford.

The consultation follows a route of four D's: Discovery, Dream, Development and Destiny.

A little piece of my dream is above this writing as a motto.



Image: European URI consultation 1997, Oxford

A year after this consultation, I attend the URI World Conference in San Francisco.

Also in 1998, I take part in a study trip full of discoveries in Morocco for healthcare workers.

The horizon grows...

In Oxford, we are invited to dream about 30 years further in time: 2027! This is my dream:

“Before me I see UR centres, situated around a Source. Around it are open chapels, mosques, temples, meditation rooms. There are celebrations, where one is a guest of the other. And there are communal celebrations. There are meeting groups to share life experiences.

There are social cafes, where one can just walk in.”

## **2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?**

One of my most inspiring experiences within URI was when I took part in a consultation of URI Europe together with URI Middle East in Berlin in April 2002. I quote below from my conference log.

There are moving encounters between Israelis and Palestinians, which create new connections between them. I would like to illustrate what lies behind this with one of the evenings we spent together.

Jean-Mathieu Lochten first introduces the theme: how to make unity? It is not about uniting into one overarching nation or religion - it is about creating synergy, not syncretism or confluence. It is about joining forces, not merging! So it is about creating “a new convivial space to live together”. An Israeli asks whether this is coexistence or pro-existence.

Jean-Mathieu, however, first wants to ask two questions about ‘Suffering’, because recognition of this is very important: “When did you suffer from your brother or sister’s actions from his or her tradition? When did you, from your own tradition, cause suffering to others?”

We are breaking up into smaller groups. I am asked to do the plenary reporting from our group. A Western Muslim regrets that although he has been a Muslim for 50 years, not one friend has ever sent him a congratulatory message on a Muslim holiday. In a secular society, it is difficult to be religious.

It was a painful experience for a Catholic priest that in an ecumenical committee only Catholics and Protestants participated, the Eastern Orthodox left their seats empty and only once was a meeting with Jews possible.

I myself tell about a daughter of mine who joined a Muslim group and about her fundamental refusal to attend her grandmother's Christian funeral after she (my mother) passed away.

In between, we ask ourselves what our stories actually say about the religions themselves.

Someone remembers how, years ago, he hurt his hosts in another house of God, because he could not find a good word to say at the time.

In a secular society it is difficult to find a place to go out without alcohol.

An Orthodox Jew recounts that he could not participate in mixed swimming during a youth camp for the mentally handicapped. He found it quite difficult that he had to burden secular Jewish care workers with the care of all the children...

During the coffee break, I was deeply moved when, in quick succession, several young Muslim women expressed their regret for how my daughter had acted at the time. Tears welled up in my eyes when they asked to become my 'step-daughter'. How the ice breaks. What a care for my soul I may now receive. And how many daughters do I now suddenly have...

This is synergy! She is beyond threat, she is enrichment through healing connection after a struggle for blessing!

### **3. What I'd like to share with someone who has just heard about URI**

In the garden of the Brahma Kumaris Global Retreat Centre in Oxford, I wrote from old and new inspiration during the URI consultation in 1997:

*OurFatherMother*

*Eternal you are to us  
 God Father Mother in the hidden,  
 heavenly high: live in us!  
 reach out with us to your future  
 make room for your will  
 descend into our souls  
 let our food  
 give us peace every day  
 let us receive  
 receive and bestow  
 spare us if possible  
 temptations and trials -  
 and if not, let us not  
 go down  
 in the negative  
 for  
 your eternity  
 creates space  
 and gives strength:  
 divine and boundless  
 is your world*



In this spirit, I want to continue to invite people to join URI!

YOU ARE I...

<https://www.facebook.com/ari.vanbuuren.3>

**How to make unity? It is not about uniting into one overarching nation or religion - it is about creating synergy, not syncretism or confluence. It is about joining forces, not merging! So it is about creating "a new convivial space to live together".**

**This is synergy! She is beyond threat, she is enrichment through healing connection after a struggle for blessing!**

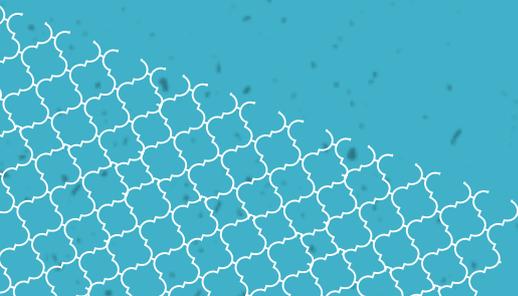
Ari van Buuren

# The world is full of smart people, but it lacks wise souls

**Jonas Slaats**



*Jonas Slaats*





### 1. What has brought you to URI?

When Patrick Hanjoul, at that time the chairman of URI Europe, asked me to join the board, I already had a strong focus on interreligious dialogue for quite some years. So I gladly accepted his proposal. It felt like a great opportunity to become part of a global movement which tries to foster stronger relations between people of different faiths and persuasions, .

My personal history with interreligious dialogue is inextricably bound with my personal spiritual growth. Somewhere, during my teens, I developed a keen interest in religious matters, and tried to delve deeper into the great spiritual traditions of this world. Right from the beginning, I took a comparative approach which you could call, to use Raymond Pannikar's expression, 'intrareligious dialogue': a personal, inner dialogue in which one contemplates, compares and weighs the various religious views on particular topics.

So, when I stepped into URI, my aim wasn't so much to bring people together so we could create a more peaceful world through the facilitation of 'outer dialogue'—even though that aim is certainly worthwhile in itself—but rather to let people expand their 'inner dialogue' after they acquainted themselves with viewpoints they hadn't considered before. Differently put: I saw interreligious dialogue (between people) as something in service of intrareligious dialogue (within one's heart and soul). I believe true peace will only be available to us when our global hearts and minds are expanded in such a way that they can take a deep breath of fresh spiritual air.

## 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

I had my most inspiring URI experience during a trip to Bulgaria to visit some local CC's to discuss the possibility of a European URI conference in the city of Plovdiv, which a few years later took place.

In the gushing rain, we went to an Orthodox monastery. People were praying in the small church of a monastery. The atmosphere was rather gloomy, dark, and damp. But the light of some hundred candles were flickering over the old icons and repetitive prayers filled the room. The spirit of century long contemplation truly became palpable. It graciously pulled me inside my soul.

Having been born and raised in a Western-European Catholic Christian context, I wasn't much acquainted with this particular Eastern-European Orthodox Christian sort of devotional contexts. So it felt both very familiar and very unfamiliar at the same time. It thus procured exactly that type of paradoxical moment which can—and did indeed—allow for a deep and lasting memory.

As such, my most inspiring experience wasn't so much an encounter with people—and thus, again, not a form of 'external dialogue'. Rather, the possibility to unexpectedly step into a ritual that felt quaint and welcoming at the same time brought about profound inner silence beyond all words.

## 3. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

One of my role models has always been Saint Francis. The way he breached the war mongering of his times by crossing the battlefield and having a peaceful conversation with Sultan al-Kamil is a classic image of much interreligious dialogue—certainly in Christian contexts. But too often it's forgotten this event was truly a dialogue and not just a monologue of the saint. The Sultan as well was open to and engaged himself in the conversation.

In fact, it is my conviction that he could easily converse with Saint Francis because he viewed him as some sort of Christian dervish, because the way Saint Francis dressed made him resemble the many Muslim dervishes in the Egypt of those days. Similarly, Saint Francis recognized the central sensibility of Islam as a deep desire to devote oneself to God because it resonated with his own spiritual yearning. As a result, he tried to infuse the Christian world of his day with certain Muslim practices. For example, he convinced certain bishops and town dignitaries to install a call to prayer several times a day, albeit not through singing but through ringing the bells of the church. Gradually, it even became a standard practice. The three times daily Angelus bell which can be heard in many churches and monasteries all over Europe is still a witness to Saint Francis' interreligious inspiration.

True interreligious dialogue then is based on three principles. 1. Recognizing similarity where first one only sees difference. 2. Using that similarity as an opening for both the ears and the heart. 3. Because of that openness eventually also embracing the difference—and thus expanding the soul.

#### **4. Looking at the PPPs. What stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?**

To respect the sacred wisdom of each religion, spiritual expression and indigenous tradition is one of the main principles of URI. This principle is very dear to my own heart as well. In modern times 'reason' has become a central facet of many philosophies, ideologies, and worldviews. But many of the ancient traditions emphasized 'wisdom' more than reason. The term includes more than simply the capacity of the mind to assess facts, analyze problems, and figure out solutions. Wisdom embraces this necessary facet of human life but also embraces compassion, justice, and the reverence for beauty. The world is full of smart people, but it lacks wise souls.

<https://jonasslaats.net/>

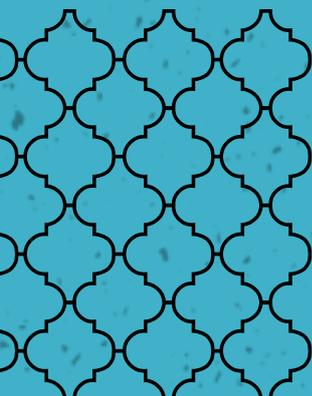
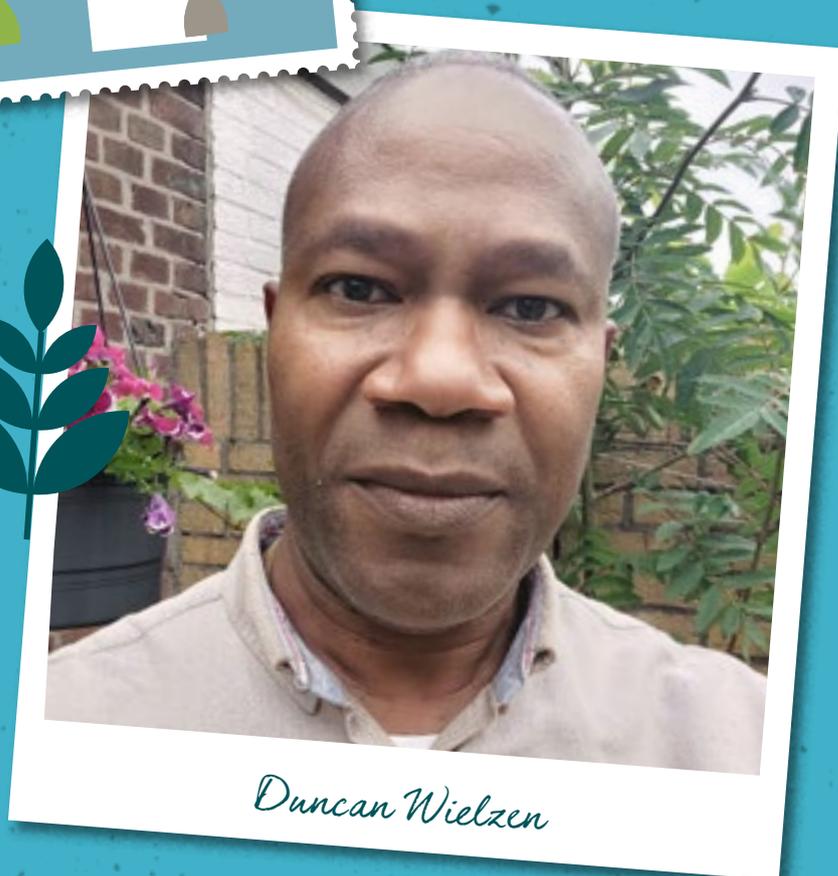
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***"In modern times 'reason' has become a central facet of many philosophies, ideologies and worldviews. But many of the ancient traditions emphasized 'wisdom' more than reason. The term includes more than simply the capacity of the mind to assess facts, analyze problems and figure out solutions. Wisdom embraces this necessary facet of human life but also embraces compassion, justice and the reverence for beauty. The world is full of smart people, but it lacks wise souls."***

# URI is a happy family

## Duncan Wielzen

Duncan Wielzen has been President of the URI Europe Cooperation Circle since 2017 and lives in the Netherlands. He is pastoral worker (lay minister) in parish ministry and a leading member of URI Netherlands.



### 1. What has brought you to URI?

In Suriname, where I grew up, I played in the street with children from all kinds of backgrounds, different colours, different faiths. We lived happily together in solidarity and good neighbourhood.

These good experiences prepared me later - after my studies in theology - to make friendships with spiritual and religious leaders during my internship in a hospital in the Netherlands.

The supervisor became a close friend.

A few years after my internship, I decided to visit my former supervisor who by then was already retired, but continued working at another office. Entering the house, I met Bart ten Broek for the first time, who just wanted to leave. My friend, knowing about both our interest in interfaith matters, immediately proposed that Bart and I should meet each other. And so we changed addresses and made an appointment. It was Bart who introduced me to URI. He was the one who told me everything about URI. And I felt that this matches everything I believe and what I am standing for. Immediately I knew that I'll join.

Three months later, I followed the invitation of URI Europe for their meeting in Plovdiv, where I met all these people of URI. At first, I followed it with mixed feelings. I was a little bit disappointed, because I had expected an academic meeting. But this vanished as soon as I realised that this is the organisation on the grassroots-level and these people are the basics to build peace and justice from the ground up. And this convinced me!

## **2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?**

I had many inspiring experiences. One that I remember very well was the 2019 Global Council and Accelerate Peace Conference and Circles of Light Gala in San Francisco, where I met so many engaged people from all over the world, with a good number of young people. They were so creative in discussing and presenting their ideas. Despite their different languages and backgrounds they were able to work closely together. It impressed me to see how these young people, without knowing each other before, came together and achieved something together in one day. It made me realize how hopeful the future of URI is, with so many talented and engaged young leaders.

## **3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?**

To answer this question I first have to make a comparison with my work as a pastor. I have worked in many churches together with people doing voluntary work. They have been involved for many years and they have a lot of experience. But that can be an obstacle for new people, especially younger people to get involved - there is a barrier. Young people are coming and going. There is a gap in understanding. My experience in San Francisco empowered me and strengthened my belief in young people and it reduced my anxiety that there will not be people to continue the work of URI in the future. This experience has really given me hope. It really gave me energy to remain engaged, because I know that URI has a future. But I do think that it remains a challenge to find the right strategy to include them and get them to remain involved.

## **4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?**

I cannot answer this question without mentioning the name of Bart ten Broek, and also Ari van Buuren who in his own way did a lot of inspiring things for URI.

I spent a lot of time with Bart, sharing meetings and talkings. He is a very inclusive person and wants always to involve others and to show the better side of a person. He is an example for me. His inclusive approach really attracts me. I admire that ability of his. That's why he is a role model for me.

**5. Looking at the PPP's, what stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?**

For me it starts with the preamble:

"We believe that our religious, spiritual lives, rather than dividing us, guide us to build community and respect for one another.

Therefore, as interdependent people rooted in our traditions, we now unite for the benefit of our Earth community".

This is so powerful and it really resonates with how I look at life in general. Everybody has this kind of spiritual dimension in his or her existence. These sentences include that in the way they are formulated. They mention what is very important to honor that difference and inclusiveness, and that is respect for one another, which I find very important. But this is not only about human beings. The entire Earth community with all living beings is included. The PPPs show that the interdependence is not only between people but also with all the earth and living beings.

Then I want to point out the principles 1, 2 and 3. I believe that every person has a spiritual background and these principles open up to this. They don't exclude anybody!

**6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about the URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?**

Whenever I have the opportunity to talk about URI, and always when I want to give feedback after a meeting with URI, what first comes to my mind, is the idea or the image of a happy family:

"A happy family!" A family is never without conflicts, but a family sticks together despite the conflicts. It's a place where you can be yourself, where you enjoy each other's company. People find each other across differences and hold each other's hands despite their differences. The purpose is to promote each other and stand together. This is the beauty of a family!

**"URI is "A happy family!" A family is never without conflicts, but a family sticks together despite the conflicts. It's a place where you can be yourself, where you enjoy each other's company. People find each other across differences and hold each other's hands despite their differences. The purpose is to promote each other and stand together. This is the beauty of a family!"**

# “Don’t judge by the cover!” because there are so many layers

## Morgana Sythove

Morgana is Anglo/Dutch and lives in the Netherlands. She is a practicing Wiccan Priestess. Over the years, she has facilitated a variety of Wiccan groups. As International Coordinator for Pagan Federation International she travels extensively giving talks and workshops about Wicca and Paganism. PFI is present in more than 20 countries. Morgana is actively involved in Interfaith and has recently been elected as a Global Trustee for URI/ United Religions Initiative, Multiregion. Here is her story, actually the short version of it!



### 1. What has brought you to URI?

It's a long story... I became aware of URI in 2004 at the Parliament of the World Religions/PWR in Barcelona, Spain. There was a group of American pagans at the event and Don Frew who was among them drew my attention to URI. He showed me what URI was doing together with indigenous people in the US and told me also that URI is very open to indigenous people and People of the Earth. I was so happy to hear that. Later on, I became aware of URI in the Netherlands - it was back in 2008. I met Bart ten Broek and Ari van Buren and was so inspired to see that URI is also present in the Netherlands. Actually, the person who influenced me the most at that time was a strong woman - Annie Imbens-Fransen (sadly she died in 2020). One of the things that she said and stays with me always is "If you choose the path of interfaith you need to be aware that it could be very lonely. It is not easy, especially for women." How right she was!

Later on during the years I met fantastic active people in URI. In 2012 I connected with Bulgarians and established a good partnership which continues to this today.

I was very interested to hear what has been happening outside the Netherlands, in the URI network and in the field of interfaith dialogue and this led me to meeting many wonderful people both in Europe, North America & South-East Asia.

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

Oh, it is an ongoing experience, I can't name one particular. For me, the ongoing experience is the wonderment and absolute delight of meeting people, of meeting soulmates in some cases. For me this is truly amazing - sharing our joy - to be alive, to be part of the world today.



### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

The connection, for me this is a spiritual food. We have the expression 'food for thought'. I have seen how everyday experiences can be used as a spiritual food. Rudolf Steiner (Anthroposophist) said "Whatever you do during the day or night, you are always feeding your soul." It is very important to see how open you are for those spiritual experiences and actually be able to transform them to actions.

### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

Annie, together with many other people, influenced me. I could say that she was my "SPIRITUAL INFLUENCER". I appreciated what she told me and decided to continue her work to be inclusive and to fight for the voice of women in URI. Even today, I struggle to be visible and be better heard - I am still not accepted fully and still feel invisible whether I speak as a pagan or a woman.

There were so many people who influenced me on my way. I have many heroes and heroines - various people, for example Rudolf Steiner. My Wiccan Elders have also been a source of great inspiration. However, my father is my role model - he was very principled, he was a Socialist. My background is in this sense not religious but socialist. My father stood for equality and for justice. He helped me to understand what my role in this life is.

**5. Looking at the PPP's, what stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?**

Apart from principle 8, "we practice equitable participation of women and men in all aspects of URI", two of the URI principles - 17 and 18 - are extremely important for me. It has everything to do with acting with the highest integrity. When I was nominated for a trustee for the Multiregion - one of the things that was so important to me as being a trustee - the word TRUST.

**6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about the URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?**

I think that our actions and our deeds speak more than our words! When I talk about URI to newcomers I try immediately to emphasize the idea of acting, working, and cooperating together. The idea of Cooperation Circles is brilliant and always point that out, but also I note some points of interest which are valuable to me - environmental issues for example. The EN CC Environmental network (Multiregion CC) is very important to me. A Living Environment is something that we all are engaged with. An important aspect of a Living Environment is the climate of social interaction. How do we treat each other? What is our moral compass?

When I speak with new people I rather prefer to tell them what we are doing, because it engages so many different aspects and they can figure out what interests them the most - gender equality; empowering women; the UN SDG's (Sustainable Development Goals) and so on. Even one small thing can have a ripple effect... the so-called Butterfly effect. The idea of sharing is important! That is why Facebook, and other social media groups, are great - you can share news, information, problems, challenges, what you or others are doing.

Listen, respect, act and enjoy life!

**"Oh, it is an ongoing experience, I can't name one particular. For me, the ongoing experience is the wonderment and absolute delight of meeting people, of meeting soulmates in some cases. For me this is truly amazing - sharing our joy - to be alive, to be part of the world today."**

# Be able to know people as what they are and not by the religion they believe in

**Shayan Shahpasand**

## **1. What has brought you to URI?**

I was brought to URI by Marianne Horling, European Global Council Trustee

## **2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?**

The 2019 URI Europe general assembly convened in Ohrid, North Macedonia. There was a very mixed group in many aspects like age, nationalities and beliefs, which worked together actively on different tasks.

## **3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?**

It always reminds me to associate humans from different beliefs and nationalities with the friends we were working with in our group in Ohrid.



Image: URI Europe General Assembly 2019, Lake Ohrid

**4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?**

I certainly consider Marianne Horling to be my role model. She inspires me with her daily life. One can see that she believes in peaceful, celebrating and productive inter-religious cooperation and society and tries actively to inspire other people by not only organizing events, but also showing it in her behaviour.

**5. Looking at the PPP's, what stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?**

What stands out for me is the third point, Principle #3: "We respect the differences among religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions."

Because only by respecting other peoples' beliefs we have the acceptance to see and respect the differences and be able to work peacefully and productively in an interfaith society.

**6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about the URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?**

I always associate URI with a classroom in an elementary school, in which the children first try to get to know other pupils as one of themselves without considering their beliefs. They might be best friends without knowing where others are from or in what religion they believe. Now, as adults who might have more information about different beliefs, we are even able to exchange among ourselves and learn more about our best friends' spiritual beliefs. But the most important factor is to be able to know people as what they are and not by the religion they believe in.

***"It always reminds me to associate humans from different beliefs and nationalities with the friends we were working with in our group in Ohrid."***



# Inspirational stories from grassroots interfaith peace organizations

**I was curious and signed up,  
URI Germany CC**  
– Germany

**A dialogical human family built on  
shared human wisdom, AUDIR CC**  
– Catalonia/Spain

**Values guide our work and that stands  
us in very good stead, BARAZA CC**  
– Germany

**Encouraging grassroots leaders  
to work together is the way forward,  
IFAST CC**  
– Germany

**Friendship, integrity, and appreciation  
make so much possible, Into Silence CC**  
– Belgium

**Everybody has their unique talent  
and all together bring the wide  
horizon, URI CC Lienz**  
– Austria

**It is a simple message: Don't give up!  
DMLBonn CC**  
– Germany

**Luna with an open soul and heart for her  
own spiritual path – Ukrainian Pagan  
Circle CC – Ukraine**

**The URI is a bridge-building  
organization, not a religion –  
Balkan as a Soul Bridge CC**  
– Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Belonging to a greater interfaith  
network of people that share the  
same values and goals**  
– Coexister CC – France

**Making efforts for mutual  
understanding and cooperation  
sustainable – Friendship Among  
Cultures in Turkey CC**  
– Turkey

**We are called to share our similarities  
rather than our differences – IBS CC**  
– The Netherlands

**Creating an atmosphere of friendship,  
peace and love between people –  
KARVAK/SIRF CC**  
– Turkey

**Networking and opportunities  
– Sombor Educational Center CC  
(SEC CC)**  
– Serbia

**We all can work together for a better  
future – Confidential Counsellors CC**  
– The Netherlands

**Discovering together what we have  
in common in faith – Interfaith  
Workgroup Ghent**  
– Belgium

**URI is a judgment-free zone  
– Student Aid Drop CC**  
– Bulgaria

**To create stable and peaceful  
communities for all beings  
– Udhetim-i- Lire CC**  
– Albania

**Dialogue and peace are always great  
motivations – Youth for Peace CC**  
– Bosnia and Herzegovina

# I was curious and signed up... Discoveries in the global interfaith world

## Interview with Andreas Winkelmann, URI Germany

### 1. What has brought you to URI?

12 years ago, when I was living and working as a nurse in Lübeck, I saw an advertisement in a magazine with an invitation to a Christian-Muslim meditation weekend in Iserlohn. What is Islam? – I had no idea about it, but was curious and signed up. The experience strengthened my interest, so that a little later, following my new friend's invitation, I also participated in the Christian-Islamic meeting at Pentecost. Thus I came into contact with DMLBonn and then also with URI. Many experiences and encounters within this setting really inspired me, and now I have been a member for 12 years. My first encounter with Islam was with Sufis – it made me even more curious.

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

The one experience par excellence... well I can't name a single one. I have come to know URI as a mixed group from the very beginning. There are very different people there who are willing to work together on the basis of the URI Charter.

As just one example, I can spontaneously think of a European and Global Council meeting in Sarajevo where I had the opportunity to speak with a native American.

One always has the opportunity to reflect on one's own prejudices. You meet people who are similarly open-minded and reflective.



### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

Meeting broad-minded people from a wide variety of backgrounds is what keeps me motivated. It is not the one sole experience, but many experiences and conversations.

### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

I came to URI through Karimah and Sheikh BASHIR and appreciate them and their commitment very much. So through them I also got to know Marianne, who is so proactive and warm. Also URI Europe's chairman, Duncan, very much comes to my mind with his incomparable way of opening his ear – and his heart's ear.

### 5. Looking at the PPPs. What stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has limited the possibilities to give and accept hospitality. But hospitality is an important meeting point for mutual understanding, friendship, dialogue and joint activities.

### 6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about it and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire them to join?

First of all, I would say that URI is an umbrella of very different groups with very different objectives that work according to the URI Charter. It can be dialogue organizations, but also, for example, social organizations or nature conservationists.<sup>3</sup>

The most diverse groups are globally interconnected, and you can see that you are not alone in the world with your activities and there are other people who deal with similar problems. You can meet very different people with a wide range of experiences. And you are always surprised how many things you are simply not familiar with and what challenges others are facing. As I like to say: all these encounters don't make the world any smaller.



<https://www.uri-deutschland.de/>



*"There is a worldwide connection to the most different groups and you can see that you are not alone in the world with your activities. That there are other people who deal with similar problems. You can meet a wide variety of people with a diverse range of experiences. And you are always surprised how many things you are simply not familiar with and what tasks others are facing. All these encounters don't make the world any smaller, as I like to say."*

<sup>3</sup> Some URI groups have their main focus on interfaith dialogue and education, others focus on social issues, e.g. employability, school education, ecology etc., while also having the interfaith component, as their activists/members belong to different faiths and backgrounds. I.e. interfaith is part of their makeup, but it may be secondary with primary focus on social activism or ecology and other issues.

# A dialogical human family built on the foundations of shared human wisdom

## Interview with Francesc Torradelflot, AUDIR CC, Barcelona, Catalonia/SpainCC

### 1. What has brought you to URI?

The will of being connected with other people from all over the world and the common interest in building a network of interreligious dialogue also open to spiritual and indigenous traditions. A dialogue without exclusion was a strong reason to be engaged in URI.

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

For me the most inspiring experience has been to realize that URI respect the autonomy, the freedom, and the creativity of each organization. URI is a non-hierarchical organization, a horizontal one, trying to take advantage of innovation and creativity of each member.

### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

I think that in a global society, every day more a society of knowledge, we need inclusive networks. The interdependence is a spiritual experience that we know very well through different religious traditions, and this spiritual experience of interdependence should be inspiring and consistent with the way we decide our organizations should be. As long as URI keeps being a participative and horizontal organization we will be there. I think that all of us should try to connect URI with this spiritual and deeply religious experience of interrelation and interdependence of all in the core of Reality.

### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

My only role models are spiritual teachers and wise of religious, spiritual and indigenous traditions. I try to learn from them even though I confess that I am not a very good disciple. People such as the Belgian Cardinal Julien Ries, Hans Küng, and the Catalans Raimon Panikkar and Marià Corbí have been role models that have helped me to be close to URI.



**5. Looking at the PPPs<sup>4</sup>. What stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?**

“We value voices that respect others, and believe that sharing our values and wisdom can lead us to act for the good of all.” I try to find out this wisdom everywhere. It’s a permanent discovery.

**6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?**

I will tell to him/her that URI is not a new institution but a dialogical human family built on the foundations of shared human wisdom, a wisdom that tries to be engaged «on the economic, environmental, political and social challenges facing our Earth community».



<https://audir.org/>

*“I think that in a global society, every day more a society of knowledge, we need inclusive networks. The interdependence is a spiritual experience that we know very well through different religious traditions, and this spiritual experience of interdependence should be inspiring and consistent with the way we decide our organizations should be.”*

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<sup>4</sup> Preamble, Purpose and Principles of the URI Charter

# “Values guide the work that we do and that stands us in very good stead”

## Our URI Experience

### Interview with Georg Popp and Riaz Ravat, Baraza CC, Germany

#### 1. What has brought you to URI?

George: What brought us to URI?... It was a very important meeting which happened in October 2010. We had just started our exhibition project on “Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence – Oman’s message of Islam” and had organized an event at a school in Augsburg. Among the guests there was a person who looked very different than all other guests – it was Sheikh Bashir.

He was there with a friend and he was listening to and looking at everything. After the event he came to us – to myself and Mohammad Al-Mamari of the Sultanate of Oman. He congratulated us, introduced himself and explained that he was coming from Bonn, i.e. from quite far away from Augsburg. He said that he was impressed by the exhibition yet it was our third one only.

He then said, “The two of you, Georg and Mohammad, you are a great team and the two of you should spread this idea over the world”. At that moment we were stunned. Now, more than 10 years later, I can say that he had a clearer vision of the potential of the project – even clearer than ourselves. Now, after realising roughly 140 exhibitions on five continents, we can say that he was right.

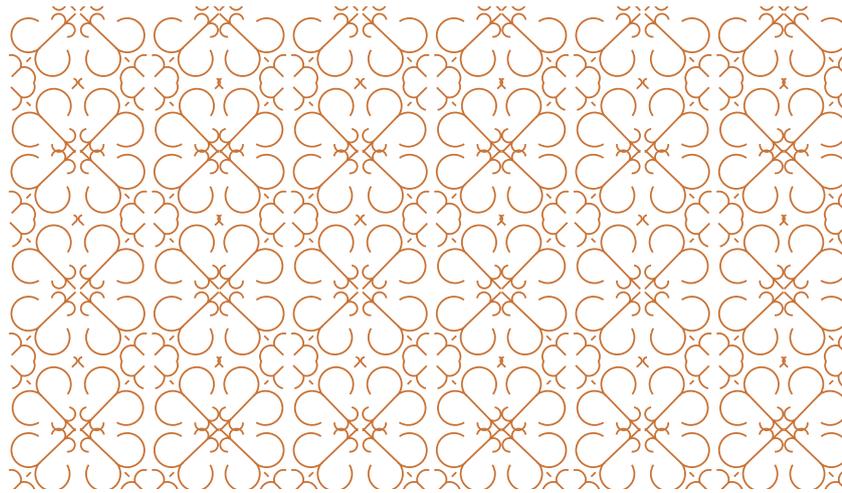
Through Sheikh Bashir, we were introduced to Karimah Stauch and with this connection and the support we got from URI the connection grew. Over the years, Karimah joined us in Muscat and in Jakarta, and her name popped up immediately when we were thinking about persons for the advisory board for Baraza.

#### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

George: There were many experiences but I think the moment when we were intensifying our cooperation, new options arose for us and also for URI. When we started producing the World Religions Colouring Book for Kids, it was a perfect cooperation. URI is the perfect platform for us to distribute this excellent educational resource. There are more opportunities I am sure.

#### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

George: Of course, we had only very good experiences together. The last event that we organized together, the joint Baraza – URI Europe webinar series which was arranged by Riaz Ravat on Baraza’s side also went very well. It happened on the occasion of the UN World Interfaith Harmony Week with our advisors coming in as speakers, alongside speakers from other European URI CCs. It shows that we can be a very good team and there are a lot of future options.



#### **4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?**

George: This is not an easy question to answer because during our project we met a lot of people who are role models in the field of interreligious and intercultural work. However, maybe the most important person who I met in this respect is Sheikh Abdullah As-Salmi, the Minister of Religious Affairs and Endowments of the Sultanate of Oman.

Sheikh Abdullah showed an immense trust in our work and ideas. He gave us a free hand to cooperate with all these people from different walks of life and he encouraged not only me but the whole team to do all this work. For us it was something new, since we had never worked in this field before. Of course, we had a close relationship to the Sultanate of Oman and many friends there. However, while visiting each other in Oman and Germany is a fun activity, going out into the world, contacting people for the first time, trying to get into communication with them, meeting them and planning events together is something very different. We did this on behalf of a country and its government, without having all this daily control and asking for approval all the time.

Sheikh Abdullah just said, “George and Mohammad, you two, you do it. The way you do will be fine for me.” So there was this complete trust and it is important to have more of these people. The way he is open for everybody from everywhere in the world is a great experience. It mirrors a way of thinking which I believe is fundamental today to have those people.

Now the project has the chance to develop further, with the community of all these people who have collaborated with us, thinking basically the same way, who are happy to work with us. It is great and I am happy to now have Riaz as Secretary-General. It is a huge chance and he is also one of the key figures for me. He is doing an incredible job. It finds opportunities for everybody which no one has been thinking about before. I remember when you, Riaz, were standing in the front of the conference hall at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Muscat, giving a speech. I am sure you were never thinking about doing something like this in your life.

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<sup>4</sup> Preamble, Purpose and Principles of the URI Charter

### 5. Looking at the PPPs<sup>4</sup>. What stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

Riaz: For me the underpinning behind URI and also behind Baraza are the values. We are very value-driven organisations. These principles are not words that we just throw around but they guide the work that we do and that stands us in very good stead. At Baraza we are used to say that we want to promote an international mindset. A mindset that permits us to accept, cherish and support diversity. Differences allow us to come together. Difference doesn't mean we stay separate, it means that we can share and learn from one another. We see that as a great thing!

### 6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?

George: I will inform this person that URI is the biggest grassroots movement worldwide regarding interreligious groups coming together in a very simple way without a lot of bureaucracy and administration. Thanks to URI, people just come together in small groups from different faiths or no faith at all – that is also very important to me – and they exchange thoughts on a basic human level. That is the essence of URI for me.

This is very important nowadays as a lot of prejudices are in the air, from all sides, about different religions, about different ways of life. I would invite this person to join this spirit – of living together on this basis of common human values.



<https://www.baraza.ngo/>

*"He then said, "The two of you, Georg and Mohammad, you are a great team and the two of you should spread this idea over the world". At that moment we were stunned. Now, more than 10 years later, I can say that Sheikh Bashir had a clearer vision of the potential of the project – clearer than even ourselves. Now, after realising roughly 140 exhibitions on five continents, we can say that he was right.*

*For me the underpinning behind URI and also behind Baraza are the values. We are very value-driven organisations. These values are not words that we just throw around. These values guide the work that we do and that stands us in very good stead."*

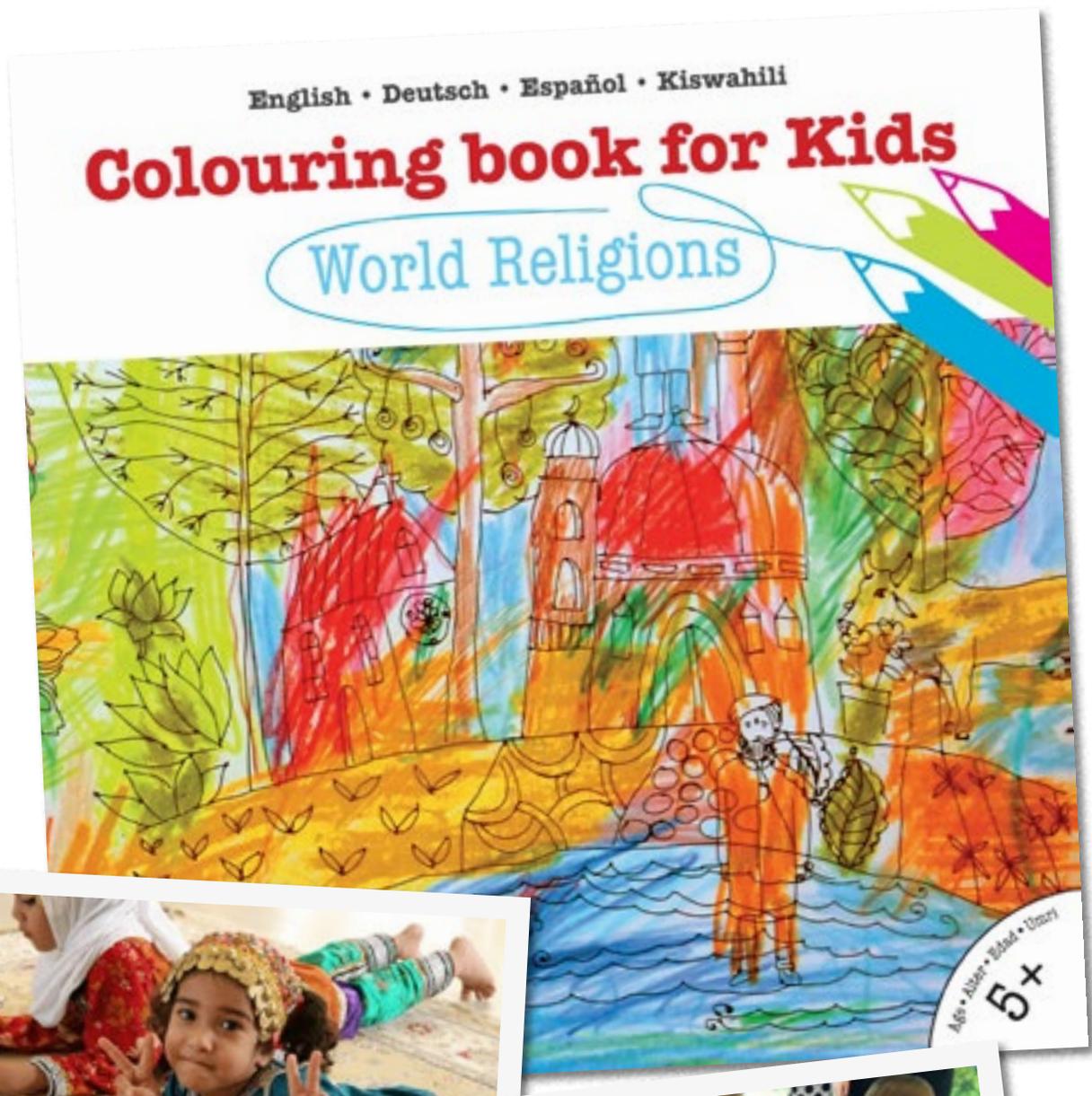


Image (Left): Children with the Colouring Book  
Image (Right): Children in Durres, Albania, using the Colouring Book on the World Religions after the earthquake in November 2019.  
The leader of the Albanian Udhetim i-Lire CC had gotten to know this tool at the URIE Assembly in North Macedonia in October 2019





# “Focusing on grassroots leaders and encouraging them to work together is smart – it is the only way forward”

## Interview with BR Sagar Swami, Alexander Kisselmann, Salima Yeleupova, Amiya Sundari, Angelica Klimovich, Liola of the IFAST CC

### 1. What has brought you to URI?

BR Sagar Swami: One of my friends is Patrick Nickisch, who used to be a youth board member of URI Europe. We worked with Patrick for a while, and he introduced me to other faith leaders. One of them, whom we met in New York, is also a youth leader for the Sukyo Mahikari. It is a Japanese tradition, and I learned more about it when I visited Japan. I was fascinated that they are so open minded and want to spread world peace. They also believe in one supreme Lord and their practice is to charge themselves spiritually, and then to spread the light. I told the youth leader from the Sukyo Mahikari: “We are natural partners, because our purpose is to spread spiritual sound, names of God, and your purpose is to spread spiritual light. So we can be in the same show: you can be in charge of the light, we can be in charge of the sound, and we can work together”. He said: “I would love all of our leaders to think like you. But those who want to work together like us are a very rare species. The higher spiritual leaders in our group do not want to work with anyone, they just want to be on their own. And there is a similar mentality in our group as well.

When I learned that URI is focusing on grassroots leaders and encourages them to work together, I realized how smart it is and that this is the only way forward. Then I decided: yes, we should work with URI because they are doing the only practical thing to unite faiths”.

Amiya Sundari: It is inspiring to hear about this big URI organization which already does so much work, with so many people, and so many similar goals and values. It was important for us to become part of such a big family with so many networking opportunities. We also wanted to bring our own power, our own service, our own life. We know that we have received so many gifts. And when you receive a lot, you eventually get a stronger energy to share and help others. Our team is really willing to do that as much as possible. We are very thankful to be a part of it.

## 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

Salima Yeleupova: The Global Interfaith Forum for Transformation (GIFT) which we organized with URI for World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW) was our first experience with URI – and the most inspiring one. The cooperation was so fruitful: everyone whom we asked to support and participate joined us. This forum allowed us to enjoy the diversity and unity of different traditions, again and again. The Cooperation Circles are the big international and multi-faith family of URI. It also showed us the potential for further collaboration. People are also inspiring: the persons who are engaged in service to URI, serving and supporting each other. The whole URI family is engaged in becoming closer to each other and uniting around very beautiful purposes. Bishop William Swing recently gave a lecture to IFAST students and others and inspired us very much, how he personally contributed to peace in the world. He shared his spiritual experience, how he came to the idea of URI, how much work he did personally to make it possible that the Charter became harmonious and complete.

## 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

Angelica Klimovich: At IFAST, after recent events, some URI CC members joined us. It demonstrated that we all work on very important common issues. We can continue doing it in different projects: IFAST can join projects which URI offers, and URI people can join IFAST projects. IFAST is an educative movement with a team of very active people. And it is a great opportunity to connect, see, and learn – and to show to others what we have to offer. We can really build a very strong team of peace makers together.

## 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

Alexander Kisselmann: There are so many big personalities in URI like Bishop Swing, Kiran Bali, Charles Gibbs, and many others. And we are grateful for the support of Karimah, Samira, Isaac and others. They give everything to support us, in the Forum and other programs. There are other people like Vasu Bandhu. He offered us to translate every meeting into Spanish. Or Salika Das from Africa. He participated in the Forum every day and joined us also for our last meeting. And there are other people like Rick from New Hampshire from the USA and Veronica from Africa. There are so many people who want to support us. We have not met them before, and they are really open hearted and want to work together. I am also thankful for the support by URI Europe CCs and URI Europe team and to Maria Eugenia from Argentina. All these people who want to collaborate. It is amazing and energizes me to cooperate even more with other CCs and URI on different themes.



**5. Looking at the PPPs<sup>4</sup>. What stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?**

BR Sagar Swami: Especially URI's Preamble is really inspiring for me: "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. "

This is pretty much synonymous to the first purpose of the tradition I am following, ISKCON, the Hare Krishna Movement. The first purpose is to systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large, and teach all people the techniques of spiritual life in order to check the imbalance of values. This means to help people to solve their problems, and attain real unity and peace in the world.

"Unity and peace" – so United Religions Initiative is pretty much the same thing for me. And it's really inspiring how the supreme Lord works and establishes His plan. Because travelling around the world I can see the unifying foundation of everything, and how different spiritual practices are just different facets of the same universal spiritual knowledge connecting all of us to the same universal origin.

**6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?**

Liola: Meeting such interesting personalities in this association, I would say that URI is a big family, joined by all generations, young and old. Young people who share their energy and creativity and the old generation who share their wisdom – such a union. I did not even expect such a collaboration. And we are very lucky to know you thanks to BR Sagar Swami. I would tell people who would like to join URI: if you want to become happier and stay in a big family, enthusiastic and full of love to God and with the desire to make this world better and purer, I would recommend you to join!



<http://ifastint.tilda.ws/>

*"When I learned that URI is focusing on grassroots leaders and encourages them to work together, I realized how smart it is and that this is the only way forward"*

*"Meeting such interesting personalities in this association, I would say that URI is a big family, joined by all generations, young and old. Young people who share their energy and creativity and the old generation who share their wisdom - such a union"*

*"Hearing about this big URI organization which already does so much work, with so many people and so many similar goals and values is very inspiring. It was important for us to become part of such a big family with so many networking opportunities. We also wanted to bring our own power, our own service, our own life. We know that we have received so many gifts. And when you receive a lot, you eventually get the strong will power to share, to help others"*

# A true story about unifying currents – beyond space and time

Lately, I have been to Germany, and I have discovered that the most ancient object of religious worship on planet Earth, supported by modern science, is the 40.000 years old figurine of the lion man. He has been worshipped in the Hohlenstein-Stadel cave near the city of Ulm – the birthplace of Albert Einstein, and the city with the tallest church on the planet. At the moment, the lion man is right there. I found this really fascinating because 40.000 years ago the lion man was worshipped in Germany, and, interestingly enough, every single day today the lion man is worshipped in our temple – and this is the only temple on the planet, or at least in ISKCON, which is exclusively dedicated to the worship of the lion man. And we have 800 temples around the planet, but this is the only one.

It is very interesting that 40.000 years ago Germans were worshipping the lion man, and today Germans continue worshipping lion man every single day – starting before they even knew this history. This is an eternal tradition which people in India followed forever. The ancient way of worshipping the lion man was always in caves. In South India, there are many ancient caves, cave temples, dedicated to the lion man – and they are calling him “Narasimha Deva”. And it is so amazing that these unified spiritual practices are uniting both countries, India and Germany, many thousands of kilometers apart, and uniting times: today and 40.000 years ago. We are so inspired by the fact that we want to raise everybody’s awareness in Germany.

Funny enough, the land in which the lion man was found, which is Baden-Württemberg, has three lions on the coat of arms. The neighboring land also has a lion on the coat of arms. Many other lands have other symbols. But these two lands have lions on the coat of arms. And the lion man, if you look at him, is actually smiling. I was thinking that this lion is actually such a crystal clear symbol of Germany, you know, power and kindness. So that is kind of an ideal national identity: have good power, use good power to stand against evil – and spread spirituality and goodness.

If you are interested in learning more about the lion man, he has a page in Wikipedia in many languages, as it is the oldest figurine on the planet.

An ancient story explains how the lion man appeared: there was a little child who believed in God, he was worshipping God since his birth. But his father was a complete atheist and materialist, and he tried to kill that child, his own son. But the son was just praying to God, and he would always be protected, and the father would do nothing against him, could not kill his own son, even though he was the most powerful king or emperor of the whole world. In India, everybody knows this story from the Bhagavata Purana. And at some point the father, this atheist, became so upset, he said to the child: where is your God. And the child said, the God is everywhere. And the father said: is he in this pillar? And then he smashed the pillar with his fist. And then he heard the roar coming from the pillar. And he said: what is that? And the pillar burst, and he saw the lion man who appeared in this shape, because this atheist, he got actually the boon that he could never be killed by anyone, neither man nor animal – none of the existing creatures. So, the supreme Lord assumed a form, which never existed before. And he killed that atheist and protected this little boy. So, it’s like the victory of spirituality over materialism, victory of good over evil. So, this is what the lion man symbolizes.

BR Sagar Swami



# Deep friendship, integrity, and appreciation make so much possible

## Interview with Marleen Dejonckheere of Into Silence CC, Belgium

### 1. What has brought you to URI?

Finding the URI invitation folder in Oxford late 1996, I was touched by the strength and the hope that the dream of URI holds in it. As a member of the board of the Belgian organization Movement Without a Name (MWN), of course, I encouraged Patrick Hanjoul to engage in this dream with MWN.

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

Without any doubt it is the depth, the trust, and the potential of the deep and lasting friendship I witnessed between the members of the board of URI Europe. Even in difficult times it was this deep friendship, the integrity, and appreciation of the core group that made so much possible.

### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

In a traumatized and traumatizing world, lasting connections on the basis of a pure dream and good wishes for the world and its beings are hard to find. On the contrary, there are many networks based on power, possession, and ego. They are a real threat for the future. Although at times it is not easy to create a professional worldwide network, it is so important that we don't give up and let the obstacles become instruments to make us stronger.

### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

Translating a dream into a worldwide movement is a huge thing. I witnessed how hard work of people from the early days created something beautiful for God and the planet. Let me put names in order to honour them and to express my gratitude for their contribution to the world: Deepak Naik, Shaikh Bashir Dultz, Karimah Stauch, Sally Mahé, Charles Gibbs, Patrick Hanjoul, and Duncan Wielzen. They, indeed, are continuing the beautiful work today. I could witness and feel the way they were working and searching together. These people made a deep and lasting impression on me. When I remember their names and faces, they bring a smile to my face, and evoke the feeling of love in my heart. Different as they are, they share the quality of radiating love, light and a kind of tenderness. To me they feel like 'one face'. The glue between those faces is the deep spirituality that is the source of their potential, their friendship, the honesty, and the love that brought them together. Undoubtedly, it is this deep connection that makes URI the unique instrument for global benefit. The love that flows from their hearts made and makes a dream come true. It's too early to retire from this dream.

### 5. Looking at the PPPs<sup>4</sup>. What stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

The strength of this preamble is created by the whole of it. But my favourite is: 'We unite to celebrate the joy of blessings and the light of wisdom in both movement and stillness'. The 'good practice' we suggest aims at the realization of this goal.

### 6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?

I would say: "If you are in search for a pure, inspired and promising network gathering wonderful people, who create hope and change for the planet... stop searching!... You just found it".

*"Silent' and 'listen' are made of the same letters"*

*"what's in the way is the way"*

*"Finding the URI invitation folder in Oxford late 1996 I was touched by the strength and the hope that the dream of URI holds in it"*

*"Although at times it is not easy to create a professional worldwide network it is so important that we don't give up and let the obstacles become instruments to make us stronger"*

*I would say: "If you are in search for a pure, inspired and promising network gathering wonderful people, who create hope and change for the planet... stop searching!... You just found it"*

# Everybody has their unique talent and all together bring the wide horizon

## Interview with Elisabeth Ziegler-Duregger and Suzanne Senfter from URI CC Lienz, Austria: “Education brings peace”. [www.bildung-frieden.net](http://www.bildung-frieden.net)

### 1. What has brought you to URI?

I think that founding URI was a present from heaven. Maybe because I attended the Parliament of the Worlds Religions in Melbourne 2009. But I am not sure, how it happened. As I read the Preamble I was so astonished and happy to have found it.

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

The most inspiring times with URI were with the people in direct contact or with ZOOM. I never found so much love in a group of women and men from all over the world.

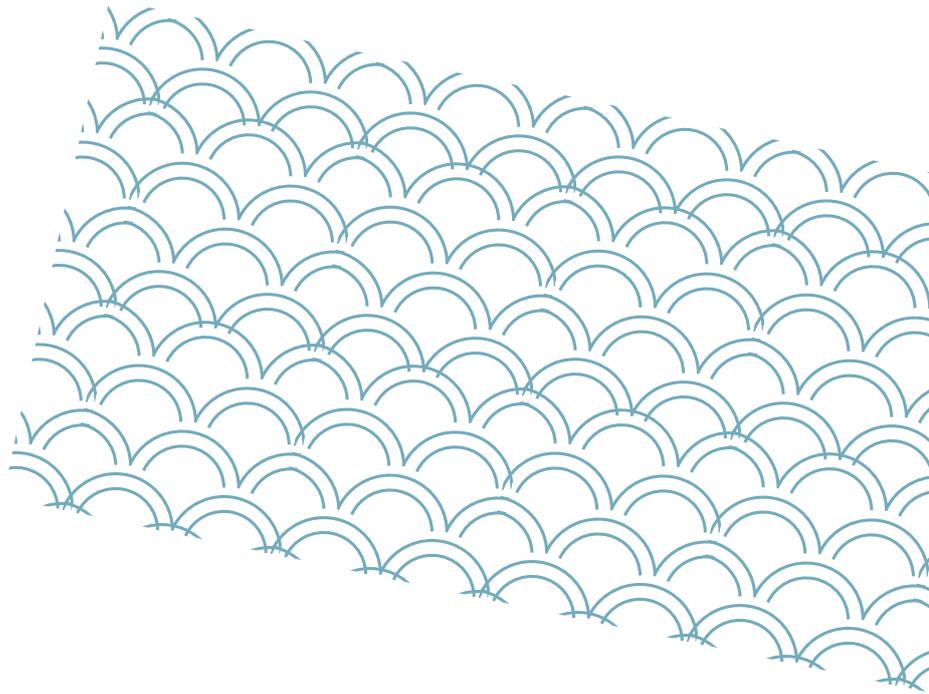
### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

Because it shows to me how life on earth should be. And I really am happy to be able to be part with my ideas and connections.

### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

Everybody that I met until now has its own talents and all together bring this wide horizon of work.





**5. Looking at the PPPs<sup>4</sup>. What stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?**

Every word is true. Being allowed to do my own work within the global family gives a feeling of freedom and friendship alike. That I can stay a Catholic

**6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?**

If you are looking for a great aim, and would like to work with wonderful people, to bring all your possibilities and energy to blossom, then join URI. On the day you will die, you will be happy about all the experiences and impact you have made. Nobody can solve the problems of the world alone, but in cooperation with like minded people from all walks of life and age, it is possible.

*"If you are looking for a great aim, and would like to work with wonderful people, to bring all your possibilities and energy to blossom, then join URI. On the day you will die, you will be happy about all the experiences and impact you have made. Nobody can solve the problems of the world alone, but in cooperation with like minded people from all walks of life and age, it is possible"*

# It is a simple message: Don't give up!

## Interview with Wilhelm Sabri Hoffmann – DMLBonn CC, Germany



### 1. What has brought you to URI?

More than twenty years ago, I became a member of a small Muslim community at my local mosque whose members were entirely of Turkish origin. Me being of German descent and of a Catholic upbringing these immigrants, pushed me to take an active role in establishing dialogue with their partners in secular institutions and Christian communities. Something I first only reluctantly accepted but in the long run enjoyed as being an opportunity to build bridges and enhance understanding. I soon came into contact with the German Muslim–League Bonn because I wanted to learn from their experience within the Christian Muslim dialogue. Their members and especially Sheikh Bashir Ahmad Dultz introduced me to URI and interreligious dialogue in a wider and more profound way.

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

There are more than one. Dialogues between the three Abrahamic faiths, in particular, like the JCM (Jewish Christian Muslim) conference<sup>5</sup> which my CC, DMLBonn, takes part in, have been inspiring for me and helped me deepen my own roots in my own tradition by encountering others. There were not only bridges between faiths and persons but also time bridges when young people and older participants, among them also Holocaust survivors, shared personal stories.

But one experience was a real enlightenment for me – “Moving Interfaith Work Forward” – the URI Europe conference in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, in 2015. It was there that I really experienced the multitude of different perspectives, personal stories, and local opportunities and hindrances which are to be found in URI. At one special occasion, I realized how this could work and be directed to a common goal.

One afternoon, all participants gathered in the courtyard of the venue in a circle and were asked to make a visible metaphor of the URI network by taking a rope into their hands and giving the other end to a person in the circle with whom they felt connected, thus forming a web of interlacing ropes between the participants that was tense and stable.

When one person suggested that we should move around in this circle to prove whether this network of ropes would be still stable, we all made an astonishing experience. The network was stable, yes, but only if yourself with several ends of rope in your hands tighten certain connections and give more space to others. URI like this network does not work with equally measured strength, power, or margin for manoeuvre but with tolerance, balance, and shifting margins and spaces. Sometimes a simple but strong metaphor helps you to understand deeper and clearer.

<sup>5</sup> The Standing Conference of Jews, Christians and Muslims in Europe takes place every year for an entire week.



### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

It is a simple message: “Don’t give up! Don’t cut connections or neglect them. There are always distractions, difficulties and discouraging events from outside in the political and social sphere which can limit and influence our activities. But a common goal and keeping moving means: we have to keep in contact with our partners, encouraging them or being encouraged by them”.

### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

Among many inspiring personalities in URI, there is one person who has been a source of encouragement for myself. This is Sheikh Bashir Ahmad Dultz, the founder of the German Muslim-League Bonn, and also one of the founding Fathers of URI. His personal story of being a refugee in and after World War II, living for a long time in Libya and facing imprisonment under the military ruler there, having to leave his whole family behind and returning to Germany with the loss of almost everything would be more than sufficient to give up on humankind and keep to himself. But he was and is still curious about people, their personal lives and beliefs. He always encouraged and sometimes mildly pressed me to engage in personal dialogue with believers and non-believers, and to find your place of work and activity in this big and multi-folded human family which is also part of a wider community which includes all beings on this planet earth.

*“It is a simple message: Don't give up! Don't cut connections or neglect them. There are always distractions, difficulties and discouraging events from outside in the political and social sphere which can limit and influence our activities. But a common goal and keeping moving means we have to keep in contact with our partners, encouraging them or being encouraged by them”*



[www.muslimliga.de](http://www.muslimliga.de)

Image (left): Weaving the URI web, URI Europe Assembly in Plovdiv  
Image (right): Members and friends of DMLBonn, Wilhelm Sabri Hoffmann (2nd from the right), Sheikh BASHIR (left))

# Luna with an open soul and heart for her own spiritual path

## Interview with Adulruna Rediviva, Ukrainian Pagan Circle CC, Ukraine

### 1. What has brought you to URI?

I originally joined the PFI (Pagan Federation International). Morgana Sythove once told me that Professor Petar Gramatikoff would come to Odessa (Ukraine). After talking with him on spiritual themes, he told me about URI and I wanted to join. Later, with friends, we organized CC "Ukrainian Pagan Circle".

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

URI is a large and friendly family of people who have a common goal – to help others, to accept people with their spiritual characteristics. God and the higher powers, each sees in his own way. And everyone has the right to exercise their faith freely. There is dialogue in the URI, but there is no pressure on personal spiritual freedom. There is mutual assistance. And there is respect for each other. This inspires me.

### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

I have my own original spiritual path. For several generations, my ancestors were healers and shamans, I am honorably developing the knowledge of my kind. I integrate my practices to help other people, regardless of their choice of spiritual confessions. At the same time, it is important to help them using the language of words and actions that they understand. URI helps me to better understand the representatives of other religions, and their traditions. My goal is to be useful to others, without imposing my faith, but at the same time, accepting the faith of the one who turns to me. If a person comes to me for a blessing, I have no right to use him for my own purposes or convert him to my faith. Everyone should make this choice himself, without pressure being put on him ...

### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

I don't have people whom I could call a role model. There are many worthy people in URI and they do very worthy deeds. But I need to observe my actions, relying on my own experience.





### 5. Looking at the PPPs, what stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

Looking at the Preamble, Purpose and Principles I want to separately highlight our common goal (on purpose). This is why I am here in the URI society. The purpose of the United Religions Initiative is 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. The principles stated below are necessary as a roadmap on the way.

### 6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about the URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?

If I understand that a person supports the goals of the URI and is in solidarity with the principles, then I will give information for acquaintance (I will show the site, let me read the PPP's, I will offer to join the CC I already created, or I will offer to create my own CC based on the URI). I will answer the questions that a person might have. Then the person must make decisions on their own.

<https://www.facebook.com/lunaoraculum>

*"We all have different languages - but to accept each other's traditional characteristics, you do not need words, you need an open soul and heart."*

# The URI is a bridge-building organization, not a religion

## Balkan as a Soul Bridge CC – Bosnia and Herzegovina Interview with Vjekoslav Saje



### 1. What has brought you to URI?

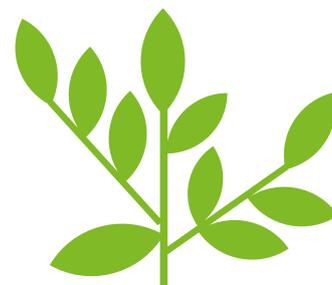
After the war, while in Mercy Corps International, from 1996–98, the focus of my work, as a program officer, was in civil society initiatives, problem-solving, and refugee return. In 1997, together with CSIS, WCRP–World Conference on Religion and Peace, and USIP–United States Institute for Peace, I assisted in the establishment of the Inter-Religious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina. My task was to organize and facilitate the preliminary meeting of our religious leaders in the Vienna residence of the former US ambassador to Austria, her Excellency Swanee Hunt. The meeting was conducted by respected peace-makers like Dr. Landrum Bolling, from the Conflict Management Group, and Dr. David Little, from USIP. These people and organizations have also initiated and helped in forming the local NGO, CRD–Center for Religious Dialogue in Sarajevo, with me as a director.

In the same period, I had a chance to meet Karimah Stauch, and Sheikh Bashir in Sarajevo, and we made a plan to form a multi-religious group from Sarajevo to participate in the first URI Europe CC meeting in Budapest, in 2000. The goal was to present our Issues during the war, and in post-war time on how to preserve the values of inter-faith life in Bosnia, and promote peace. URI friends encouraged us to form one of the first CC-es in Europe, and it was mutually agreed that the name should be Balkan as a Soul Bridge. It started with Ms. Nadia Fejzagic, Muslim, Mr. Moris Albahari, Jew, Ms. Rada Radovanovic, Serb Orthodox, and myself Vjekoslav Saje, Roman Catholic. In the course of time, and with different projects many friends have joined, like Adnan Hasic from Mostar, Jasna and Elma Kapisazovic, prof. Azra Jaganjac, Denis Aranitovic, Milica Tomic, Montenegro, Anita Agagjyshi and Endrit S Bytiqi, Kosovo, Sonja Majstorovic, Croatia, Ivan Ilic and Ivana Jakovljevic–Milosavljevic, Serbia, Lolita Ristova, N Macedonia.

In cooperation with CSIS and OSCE, in 2002, we participated in Conflict Resolution seminars in Kosovo, for religious communities and local government leaders. And we even brought a mixed group from Bosnia.

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

URI–United Religions Initiative Summits in Pittsburgh and Salt Lake City, where I was introduced to various skills of peacebuilding, and Appreciative Inquiry, in particular. At the same time, I have met so many amazing people from all over the world, and many of them became my friends, and later on participated in different projects. On another occasion, as an act of serendipity, I had a chance to meet Lejla Hasandedic Dapo in Austria, and introduce her to URI and Youth ambassadors. Since that time, Lejla has been with us, becoming one of the pillars of URI Europe.



### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

In an effort to bridge the many divisions in Sarajevo, we have started URI CC Balkan as a Soul Bridge Cooperation Circle (CC). The CC organizes training workshops in problem-solving and communication skills helps direct participants to projects and initiatives like URI, and provides support and recommendations to help youth get into universities and find jobs.

At one point, at a memorial for victims of the massacres to provide a platform for reconciliation, we brought together a group of Serbs and Muslim Bosnians . Through storytelling and inter-religious dialogue, both sides had an opportunity to speak about the atrocities committed during the genocide.

One Muslim Bosnian mother, Hatidza Mehmedovic, described how she was separated from her husband and two sons, and how she hoped for many years that she would at least find their remains. Mrs. Mehmedovic lost 40 members of her extended family, and she now lives alone. As she was speaking, a young teenage Serb boy approached her, and embraced her, apologizing on behalf of his own people, knowing that some of them were participants in the massacre. After a moment of silence, Mrs. Mehmedovic kissed the young man and said that her feelings for him were the same as if he was her own son. She acknowledged that she did not want to be driven by hatred.

### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

Karimah Stauch, Sheikh Basher, Deepak Naik, Barbara Hartford Cynthia Sampson, Charles Gibbs, Marianne Horling, Bishop Swing, Patrick Hanjoul.....and many others on the way gave us hope and encouraged us in building peace together, as a global goal! It is our privilege to work and enjoy together for more than 20 years, and keep in touch, even now, thanks to modern virtual technology.

### 5. Looking at the PPPs, what stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

Part of the PPP's that stands out for me and our CC are following.

We live and appreciate the idea and action 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. We unite to build cultures of peace and justice. The URI is a bridge-building organization, not a religion.

We welcome as members all individuals, organizations and associations who subscribe to the Preamble, Purpose and Principles.

*"Mrs. Mehmedovic lost 40 members of her extended family, and she now lives alone. As she was speaking, a young teenage Serb boy approached her, and embraced her, apologizing on behalf of his own people, knowing that some of them were participants in the massacre. After a moment of silence, Mrs. Mehmedovic kissed the young man, and said that her feelings for him were the same as if he was her own son. She acknowledged that she did not want to be driven by hatred."*

# Belonging to a greater interfaith network of people that share the same values and goals



## Coexister CC – France Interview with Radia Bakkouch

### 1. What has brought you to URI?

My involvement in Coexister made me discover URI network, values, and friendships! Coexister is the largest Interfaith youth-led organization in France, and it has started to develop also in Europe (Germany, United Kingdom and Belgium). Coexister has been a URI Cooperation Circle since 2014. When you are a peacebuilder, it is very important that you become a member of communities of good practices. Indeed, Coexister is a laboratory of interfaith practices, and we wanted to share and challenge them with initiatives from different contexts. Finally, as interfaith organizations are still too uncommon in the world, we need to gather our strengths to influence societies and politics and foster the creation of organizations and initiatives that build peace. The community of practices, that's what brought me to URI, the influence we could have together, that's what made me stay!

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

The URIE General Assembly in Ohrid and the road trip we took with URI friends before and after the General Assembly. It was great to share this valuable time with Matt, Daniel and Emina. We were a diverse group, from different countries, with different stories, different passports and we traveled together. It was great! We did not know each other very well before, we really got to know each other during the trip: our habits, the things we liked to eat, the time we needed to sleep. It is the daily things that we learned about each other that made this experience amazing. It was inspiring because we came from very different contexts but we had the same goals and dreams for our countries. Thank you, URI, for making this meeting happen.

### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

I feel I belong to a greater interfaith network of people that share the same values and goals. We live in different contexts, with different majority/minority balances and still have the same dream for the world, we reach the same conclusions on the world complexity and we deeply understand each other. I feel way closer to an interfaith peacebuilder living in the other part of the world than to some people in my own country. It is also really important and essential for Coexister to be in a community where organizations can exchange good practices. Also, organizations are in different stages of development and we can benefit from the mistakes, the success, and the experience of others. Coexister has a lot to learn and a lot to offer, that is what empowers us to remain engaged with URI.

#### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

All the people I work with are somehow my role models, and experiencing a collective adventure with them has shaped my engagement in interfaith cooperation and, hence, with URI. The role models of non-violence are still very present in our collective memory and commitment to peacebuilding, but there is also a need to reinvent, to diversify the stories so everyone can feel they are capable of being a peacebuilder. The InterFaith Tour program, part of the Coexister Movement, holds the objectives of identifying, mapping and promoting Interfaith initiatives for peace so the stories can touch anybody.

#### 5. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about the URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?

I would like to say to anyone who does not know about URI that daily and sustainable interfaith cooperation is essential and we need them to make the world a better place. They can create an innovative interfaith initiative that can answer the issues raised in their own context. To do so, they can join URI to feel connected to a bigger movement, to have support and a community. I would also tell them that it is very important to be rooted in their own community so their experience can really be relevant for URI.

#### 6. Explain your CC good practice?

Coexister holds several good practices that have been built over the years. The first is to always give the power to young people, they are not only part of the governance but their governance is exclusive, we are the ones in power so we can expose our dreams and demands. Being a youth-led organization allows us to always give the voices to the people that are not heard otherwise. Also, we are an interfaith movement that is closer to an inter-convictional movement. It is very important for us to have people with different beliefs – being religious or not – especially in a country like France where atheism and agnosticism are the majority. Finally, another good practice we experience in Coexister is to go further than just dialogue, as the heart of our pedagogical project is to focus on action, cooperation and societal matters to have a real citizen movement.

#### 7. On what occasions do you use it?

These strengths and good practices are at the core of all our project and the peace education paths that we offer to all our members.

#### 8. Did the Covid-19 pandemic influence your work and how?

Covid-19 had a huge impact on Coexister. As every activity went online, all the local activities became national activities, and everyone could join. So, even though we could not meet, we had the chance to exchange with new people around the country

*“The community of practices, that's what brought me to URI, the influence we could have together, that's what made me stay!”*

Radia Bakkouch, Coexister CC

<https://www.coexister.fr/>

<https://www.facebook.com/coexisterfr>



Image: Udhetim-i Lire CC - Support for the victims of Earthquake



# Friendship Among Cultures in Turkey CC – Turkey

## Interview with Rosen Dimov

### 1. What has brought you to URI?

Through the Peace and Collaborative Development Network that I was a member of, I learned about the URI back in 2010. I applied to be a youth ambassador to the URI and, after completion of my ambassadorship, I was immediately interested in creating a CC.

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

The most inspiring experience has been the training camp for young leaders in interfaith work that we organised in Stara Zagora, Bulgaria. URI youth programme coordinator Matthew Youde and URI Global Council Chair Kiran Bali helped me in training 18 representatives from various faith traditions. They continued their cooperation after the camp and one of them has become the mayor of Stara Zagora, re-elected for three times. In this way, the camp became a sustainable platform for local interfaith work and an opportunity to make this a long-term priority in the local public policy. I feel so motivated that we managed to change the lives of many people and make their efforts for mutual understanding and cooperation sustainable.

### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

Through this experience, I have figured out that CCs are the best way to ensure continuity of one-off gatherings and events in interfaith. I got empowered by the results, by the enduring willingness of people from all faiths to work together and make a tangible impact on their community.

### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

One of the most inspiring people that I have met in URI is Roselyne Swig. I am honored to have sat on the same table with Mrs. Swig at URI's Candles of Light ceremony. "Cissie" – as she humbly wanted to be called – is a long-standing supporter of URI and a philanthropist who has been engaged in a wide range of initiatives. She has been an inspiration due to her open, good heart that radiated understanding and passion for change.



### 5. Looking at the PPP's, what stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

"We listen and speak with respect to deepen mutual understanding and trust." has been the principle that has guided me in my interfaith work in URI and beyond it. I apply this principle in my day-to-day life, in relations with family, friends and even strangers. The attempt to understand each other always leads to a gradual increase of confidence, and paves the way to dialogue, possibly even cooperation.

### 6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about the URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?

URI does not give an immediate solution to conflicts and misunderstandings. It provides tools for dialogue that takes time. It teaches patience and openness. If you wish to engage in an open-ended process of getting together people from various spiritual traditions, then URI is the right place. You will learn from everyone else and take inspiration from individuals and groups from all over the world.

### 7. Explain your CC good practice?

Friendship among Cultures in Turkey CC is a good practice as it aims to promote good relations among locals and foreigners in Turkey from all faiths.

### 8. How do you do it?

We do it by adopting and applying a wide range of tools for interfaith that are available across the URI network worldwide.

### 9. On what occasions do you use it?

Informal interfaith gatherings, meals, sport activities, environment protection activities, and outdoor picnics.

### 10. Why does it work?

As Turkey is a place of millenia-long history of co-existence of various spiritual traditions, we try to build upon these pillars. The group includes foreigners and expats that have come to study, work and live in Turkey, therefore embracing the rich foundations of inter-religious dialogue and work placed throughout the centuries in Turkey.

*"The camp became a sustainable platform for local interfaith work and an opportunity to make this a long-term priority in the local public policy. I feel so motivated that we managed to change the lives of many people and make their efforts for mutual understanding and cooperation sustainable."*

# We are called to share our similarities rather than our differences

## Interview with Sharief Imambuks, IBS CC, The Netherlands



### 1. What has brought you to URI?

In 2008, I was already active as a volunteer in my local mosque. In that year, I was asked to represent the mosque at the Interreligious Council of Segbroek, the IBS, a CC of URI. I had never heard of URI before then. IBS had been inactive for quite some time and there was a need for a restart, with new representatives from various religious backgrounds. I was willing to represent my local mosque, but also realized that there was a need for interreligious dialogue. I then considered IBS as a fine place where I could practice interreligious dialogue with people from other faiths.

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

As a new member of IBS, I also got involved with the organization of the annual World Interfaith Harmony Week since 2011. And on November 19, 2011 we organized a symposium with an exposition in the local library. This exposition was opened with a lecture titled "Religious Tolerance, Islam in the Sultanate of Oman," by Sheik Ahmed, the Grand Mufti of Oman. The programme further consisted of other lectures and visits in and to different houses of worship in the Segbroek area in The Hague. After the exposition in the local library we had a lunch for all visitors in our mosque. Sheik Ahmed of Oman presided at the afternoon prayer in our mosque, after which the entire delegation walked to the neighbouring Saint Agnes Roman Catholic church. There were dialogue sessions and lectures in the church. What made this symposium very inspiring for me was the experience of the interest and involvement with interfaith dialogue that so many people demonstrated. There were between 70 and 100 people from diverse religious, spiritual and philosophical backgrounds coming together, listening to one another and dialoguing with each other in a peaceful and harmonious way. I was moved by this experience of interfaith dialogue with so many people involved.

### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

The November 19, 2011 symposium made a lasting impression on me. It inspired me to remain in dialogue with others. It convinced me that together we can achieve great things. That resonates with my values and with who I am as a Muslim believer. I like interacting with people about interfaith dialogue.

#### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

I do not have any particular person as a role model. I grew into the interfaith movement from my own personal interest. At a particular stage I felt the need to give more of myself, my time and energy, to my local mosque as a volunteer. I also wanted to correct the negative image of Islam portrayed by the media, showing positive things about my religion.

#### 5. Looking at the PPPs<sup>4</sup>. What stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

My religion says that we should have respect for each other. In Chapter 49, verse 13, it says: 'O mankind! We created you from male and female, and made you peoples and tribes, that you may know one another.' Why then, should I separate myself from others who were also created on earth by the same Creator?

I agree with the goal of URI to promote inter-religious cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence and create cultures of peace between people and all beings on earth. It is unfortunate that there are 'believers' who put a different spin on this. They use violence to see a dissenter as an unbeliever and even go so far as to murder others. Even believers who profess the same faith, but follow a different movement, are seen as non-believers. I have put believers between inverted commas, because someone who is a believer is not allowed to kill another.

The Qur'an, Chapter 5, verse 32, says about this: '...whoever kills a human being, except for those killing others or creating disorder in the land, it would be as if he had killed the entire human race...'

I agree with several principles of URI. The most important ones for me are:

- URI encourages its members to deepen their understanding of their own religion;
- URI seeks and offers cooperation with other inter-religious efforts;
- URI is open to all, individuals, organisations and associations.
- The most important principle for me is the following: Members of URI will not be forced to participate in any ritual or to be converted!

#### 6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?

I would like to mention that it is important to respect people from another or different religions. We are called to share our similarities rather than our differences. It is possible to enter into dialogue with each other, without losing respect. Anyone who agrees with these I would like to welcome to join URI via IBS or another CC.

*"We are called to share our similarities rather than our differences. It is possible to enter into dialogue with each other, without losing respect."*

Sharief Imambuks, IBS CC member

# Creating an atmosphere of friendship, peace and love between people

## KÜLTÜRLERARASI ARAŞTIRMA VE DOSTLUK VAKFI SOCIETY FOR INTERCULTURAL RESEARCH AND FRIENDSHIP KARVAK-SIRF, Turkey Interview with Dr. Kemal Basci



### 1. What has brought you to URI?

URI aims to create an atmosphere of peace and to build bridges between religions and cultures. Having a similar mission and vision as KARVAK brought us together with URI.

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

Personally, when I first met with URI, the friendships and intimate relationships in the environment impressed me immensely. The fact that people from all religions and even different sects of each religion could establish such warm friendships sparked my hope. The fact that the URI initiative incorporates not only religions but also many other ideologies has shown me how tolerant the URI is.

### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

It was very enjoyable for the people I met for the first time to take me amongst them easily and to be friendly and sincere. As a result of the presentations, events, and conversations I had with the people I met afterward, I realized how active the URI is and how much they are working in establishing peace between religions and cultures. I decided to be part of the URI, saying I should have a contribution to this.

### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

The most interesting and inspiring person for me was Sheikh Bashir. His thoughts, life story, and advice were priceless to me.

### 5. Looking at the PPPs<sup>4</sup>. What stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

I would say that the purpose of the URI is to contribute to a peaceful life among all societies through the free expression of beliefs and ideas around the world. If they want to contribute to this meaningful action, they can join the URI family.



### 6. Explain your CC good practice?

Creating an atmosphere of friendship, peace and love between people of all different cultures, especially international students, and ensuring intercultural information exchange are among our best practice activities.

### 7. How do you do it?

We organize international student meetings. We organize cultural trips for international students. We organize language training courses. We do our work by organizing events such as cultural days and cultural meals.

### 8. On what occasions do you use it?

We organize cultural days and cultural events to bring together people from different international cultures. While organizing these, our main goal is to create an environment of intercultural friendship and brotherhood and to get young people to know different cultures.

### 9. Why does it work?

The connection between young people from different cultures gets stronger. They get the chance to get to know each other. In this way, people from different cultures form friendships by learning about different cultures. These international students, who meet each other through our events, experience love, respect and cultural gains.

### 10. Any difficulties or cautions? Anything you need to keep in mind?

We carry out our work easily with our professional team and international participating students. We have not had any difficulties in our operations. However, the Covid-19 pandemic process has made our activities difficult.

### 11. Did the Covid-19 pandemic influence your work and how?

Due to the prohibitions, we could not realize the activities that we used to carry out without the Pandemic. We had to postpone our in-person activities due to the ban on collective events, and the easy spread of the virus at collective events.

<http://www.karvak.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/karvaksirf>

*"Personally, when I first met with URI, the friendships and intimate relationships in the environment impressed me immensely. The fact that people from all religions and even different sects of each religion could establish such warm friendships sparked my hope."*

Dr. Kemal Basci, KARVAK-SIRF CC

# Networking and opportunities Sombor Educational Center CC (SEC CC) – Serbia



## Interview with SEC CC members

### 1. What has brought you to URI?

As an organization since its founding, we have been partnering and networking with a significant number of organizations from Europe. During one of the meetings with this aim, we were introduced to the work of URI. A friend of our organization explained to us what URI was doing and, considering the fact that we share values, beliefs, and fields of work, he proposed to us to engage as well. This is how we became familiar with your work and during the years we became more and more engaged as CC from Europe.

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

Since we joined URI, we have been trying to be engaged as much as possible. Assemblies that are organized for CCs in Europe are something we consider very inspiring for us individually and for organizations as well. During these kinds of events, we are able to connect and network with others, we are able to hear about other practices and present ours, create new partnerships, new project proposals and influence communities in which we work in that way.

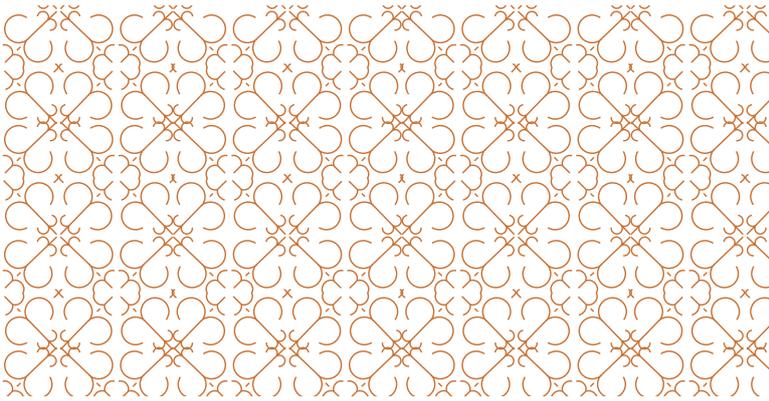
### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

These kinds of experiences are motivating for us, meaning they give us the opportunity to meet with others, to hear inspiring stories, exchange new ideas with the people who are sharing our values and beliefs, etc. Since the beginning of our work as an NGO we value partnership very much, especially because we believe that the united work of organizations who share the same values and beliefs can do more regarding influencing communities to be more active, more engaged and more inclusive towards all of its members.

### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

We would say that the organization we look up to in the region is Youth for Peace from Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. When it comes to peacebuilding, their practice in the region is very inspiring and motivating for us. We have cooperated with Youth for Peace for years now and we are always happy to be able to learn from them on every occasion possible.





**5. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about the URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?**

We believe that it is not needed to mention professional expressions when explaining URI to someone. We would simply say that URI is a global network that is contributing to the cooperation and networking of organizations that are practicing inter-religious dialogue all around the world. There are many benefits of being part of URI, from which we would emphasize networking with organizations all around the world, and also opportunities for the development of the organization, contributing to the peacebuilding processes in the world, raising awareness about tolerance, and all the processes related to the URI we have been part of have influenced personal and social development of members of our organization who took part in it.

<https://sec.org.rs/>

<https://www.facebook.com/SECsombor/>

*"There are many benefits of being part of URI, from which we would emphasize networking with organizations all around the world, and also opportunities for the development of the organization, contribution to the peacebuilding processes in the world, raising awareness about tolerance, and all the processes related to the URI we have been part of have influenced personal and social development of members of our organization who took part in it."*

# We all can work together for a better future

## Interview with Mala Wallage, Confidential Counselors CC, The Netherlands



### 1. What has brought you to URI?

Bart brought me to URI! When we first met he told me: "I am part of an interfaith organization – URI – and we are looking for someone to go to Damme, Belgium for the URI Europe Assembly in March 2018. I can't go and would be nice if you are free". By coincidence I was able to go and went there together with my husband Roald. Duncan, Hanna Mitra and Morgana came on the next day. When we get there with Roald we were surprised how hospital and open were all people from URI, especially URI Europe staff and team. Roald has special interest in East Europe, so it was great opportunity for him to meet and to talk to people from there. Also a very nice and informal introduction to URI was made by Deepak, it attracted us very much. During those three days we felt very comfortable, warm welcomed, talking about interesting subjects, also food was nice. And the message that we all can work together for better future was essential to me. I love to work on grass roots level, so I choose to stay in URI. And all miracles came after that decision. You Angelina told me about the youth camp and that we can make it together.

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

Every experience in URI is inspiring for me. People for the URI network are so inspiring and motivated. Despite of the challenges they are not afraid to continue. I respect very much this way of living!

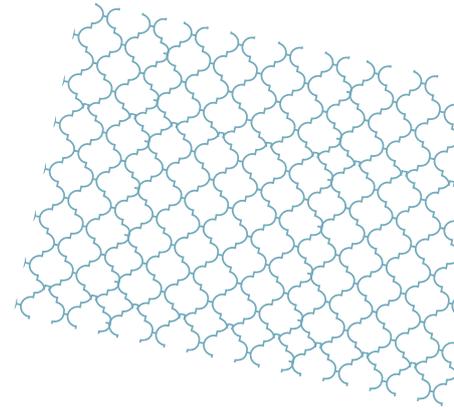
### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

Interfaith youth camp "BRIDGE-Inter-Cultures" was a present, I love that project. And I can see myself fully engaged with it and it makes me move and grow. What is also very inspiring for me – it is an international project, we can collaborate with BRIDGES from Bulgaria and to build strong relations among youth from both countries. My heart is in the youth camp. Now we are looking to buy a place and to build a center here in the Hague.

### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

Duncan is extraordinary man, he behave equal with every person, he is nice with everyone. And also I love you three working together (K&L&A), so creative, so inspiring, how you connect with CCs. I love that you trust each other and have confidence.





### 5. Looking at the PPP's, what stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

I stands for PPP's in life, everybody is equal and unique; different people but common things are important for all of us. My work is visiting people from different nationalities and all of them for their children want the do best. The same is with food.

People want to live together, but don't know how to reach each other! We are in our boxes and circles. Since I am in URI, I am not afraid to be with different people in one room.

### 6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about the URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?

If you have 7 people from 3 different religions, spiritual expression or indigenous traditions, you can join URI and you are free to come together and to build Peace in your society and in the world. I enjoy being part of URI and I inspire many people. I am currently working with Women's Club and there are women interested to form a CC. Let's hope that soon we will have new born CC in the Netherlands!

*"And what was the essential for me – the message that we all can work together for better future. I love to work on grass roots level, so I choose to stay in URI. And all miracles came after that decision."*



# Discovering together what we have in common in faith

## Interview with Marc Loos, Interfaith Workgroup Ghent CC, Belgium



The Interfaith Workgroup Ghent has even existed for more than 20 years. And we congratulate URI on their anniversary!

As pastor and on behalf of the congregation of the United Protestant Church Ghent Rabot, we found and still find it increasingly important to build contacts with the various (faith) communities in the neighbourhood and the city.

In the beginning, this happened especially in the 19th century belt of our city with various Islamic places of worship and mosques. But also with other ideologies, such as Buddhists and Turkish associations, the district deanery, liberalists, etc.

The Muslim community is the second largest religious community, but was and still is largely on the fringe and on the side-lines, unheard and unloved in our society. Yet they have much in common with our Christian and particularly Protestant faiths. It is better to work together, nay, to strengthen each other in faith and in building a more prosperous and peaceful coexistence in deprived neighbourhoods.

Discovering together what we have in common in faith and that we share the same wishes and dreams across borders for the future of our children and the world as a whole is a blessing and makes us brothers and sisters, and also makes us feel much more at home in an often hostile world, in which people and groups are divided into 'us and them'. This blessing does not simply fall from the sky, but is a long process of trial and error, of persistence and perseverance. For this, you need an interpersonal working group and URI, and a growing support base of solidarity is indispensable. Freethinking humanists are an integral part of our working group and they make an indispensable contribution to our work.

For me, a few strong local bridge figures, such as a pastoral worker, a moral counsellor, a street worker, a Muslim friend, who are uncompromisingly committed to a neighbourhood, are an incredible inspiration.

And for thinking through a real inter-life reflection and unity, a theological book that stands out for me is certainly: Torah, Gospel and Koran – 3 books, 2 cities, 1 story – by Anton Wessels. I also think of the recently deceased theologian Hans Küng and his life commitment to unity in ecumenical and interfaith terms and to a world ethic. No world peace without the involvement of religions.

Of course, there are the big international meetings like Assisi and URI that are important sustainable signals for the international world.

The PPPs of URI are a wonderful guide and inspiration for that peaceful world. For many, the enormous diversity that becomes visible in URI is an inspiration, while others are initially frightened and feel confused or threatened.

But in meeting them lies the secret of a world open and discoverable, exciting and full of people of good will.



*"For me, a few strong local bridge figures, such as a pastoral worker, a moral counsellor, a street worker, a Muslim friend, who are uncompromisingly committed to a neighbourhood, are an incredible inspiration."*

*"Discovering together what we have in common in faith and that we share the same wishes and dreams across borders for the future of our children and the world as a whole is a blessing and makes us brothers and sisters, and also makes us feel much more at home in an often hostile world, in which people and groups are divided into 'us and them'."*

# URI is a judgment -free zone

## Interview with Praveena and Reem, Student Aid Drop CC, Bulgaria

### 1. What has brought you to URI?

Yasmin was searching for a multi faith organisation online. where she found Angelina, and asked to meet up with her. We had also set up Student Aid Drop at around that time so when we met Angelina she explained how we could possibly become a CC.

### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

We have all been lucky enough to go to URI trips individually so they have all be super empowering for each one of us. My trip to Belgium, Damme at the Silent Farm was super inspiring for me as I met people who were so “different” to me in society in terms of age, religion, demographic. So maybe on day to day life we wouldn’t get the chance to mingle, communicate and grow the way we did.

### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

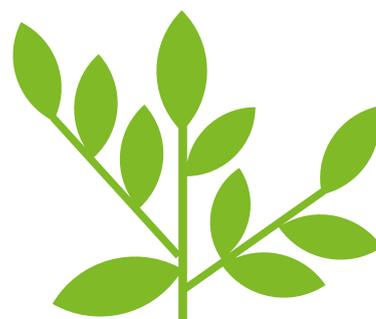
This always reminds me how beautiful, welcoming, and special the URI community is and this is something we want to constantly be a part of.

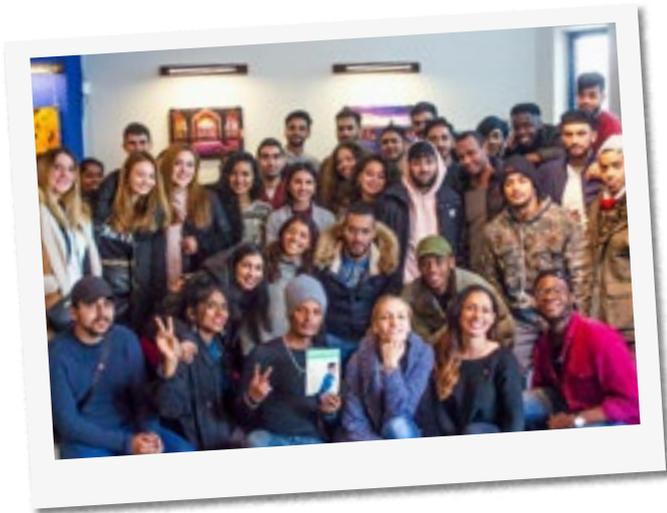
### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

Angelina is definitely our role model here in Sofia Bulgaria. She has been a mentor and a mother figure to us. We don’t know what we would of done without her. From helping us with Student Aid Drop, to just giving us our love and support, she is always there for us and makes us feel so safe and appreciated. We are constantly one awe of how active she is and how she is constantly looking to do more. As a women this is so inspiring to me and I want to be like this too.

### 5. Looking at the PPP’s, what stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

The respect for all cultures, religions, practises and each other. The healing energy and building peace. This has taught us so much over the years we joined URI as 19 years olds now as young adults we are constantly applying this to our lives wherever we go. We have a natural instinct to radiate this energy we get from URI which is to respect and love those around us no matter how different we are. We truly believe this is what the world needs more of empathy and love to bring people together and build bridges.





**6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about the URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?**

I would first describe what URI is, which is a grassroots interfaith network. It is a diverse community where you have the opportunity to engage with people from all walks of life, with regards to beliefs and principles. From this, you start to understand how people apply their beliefs into their CCs. Each time the CCs come together in congregation, it is an opportunity to learn something new. URI is a judgment-free zone, it is a place filled with only love and support for one another.



<https://www.instagram.com/studentaiddrop/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/StudentAidDrop>

*"Each time the CCs come together in congregation, it is an opportunity to learn something new. URI is a judgement-free zone, it is a place filled with only love and support for one another."*

Praveena

# To create stable and peaceful communities for all beings

## Udhetim-i-Lire CC – Albania

### Interview with CC members

#### 1. What has brought you to URI?

The association Udhetim i Lire –Liberi di Viaggiare since the very beginning aimed to be part of networks that have similar goals to it; URI is one of these networks. We want to collaborate with URI with the desire to work with organizations that aim to create a more peaceful world in which human rights are respected and religious barriers are eliminated. To make this a reality, we need the active involvement of young people and communities, as well as the creation of opportunities for them to express themselves. URI creates these possibilities and from our side, this is the strongest point that has made our cooperation more fruitful.

#### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

During these three years, our staff and volunteers have participated in many activities developed by URI and its collaborators. Each activity has had a special importance and has helped us gain new experiences regarding the approach we should have with religious communities and not only. The most inspiring and special activity for us has been “Circles of Light 2020”. The messages that were conveyed during the event as well as the presentation of the documentary “The Power of Story” managed to bring light during the dark days of quarantine and inspired the young people who participated in it. It was also a good example that showed that, despite the fact that we are online, we can collaborate and create a virtual environment similar to the real one.

Also the activity “Fly to Albania” organized on 24 October 2020 was the first activity that now is becoming a tradition within URI. Each CC invites interested people in the virtual tour to know more about their country, tradition, culture, and history. In this activity, our volunteers presented a video and short presentation about the previous experience of Udhetim i Lire – Liberi di Viaggiare CC and tourist attractions that can be visited in Albania.

#### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

This experience helps us recall once again why we had chosen to be part of the URI. Some of the young people who were present at the event showed interest to participate in the activities that would take place later by URI. Some of them, even inspired by the words of various representatives during “Circles of Lights 2020”, started thinking about a series of activities that the association and the URI could carry out. Some of these activities have been carried out and some others remain to be seen in the coming months.



#### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

In these three years, as CC, we have had the good fortune to cooperate with a number of URI representatives. All without exception have given their help and have supported us in the development of joint activities as well as have increased the capacities of some of our volunteers. Thanks to URI we have managed to create partnerships and implement international projects. Angelina, Lejla, Daniel, Emina and Sarah are part of the staff with whom we have worked directly and we find the opportunity to thank them for the fact that they trusted us.

In terms of the model that has helped us shape and become more and more involved in the URI, is Karimah. She has always been our best supporter and has created the opportunity for us to feel accepted and part of the URI. She has supported the initiatives of our young people and has created the opportunity for them to always show their talents. After the Earthquake of 26th November 2019 she initiated a campaign to help our association. She realized bringing monetary help collected from different CCs to support the volunteers that worked in that period with the victims of the Earthquake.

#### 5. Looking at the PPP's, what stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

PPPs represent a set of principles that we should all follow in our lives to make society and the world we live in better. During our daily work we try to maximize the implementation of the latter, and encourage young people to occasionally read and reflect on the message they convey. There are some PPPs that we see as the most unique and influential in our lives, such as:

- We respect the uniqueness of each tradition, and differences of practice or belief. It is also one of the principles that guide our work, we respect and are open to every individual, regardless of its specifics, that helps us fulfill our purpose and mission.
- We give and receive hospitality. In all the relationships we create with both partners and volunteers. This point also coincides with our mission in the field of environment.
- We act from sound ecological practices to protect and preserve the Earth for both present and future generations. The environmental initiatives we have taken locally also show that we are eco-friendly and foster the same spirit in our volunteers. The aim of our association is the protection and preservation of the environment.

#### 6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about the URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?

After our membership in URI, we often had to introduce it to our volunteers and partners. In short, we try to show that URI is an organization that creates bridges of cooperation between different religious organizations and not only, young people and communities. Through the initiatives that are undertaken as well as the development of numerous activities aim to create stable and peaceful communities for all beings.

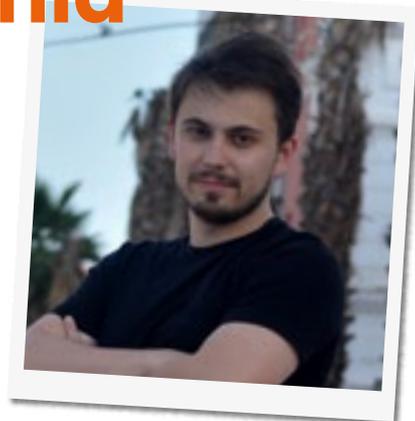
Our invitation for first time listeners to URI is very simple. Join us in a meeting to see how slowly your approach to various issues will change and the flow of life will improve. By sharing your personal approach, you can help solve major problems.

<https://udhetimiilire.org/en/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/udhetimi.lire>

*"Join us in a meeting to see how slowly your approach to various issues will change and the flow of life will improve. By sharing your personal approach, you can help solve major problems."*

# Dialogue and peace are always great motivations

## Youth for Peace CC – Bosnia and Herzegovina



### Interview with Daniel Eror

#### 1. What has brought you to URI?

The idea of joining URI came from one of the founders of the organization who had experienced URI through the URI Youth Leadership Programme, and had discovered URI values and how those values are re-lived in grassroots activities.

When Youth for Peace got an opportunity to discover URI better, it was a perfect match, since many Youth for Peace goals are aligned with URI's; great global community advocating and working for peace.

#### 2. What has been your most inspiring experience within URI and why?

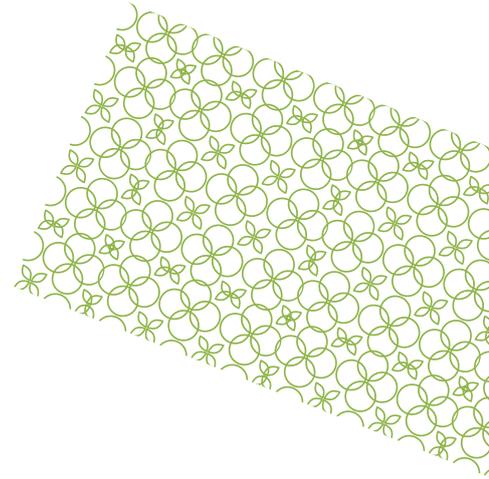
A global gathering in Sarajevo that was hosted by Youth for Peace was a most inspiring experience. For the first time, Youth for Peace members have had the opportunity to meet URI people from all eight regions, from different parts of the world... Gathering so many diverse cultures and traditions in a single place. Gathering the world's cultures in Sarajevo, a city that is usually seen as a crossroads of differences.

#### 3. How does this experience empower you to remain engaged with URI?

Dialogue and peace are always great motivations to be engaged with URI. Such an event is only a mirror of thousands of small-scale events around the world that witness cooperation, collaboration, and togetherness. I am dedicated to contribute, help, and assist anyone doing it.

#### 4. Who do you consider role models and how has he/she/they shaped your engagement with URI?

I do not have any specific individuals or groups whom I see as role models. For me, everyone who is creative in bringing people together, in building bridges or in learning and teaching how to use differences as advantage and richness is a role model. The role model for a better world, a world of equal opportunities and a world that can and should be a place for everyone.



### 5. Looking at the PPP's, what stands out for you and how does it translate with your choices in life?

Principle No 5 – “We listen and speak with respect to deepen mutual understanding and trust” – I see it as a great one. It puts an emphasis on dialogue, i.e. on listening with willingness for understanding. Willingness to hear and listen to others is crucial for everyday life and communication. I wish for each of us, around the globe, to be willing to listen more, genuinely willing to see others' perspectives without prioritizing our own.

### 6. What will you tell about URI to someone who just heard about the URI and what will you mention in order to invite and inspire this person to join URI?

So many people, coming around the world, with very different backgrounds, cultures, traditions and beliefs have found a common goal – isn't it terrific?

<https://www.youth-for-peace.ba/en/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/YouthForPeaceBiH>

*“For me, everyone who is creative in bringing people together, in building bridges or in learning and teaching how to use differences as advantage and richness is a role model. The role model for a better world, a world of equal opportunities and a world that can and should be a place for everyone.”*

Daniel Eror, Youth for Peace CC

# Successful practices of grassroots interfaith peace organizations

**Building a local network of interfaith encounter and engagement**  
– AUDIR CC  
– Catalonia/Spain

**Youth interact across cultures and religions** – BRIDGES CC  
– Bulgaria

**‘Silent’ and ‘listen’ are made of the same letters... Into Silence CC**  
– Belgium

**A lot of good people out there want to make a difference, URI CC Lienz**  
– Austria

**Personal encounters faith to faith and face to face, DMLBonn CC**  
– Germany

**The power of human Faith is capable of making our world kinder and better**  
– Ukrainian Pagan Circle CC  
– Ukraine

**Cherish the best from the values of each group and enjoy our diversity** – Balkan as a Soul Bridge CC  
– Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Respect for diversity and living in harmony** – Community Development Institute (CDI) CC  
– North Macedonia

**The Forgotten Holocaust**  
– Dialogue Center CC  
– Bulgaria

**Overcoming difficulties by building partnerships** – Sombor Educational Center CC (SEC CC)  
– Serbia

**Respectful communication and integration** – Student Aid Drop CC  
– Bulgaria

**The Sacred Space can take many forms** – Together in Action CC– UK

**The brilliance in the eyes of the children** – Udhetim-i- Lire CC  
– Albania

**Combating divisions strongly entrenched in nationalistic, extremist narratives** – Youth for Peace CC  
– Bosnia and Herzegovina

# Building a local network of interfaith encounter and engagement

## Interview with Francesc Torradelflot and Jaume De Marcos, AUDIR CC, Barcelona, Catalonia/Spain

### 1. Please explain your CC good practice

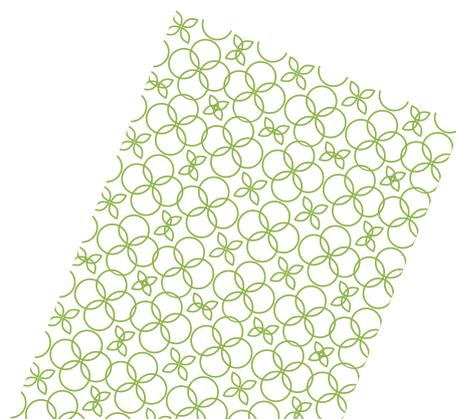
At AUDIR (UNESCO Association for Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialogue<sup>6</sup>), we are leading two networks of local Interreligious Groups in neighbourhoods. These groups connect with religious and spiritual communities, with social organizations of the district, and with city councils. They are in dialogue but they also organise several common social actions in their neighbourhoods. We all work together in order to build religious, convictional dialogue, social cohesion, and peace. We have more than 15 groups in Barcelona and different Catalan municipalities and neighbourhoods right now, which are part of or directly related to AUDIR. We also have AUDIR interfaith groups on the climate crisis, youth, women etc. .

Besides, we are also coordinating a Catalan Network of Interreligious Organizations (<https://audir.org/xarxa-catalana-dentitats-2/>) with more than 20 members of the Catalan Mediterranean Area from Perpignan to Alicante and from Lleida to Mallorca. These are independent groups, which formed autonomously, many times with AUDIR's support or guidelines, but as independent organizations.

Every four years, they celebrate together a Catalan Parliament of Religions and, every two years, a Conference on Interreligious Dialogue, devoted especially to training.

It is supportive for the different groups to be connected with each other beyond their local circumstances. They share experiences and good practices. They also provide advice and inspiration – this helps keep groups engaged. We have a website with the different local interreligious initiatives. In fact, this network is, in some way, related to the International Network on Religions and Mediation in Urban Areas (<http://www.rel-med.net/en/>) which was launched in 2007 in Lleida.

<sup>6</sup> Associació UNESCO per al Diàleg Interreligiós





## 2. How do you do it?

We identify neighborhoods and the different religious and convictional communities that are there. First, we talk with every community to explain the project and to solve some doubts or mistrust. Then, we make it clear that nobody wants to convert or change them, but most of the time everyone can deepen their own belief, respect the other, and be able to discover how many values we share. We explain express that all together we can help in a creative way to improve a common society. We propose that we will be there with them to serve the group, avoiding as much as possible political or ideological interferences and trying to help to build common social initiatives. They meet once a month during more or less an hour and a half. Also, every group organizes at minimum one or two common social activities per year in its own neighborhood. Sometimes these activities are related to the municipality festivals and are part of the official programme, e.g. performances, declarations, food stores, round tables on current issues, opening doors, or sharing of cultural traditions.

## 3. On what occasions do you use it?

This initiative is very interesting especially when people don't meet with people from other religions and convictions, and keep themselves closed and isolated in their homes, sometimes with mistrust and fear, or even anxiety. To do this initiative, people should meet in a safe and reliable place and atmosphere. In such a setting it is easier to find out the values of the other. Then things begin to change. In fact, in some municipalities, these initiatives have been created after conflicts between different religious or cultural communities.

## 4. Why does it work?

Our society is plural and diverse, and we have some people that are not ready to accept difference and the otherness. This kind of initiative can help to show how enriching a diversity and dialogue are, and how we really need each other.

## 5. Any difficulties or cautions? Anything you need to keep in mind?

The most important difficulty we face is getting the engagement of people who do not know interreligious dialogue in each of the religious communities, i.e. members of the religious groups. Sometimes it seems quite complicated to allow the interreligious initiatives to spread widely, e.g. beyond houses of the religious leaders or beyond individuals who are already engaged in the interfaith movement. We would like the interreligious option to be widespread, not only a minority bet. We try to convince people who are not yet involved. We need to be aware about the necessity to be patient and hopeful.

We always reach out to all religious communities. We make no distinction depending on which branch they belong to. We invite everybody, we contact everybody, we talk to everybody, we meet everybody. Then, we invite them to the table. Sometimes we work slowly, because we do not want to push anybody into the defensive.

We have noted that in many cases there is a core circle, with fully involved religious communities. Other communities participate, but only in some activities, especially the public activities. A third circle includes communities which do not participate in any activity, but they are informed about our activities. If possible, it is also very important for us to include nonreligious people in every initiative. In this sense, we try to follow the advice of the Council of Europe concerning the need of cultivating the dialogue between religious traditions and non-religious convictions.

We should be aware that each project should have its own funding. A bad funding in our organization means the impossibility of continuity, and the loss of energy and of human resources. That is why, from 2012 on until now, we do not start any project if we do not have guaranteed funding.

### OTHER PROJECTS OF AUDIR

- **WISES:** Interfaith and interreligious and intergenerational learning
- **Dialogue in prison:** Interreligious groups and learning in religious and convictional diversity in prisons
- **Interreligious Calendar**
- **Interfaith Choir**
- **AUDIR Youth movement**
- **The Night of Religions**
- **Interreligious education: publications on interreligious mediation; women, religions and feminism; religious festivals; places of worship, religious care at the end of life, guidebook of faiths and convictions for funeral celebrations**





“We invite everybody, we contact everybody, we talk to everybody, we meet everybody. Then we invite them to the table.”

“Our society is plural and diverse and yet some people are not ready to accept difference and otherness. This kind of initiative can help show how rich diversity and dialogue are and how we need each other.

For the different groups it is supportive to be connected with each other beyond their local circumstances. They share experiences and good practices. They also provide advice and inspiration – this helps keep groups engaged.

We always reach out to all religious communities.  
We make no distinction depending on which branch they belong to. We invite everybody, we contact everybody, we talk to everybody, we meet everybody. Then we invite them to the table.

# Youth interact across cultures and religions



## BRIDGES CC, Bulgaria

### 1. Please explain your CC good practice

„BRIDGE – Inter – Cultures“ is an interfaith youth camp for teenagers. It has been already five years (without 2020) that we implement an initiative that aims to work with children 13-17 years old, belonging to different religious communities and cultures. This is not just an initiative, but a cause. It is our so-called “GOLDEN” project and we are happy that it is in its 5th edition in July 2021. Interfaith camp is a 5-day youth forum for tolerance and intercultural dialogue. Diverse group of teenagers live together, learn about “the others”, work as a team and build trust, tolerance and mutual understanding across religions. Every year we have a different topic – the 2021 theme is “Ecology of the Soul” and we are looking very much forward to it.

### 2. How do you do it?

With our amazing small BRIDGES team and full dedication to the cause. We started 6 years ago with just a few children without knowing if and how this idea to bring together children from different religious traditions would continue. Financially we count on the support of Municipalities in Stara Zagora and Plovdiv, a small URIE grant, our friends from the Netherlands, private donors, Foundation “Plovdiv 2019”, etc. We are happy that civil organizations, local authorities, volunteers, and the media stand behind our idea.

What does the camp look like? Living together for five days teenagers from different religious backgrounds build bridges of tolerance and mutual understanding. It requires acceptance and respect between spiritual traditions, generations and cultures. It teaches them how to work in a team and develop their creativity and understanding of the basic principles driving humanity. The conclusion from cohabitation is that in dialogue you keep your identity and faith, and at the same time you are enriched by the culture of your friend. Within those five days, young people have the opportunity to meet with representatives of different religions and learn more from them about the religion and faith. Through various joint activities, young people have the pleasure to discover what they have in common despite their differences.

### 3. On what occasions do you use it?

BRIDGE-Inter-Cultures is a Summer camp, every year usually at the end of July (schools finish at the mid of July). We use the opportunity to celebrate the UN International Day of Friendship which is on 30 July. Hopefully, in the near future we will make more than one edition during the summer vacation, because there are so many applications from around the country so that one group is not enough to gather all young people who are willing to be part in the adventure.

Every camp edition has a different theme, but the main idea is to educate young people for “the other”, for the religion and culture of your neighbour, who is living in another part of the country or even in another part of Europe. Three years ago, in 2018, we turned the camp into international and together with our URI friends in the Netherlands Mala, Duncan, Hanna Mitra, Bart we started excellent partnership and gave the opportunity to the youth interfaith groups to meet and to have a chance to participate in the Arigatou LTLT training. Second and third exchange programs were not possible due to the Covid-19, but we hope that next year we will have again two weeks of international interfaith experience.



#### 4. Why does it work?

Very interesting question. It works because it is needed and gives a new perspective to the youth. Turn their focus inside and change their priorities in life – toward more spiritual and fundamental questions they never thought. Interfaith camp activities and meetings widen their horizon, educate them on important ethical issues, empathy and tolerance. It changes their understanding for “the others” and for the world outside their circle.

#### 5. Any difficulties or cautions? Anything you need to keep in mind?

Sure, there are always difficulties, but we need to face them, overcome them, and move forward! In the beginning there was a great problem with parents, because prejudices and stereotypes are still strong obstacles to having dialogue between religions in Bulgaria. Another difficulty we faced in the first year, most probably related to that one, was a small number of participants. But that was only in the beginning. Later we had the opposite “problem” or challenge – too many applications and young people who wanted to take part. For example, this year we received 32 applications for 16 places only for a week. That fact shows us that there is a need to continue and to develop our project, and to give a chance to more and more young people to become part of the idea. Another issue we always face is the funding. In our context, it is very complicated to motivate people to financially support such a cause. Despite the challenges and difficulties on the way, we are proud to manage and give a chance for 5 years to the teenagers to build bridges of tolerance, peace and to create cultures of peace between religions.

<http://bridges-forum.org/work/bridge-interfaith-youth-camp-2021/>

[http://plovdiv2019.eu/bg/platform/fuse/121-xxxxxx/2969-xxxx-xxxx-xxxxxxxxx?fbclid=IwAR-3jkgazmsjB-AymbByaPuNfixUglNyVrepuVaGN3eozyCnhymTE\\_oDZ2IY\\_](http://plovdiv2019.eu/bg/platform/fuse/121-xxxxxx/2969-xxxx-xxxx-xxxxxxxxx?fbclid=IwAR-3jkgazmsjB-AymbByaPuNfixUglNyVrepuVaGN3eozyCnhymTE_oDZ2IY_)

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=bridges.forum&set=a.2625175690899757>

**“It works because it is needed and gives a new perspective to the youth. Turn their focus inside and change their priorities in life – toward more spiritual and fundamental questions they never thought.”**

# 'Silent' and 'listen' are made of the same letters.. Our CC good practice

## Into Silence CC, Belgium

### 1. Please explain your CC good practice

Going into silence ... for a minute... a few minutes ... an hour

### 2. How do you do it?

Anyone can ... I would say that it is best to discover the context that suits you best to enter into silence; it could be nature, entering a sacred place, your meditation room or private space in the house. To encourage and guide individuals and groups to discover and experience the potential of 'going into silence' we created a new VZW (In English: Charity Association) named:

## 'Into Silence' Bringing coolness to a world on fire...

Our main activity is the creation of a 'Serious Game' that allows small groups to discover and share the richness of the amazing journey inwards. Silence is, of course, the gateway. As Patrick Hanjoul is the chair of the new project and as the project was created at the Silence Farm, it is obvious that this is an inter-cultural and inter-interreligious project. We consider it as 'a gift in the making to URI'.

### 3. On what occasions do you use it?

At any time you feel the need... The concept allows people to play the game partly alone and so at any time, and at moments together with a small group of max 7 people. The Island you play on consists of different locations symbol for the different dimensions of life.

Experiencing the potential of silence together empowers the deep connection between people. The creation of the project itself is part of the process. We hope to create a cooperation and thus a partnership with URI Europe.





#### 4. Why does it work?

Silence is a universal language, and the space where people can meet beyond the distraction of language. Silence is the door to discover the amazing inner world. It allows us to go beyond as well as deep inside. In silence, we can easily feel the connection with mother earth and its residents. Silence is the common ground for all kinds of reflection, prayer, or meditation. It is the space where one-ness is naturally experienced and where differences evaporate. In silence, we are able to listen and hear differently and differently things. 'Silent' and 'listen' are made of the same letters. In silence we look differently and see different things. In times where noise and the never-ending stimuli pull us outwards, it is refreshing and empowering to enter into deep silence and explore its potential and light.

#### 5. Any difficulties or cautions? Anything you need to keep in mind?

Simple as it sounds, the practice of going into silence will make you realize it is not obvious. Opening and entering the gate of Silence a lot of noise will appear. Voices of long ago and unrelieved pain will ask for your attention. Going into silence is not the way of people who want to escape reality. It takes courage to allow the unheard voices and cries that were for too long overruled by many inside noises and our stubborn illusions. That's why the Serious Game offers a guide to confront and handle them, realizing that ...'what's in the way is the way'.

**“Our main activity is the creation of a ‘Serious Game’ that allows small groups to discover and share the richness of the amazing journey inwards. For which, of course, silence is the gateway.”**



# A lot of good people out there want to make a difference

## Our CC good practice

### Interview with Elisabeth Ziegler-Duregger and Suzanne Senfter of “Education brings Peace” CC Austria

#### 1. Please explain your CC good practice

We translated an Austrian story about the question “who created everything” in now 45 languages for interreligious work with children, young people, and adults.

[www.little-owl.net](http://www.little-owl.net)

We organize interreligious prayers in a park at winter solstice around a fountain, with texts from different holy scriptures.

We invite to actions in schools during the World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW)

We built a tower with a “Bell for Peace and Friendship” on top of a mountain. The bell shows the symbols of 12 religions and the tower is full of stones from all over the world and from holy places of different religions.



## **2. How do you do it?**

We receive a lot of help from many people, also financially and physically.

## **3. On what occasions do you use it?**

We work throughout the year on different projects with different groups.

## **4. Why does it work?**

Because there are such a lot of good people out there, and they want to make a difference in the world with their talents.

## **5. Any difficulties or cautions? Anything you need to keep in mind?**

No difficulties that we could not solve in a good manner. And we always start again with a project until it is finished or we decide to stop it for some reasons.

[www.bildung-frieden.net](http://www.bildung-frieden.net)

“If you are looking for a great aim, and would like to work with wonderful people, to bring all your possibilities and energy to blossom, then join URI. On the day you will die, you will be happy about all the experiences and impact you have made. Nobody can solve the problems of the world alone, but in cooperation with like minded people from all walks of life and age, it is possible.”

“We have no difficulties that we could not solve in a good manner. And we always start again with a project until it is finished or we decide to stop it for some reason.”

# Personal encounters faith to faith and face to face

## Interview with Wilhelm Sabri Hoffmann – DMLBonn CC

There is one outstanding practice which we are keeping alive for 32 years now: “Christlich-Muslimische Tagung am Pfingstfest” (Christian – Muslim Conference at Pentecost). The Conference counts an average from 70 to 100 participants, Christian and Muslim, young and old, single persons, and whole families.

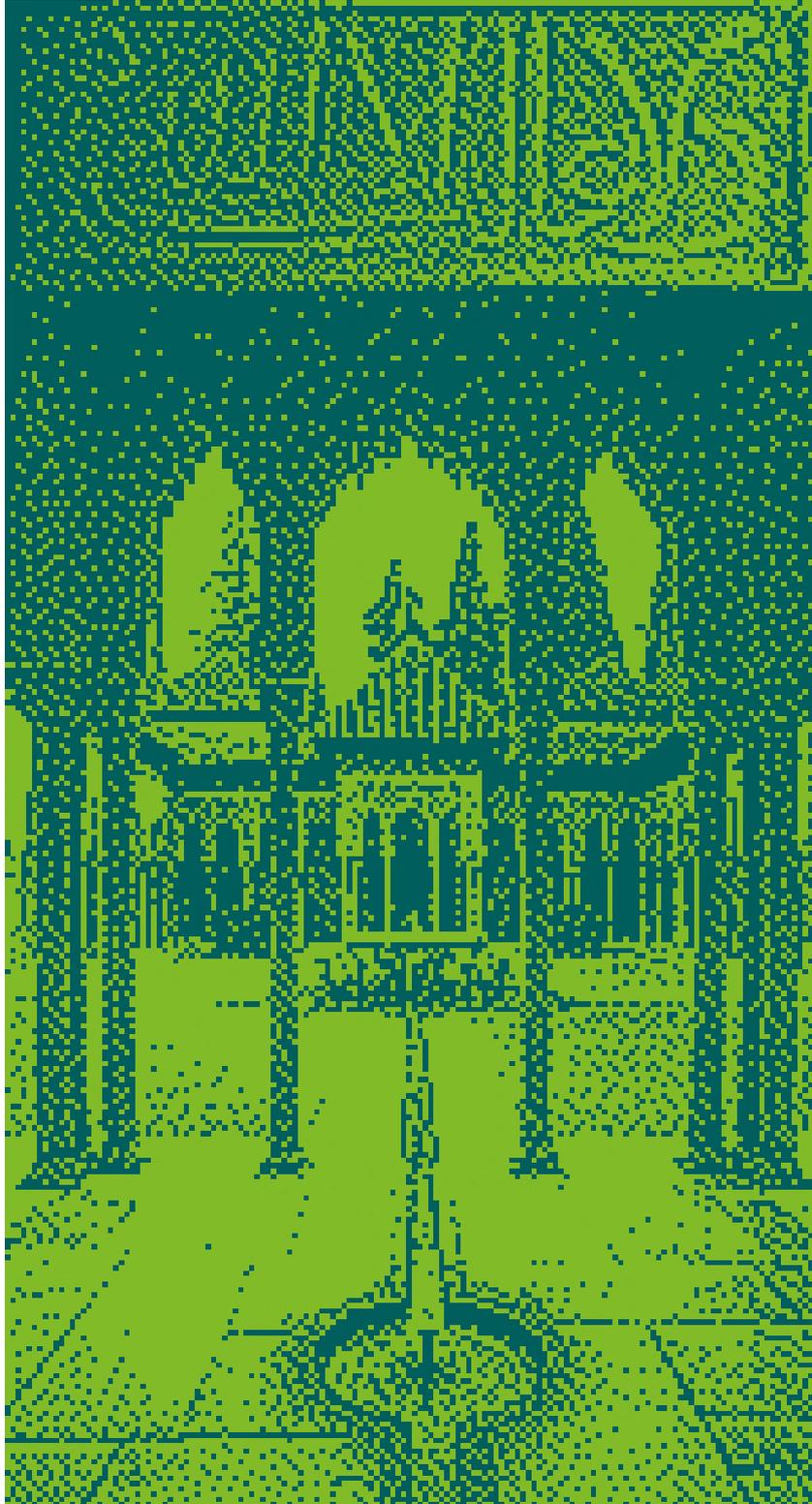
For the occasion, they come together for 4 days at the Pentecost time at a conference venue, inviting and taking part in Christian and Muslim worship and prayer as active part or simply as a guest, listening to lectures about certain interesting and relevant topics, and spending time together in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Personal encounters faith to faith and face to face. The preparation of this conference is a lot of work, spanning a whole year and could only be done by cooperation with different partners.

In 2021, it was not possible to come together in the usual way and the usual place. But at least we managed to have a 3-hour online video meeting with several participants of former conferences. The agenda of the online meeting was exactly the same agenda we had on the first evening of the conference. And, most surprisingly, there were special moments in this online meeting, when you forgot that you were only in a virtual sphere, and felt the warmth and friendliness of the original conference!



[www.muslimliga.de](http://www.muslimliga.de)

**It is a simple message: Don't give up! Don't cut connections or neglect them. There are always distractions, difficulties and discouraging events from outside in the political and social sphere which can limit and influence our activities. But a common goal and keeping moving means we have to keep in contact with our partners, encouraging them or being encouraged by them.**







# The power of human Faith is capable of making our world kinder and better

## Ukrainian Pagan CC, Ukraine Interview with Luna Oraculum

### 1. Please explain your CC good practice

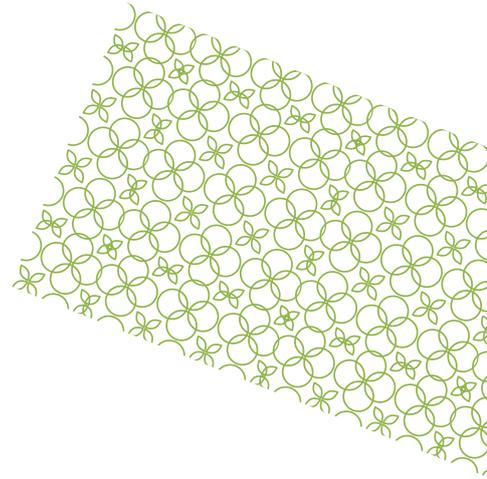
We have Ukrainian Pagan Cooperation Circle. This is a society of spiritual practitioners who are close to the idea of polytheism. But we all have a very different spiritual approach to ritual practice. There are those who create home temples and do original ceremonies. There are people who prefer solitude and are not ready for open public rituals. I give everyone freedom within the framework of the solidarity principles and purposes of the URI. We are all very different and I do not want to mix different self-sufficient spiritual traditions.

### 2. How do you do it?

At my home in the city of Odessa (Ukraine), a small temple was created in the Greek Polytheistic tradition. I have 5 full-fledged altar spaces, in which there are the faces of the Gods and Goddesses of the Greek pantheon, as well as additional attributes and signs. I do regular spiritual ceremonies, many of which I have adapted to modern realities, making them more humane. We live in the 21st century, so I consider animal and human sacrifice unacceptable. This is not what our Gods want to see, there are other, alternative methods without blood and pain. We are looking for harmony and love, so the methods of achieving them must be appropriate. I also consider it unacceptable in the priestly practice of using drugs and other illegal actions.

### 3. On what occasions do you use it?

I try to practice daily. In addition to my personal home practice, I regularly travel to places of power in my region (usually on holidays). I also often travel overseas and actively share my experiences with other practitioners. Believers of other confessions and beliefs often turn to me for help. They may not only be pagans or polytheists. I managed to develop interfaith spiritual practices that are accepted by other believers and do not contradict their spiritual principles. For example, one day I can read Orphic hymns in front of my altar, and after a couple of hours, bless a person by consecrating the key of King Solomon with Latin psalms for him. And it can be done efficiently in one space.



#### 4. Why does it work?

This can be effective when a person is sincere in their faith and intentions. The power of human Faith is capable of making our world kinder and better. And our Faith should NOT be built on selfishness, fear or compulsion. Evil can only give rise to greater evil, Nothing more. – If a priest acts honestly then miracles happen, often without realizing it. History knows a lot of examples in different beliefs. But sometimes, we all need to unite efforts, combine experience and knowledge in order to achieve even more good and help. And I often use knowledge in the tradition to which the person who turns to me is close.

#### 5. Any difficulties or cautions? Anything you need to keep in mind?

There are many difficulties. They are basically inside each of us. It is not the ability to accept the experience of others and the rejection of that which frightens us with the unknown. We may not be ready for everything at once, and this is natural. For many of us, the spiritual tradition of a culture alien to us is the unknown that can scare. But uncertainty is not a sign of enmity with this culture and its values, it is a signal for better studying it. I encourage people to embrace and understand other cultures, better study and research them. We all have different languages – but to accept each other tradition characteristics, you do not need words, you need an open soul and heart.

Peace, kindness and respect to everyone. Be blessed. Luna Oraculum

**To accept each other's traditional characteristics, you do not need words, you need an open soul and heart.**

# Cherish the best from the values of each group and enjoy our diversity

## Balkan as a Soul Bridge CC, Bosnia and Herzegovina

### 1. Please explain your CC good practice

We have realized that our experience of multi-religious society and its survival during the war could inspire other people to try to build the same. To that end, we have been organizing or partnering in many events, such as:

- URI Europe sub-regional meeting “All unique, all united – hand in hand for peace, justice and healing” that was held from 14-17 of September, 2017 in Sarajevo, Bosnia
- From June 15-18, 2007 we took part in -URI Europe Assembly in Belgium/Antwerp “Interfaith Dialogue: A tool for peace in Europe”.
- URI Europe conference “Cherishing the past, building the future -Co-creating our Vision and Making URI Europe a Strong Actor for Positive Change”, taking place in Damme, Belgium, on October 6-9, 2016.
- URI E took part in Sarajevo Peace Event 2014
- URI workshop “Sarajevo – a European beacon for harmony, hope and peace” held in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on October 6, 2012
- URI E meeting in Pristina KOSOVO, in 2011, organized in partnership with URI CC Balkan As a Soul Bridge.
- Balkan as a Soul Bridge hosted 2 MJC conferences in Sarajevo, and participated in MJC Berlin, Vienna,
- Hosting our friends from Co-exister in Balkans, on their Inter Faith World Tour, for several years.



Our goal is to cherish the best from the values of each group, and enjoy our diversity. This precious social tissue was jeopardized during the recent war, and we find it very important to engage reasonable people, teenagers and young adults in particular, in restoring these values. That is the only way to discourage evil and to try to prevail again, in future.

### 2. How do you do it?

A few years ago the youth of Sarajevo, Banja Luka, and Brcko, gathered in Bihac for training in conflict transformation skills entitled “Hope for a Better Future: Transforming Attitudes and Building Society.” Young people came as representatives of their religious communities—Muslim, Roman Catholic, Serb Orthodox, Jewish, Protestant, and Agnostics. After the long discussions, the young adults brainstormed a list of possible future projects. As they were interested in all the ideas presented, they chose to combine projects rather than dismiss one or more of the projects. The areas in which they chose to work were: 1. Broadcasting a Youth radio program, 2. Organizing a meeting of the youth of Kosovo and ex-Yugoslavia with young people from Bosnia, 3. Visiting monasteries, and religious and cultural sites; 4. Having a meeting with religious leaders, 5. Helping people with special needs, and 6. Developing a Youth website. They chose to combine the visits to the religious cultural sites with the meeting with the religious leaders. To develop a work plan for these projects, the young people divided up into teams and presented their vision for the projects and what would be needed. Also, we developed a network of volunteers to assist young adults with special needs to participate in our inter-religious activities.

We have organized visits with them to different religious buildings and communities in Sarajevo, Mostar, Zenica, Banja Luka, Rama and Srebrenica. One trip was organized to Serbia with the help of the EU. We plan to do something similar with our friends in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Croatia. We are keeping it a low profile at this point, as fund raising is in a real crisis at the moment.

### **3. On what occasions do you use it?**

We also use other partners and resources to enable mainly young people to learn and travel to attend various events. I am passionate about networking with friends, as a concrete way of acquiring skills and peacebuilding. I have facilitated 3 seminars In Conflict Resolution for youth in BiH, sponsored by WCRP/World Conference on Religion and Peace, in 2003/04.

In June 2004, I was a speaker at the Parliament of the World Religions, in Barcelona, Spain. In November 2005, I participated in two events. From November 1-7, I took part, with my young team from Bosnia, in 2005 Goldin Institute for International Partnership and Peace, focused on the theme of Reconciliation: Creating Partnerships for Building Peace, in Amritsar, India.

### **4. Why does it work?**

Most of the people are eager to restore the same values, as we used to have many centuries ago. We also realized that our experience of multi-religious society and its survival during the war could inspire other people to try to build the same.

So, this is giving us a chance to connect people from different cultures, with different experiences, and let them communicate and create some new ideas and projects. To that end many of our young people were able to participate in different peacemaking events, and also many of the young adults from different countries were able to join our interfaith initiatives, and become familiar with our ideas. The end result of all this would be in changing attitudes, learning from each other, mutual respect, and enjoying diversity.

### **5. Any difficulties or cautions? Anything you need to keep in mind?**

As the situation in Bosnia is still undefined and tense, the economy is fading, corruption is blooming, tribal passions are growing. All these factors are creating a difficult environment for normal citizens, young people, and intellectuals. The struggle for human rights has been reduced only to ethnic/religious issues, and the protection of their constituent aspirations. Minorities and others, including myself, have been marginalized. Democracy has been hijacked, by the nationalistic (Nazi) parties. To that end, we try to bring people of all ages together, to organize some training workshops in problem solving and communication skills, direct them to certain projects and initiatives, or give them recommendations for different universities, help them find jobs.

### **6. Did the Covid-19 pandemic influence your work and how?**

The main change happened regarding the personal face to face contacts, and inability to travel, and organize workshops, and meetings. But in spite of the new normal, we keep in touch, and organize some events outdoors, when the weather allows.

**This is giving us a chance to connect people from different cultures, with different experiences, and let them communicate and create some new ideas and projects.**

# Respect for diversity and living in harmony

## Community Development Institute (CDI) CC, North Macedonia

One of the primary aim of the CDI, and core value at the same time, is respect for diversity and harmonious inter ethnic relations in North Macedonia.

In its work, the CDI applies various methods, and conduct activities in order to provide opportunities for all citizens to express their views, needs and concerns. The CDI facilitate the processes and communication between various ethnic groups, and between the groups and local and state institutions, articulate their voice, advocating for equal and just society for all.

The CDI is active at all levels: from local/grass root, providing support for municipal committees for inter community relations, to national/policy level, proposing changes to the legal framework in order to improve the situation of the citizens in the society from ethnic and cultural point of view.

### 1. Please explain your CC good practice

We try to inspire and share good practices in difficult times by video documentation of activities and efforts of the ordinary citizens. As a methodology using video production, we do this for longer period, but in this specific case of Covid\_19, we did after the pandemic in March.

- The title is: Local Heroe`s.
- The list of good practices is presented at the following link (including translation in German and English): <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLWxliz7euws9WteF0L-WlcmkcpxFVYZsA>

### 2. How do you do it?

We were visiting them and we have produced video documentary movies.

- Explain the method and who is involved for example. The persons involved were selected on the basis on their activity within the community and the CDI staff members explored, analyzed and double checked the impact hey are doing in their environment. The activities were supposed to be on voluntary bases, not for profit and to have educational story inside.
- Add link to your page or link to video (if any). <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLWxliz7euws9WteF0LWlcmkcpxFVYZsA>

### 3. On what occasions do you use it?

Whenever we have online activities or gatherings, we are presenting as positive cases from Macedonia. It is used both at national and/or international level.

#### 4. Why does it work?

We believe that the people, in their nature, would like to help the others. By presentation of these motivating and educational activities, we encourage them further to continue with their work within the community. By sharing good practices, the people have visibility but also additional motivation and support by other community members. Inspired by the video stories, we have at least 3 new regional initiatives to provide support for vulnerable groups during the pandemic.

#### 5. Any difficulties or cautions? Anything you need to keep in mind?

Not really difficulties, but we should be aware that there are people who would like to misuse opportunities for personal interest.

### COVID19 and your work

#### 1. How do you operate as a CC, did you adapt/change?

In order to make sure that everyone is safe during the pandemic, we have adopted new policy for remote work, and we have defined channels of communications needed for communication between the employees and target group.

#### 2. Did you organize an activity?

Yes, we did organize activities, online with target group, and with physical presence involving staff members.

#### 3. What inspired you to act, what was the need?

We wanted somehow to contribute and help those in need. We were aware that our contribution will be symbolic, but still, we wanted to do something, at least to promote and inspire.

#### 4. As a consequence of the 'coronavirus' what has changed e.g between people, communities?

Most of all, the people got isolated, and the elderly people are in the worst situation from all. The economy has declined and unemployment has been increase.

#### 5. What 'learning' or 'change' will you or your CC take into the future?

One is for sure: don't take everything for granted as things might be dramatically changed overnight.



<https://cdi.mk>  
<https://www.facebook.com/irztetovo>

**“We believe that the people, in their nature, would like to help the others. By presentation of these motivating and educational activities, we motivate them further to continue with their work within the community.”**

# The Forgotten Holocaust

## Dialogue Center CC, Bulgaria interview with a founding member and Global Trustee from Europe – Petar Gramatikov

### 1. Please explain your CC good practice

Our work in the Dialogue Center is mainly about educating people through dialogue. Our good practice we are proud of is related to the Jewish community and Holocaust – commemoration of the very important event in our national history – saving the Bulgarian Jews from the Nazi camps. As well as any other ethnic, political or specific group targeted by the Nazis for extermination.

### 2. How do you do it?

Since 2013, we have organized various events to raise awareness among different religious groups and wider audience on the issue of saving our brothers and sisters from the Jewish religious tradition from deportation and the role of the religious leaders and people in that act. Every year we give a different name and focus.

Financially, we receive support from Olga Lengyel Institute (TOLI) annual small grants and other partners.

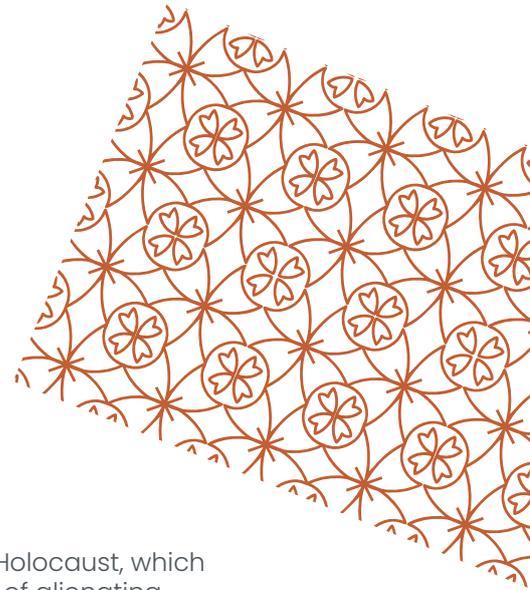
### 3. On what occasions do you use it?

We usually use some of the UN days (WIHW) to organize events and other historical dates in our Bulgarian history – for example the celebration of the holiday of saving the Bulgarian Jews.

- “Forgotten Holocaust” 2013 during the WIHW inviting young Gypsies from Plovdiv to discuss and rediscover the fate of the Bulgarian Gypsies during the WWII.
- “The Netherlands and Bulgaria Holocaust Comparative Case Study” – 10 May 2019, Plovdiv. International training in partnership with Trans Defi CC, BRIDGES CC and with a financial support of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints;

The benefit of the presented project – to promote tolerance, dignity, and equal treatment for the other and to raise respect towards the otherness among the participants and the people reached by them; sensibility to all forms of violence, wherever they occur.

- “The Holocaust and the Bulgarian cinema” – 8 November 2020, Plovdiv  
The Holocaust and the Bulgarian cinema was a peer led retreat by Olga Lengyel Institute (TOLI). The main educator and lecturer of the conference was Dr. Petar Gramatikoff, head expert for religious and ethnic question in Plovdiv Municipality and URI Europe Global Trustee. The idea behind the conference was to make an overview of the Bulgarian point of view about the Holocaust in 3 different eras: Socialism, Transition to democracy and the Modern day society.
- “I will lie on the rails, but I will not allow them to go to the death camps!” – 10 March 2021, Plovdiv



The chairman of Shalom organization, Svetlozar Kalev, reminded that the Holocaust, which began in the 1930s, was not an episodic phenomenon, but a long process of alienating Jews from the societies in which they lived. “Bulgaria, to our pride and joy, is one of the few European countries that managed to save the Jews living in the Bulgarian lands from deportation to the Nazi concentration camps.” On March 10, the deportation of 600 Jews was prepared in Plovdiv and they were imprisoned in the Jewish school. Metropolitan Kiril of Plovdiv crossed the fence and entered the school, which had been turned into a gendarmerie station, and said his significant words: “I will lie on the rails, but I will not allow them to go to the death camps!”. Due to the Covid-19 crisis, for the first time this year, there were no representatives of the State of Israel at the ceremony.

#### 4. Why does it work?

It is very important and life memory for all Jewish people living in Bulgaria. It is also very important part of our history and heroic act we all are proud of. Undoubtedly, it is an act of love toward “the others” in the time of war. The example of Bulgaria as an act of power of the civil society in front of a crisis situation is worthy to be reminded always.

#### 5. Any difficulties or cautions? Anything you need to keep in mind?

Prejudices in today’s society are very strong. Without a proper response they become stronger. Definite need of interfaith dialogue – within every single community, before entering on the level of interfaith dialogue.

**“Prejudices in today’s society are very strong. Without a proper response they become stronger. Definite need of interfaith dialogue – within every single community, before entering on the level of interfaith dialogue.”**

# Overcoming difficulties by building partnerships

## Sombor Educational Center CC (SEC CC) – Serbia

### 1. Please explain your CC good practice

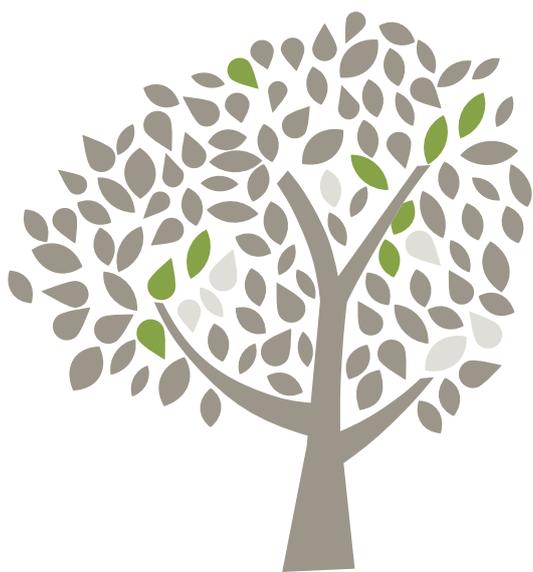
In the frame of our work, we organize a significant number of activities for children and youth in the field of human rights, promotion of equality, inter-religious dialogue, inclusion, activism, and volunteerism. We have been working on improving the position of children, youth and marginalized groups and so far we have implemented a lot of projects related to it. Our daily work and work on projects we implement is based on the needs of our targeted groups. Our team is consisting of experts such as teachers, pedagogues, special pedagogues, journalists, youth workers and other experts in the field of work with children and youth who are also coming from different nationalities and different religious backgrounds because of the intercultural diversity that our community consists of.

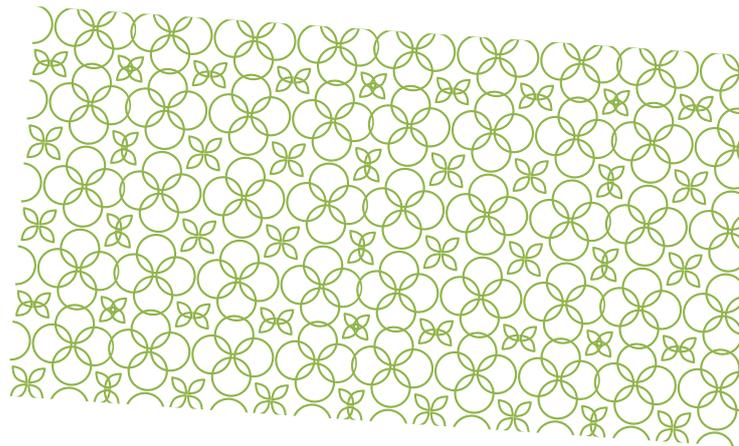
### 2. How do you do it?

We achieve our goals of improving the position of children, youth and marginalized groups through different kinds of activities. We organize workshops, training, seminars, conferences, lectures, and other forms of non-formal education methods.. All the activities we implement are flexible and done in coordination with the current needs of the users.

### 3. On what occasions do you use it?

Our practice depends on a few things. It depends on our current resources, it depends on the needs of the target groups we are aiming for, it depends on the motivation of the target group to engage and it depends on their needs. If we speak about values, beliefs and principles that are part of our practice we use them in almost every occasions, from all the activities we implement during the year to our daily work and communication with our targeted groups.





#### **4. Why does it work?**

We believe our practice is working for years firstly because it is based and is starting from our users/target groups. Knowing their needs, and fields in which they need support from our side is the core starting point from which we plan, develop and implement all of our activities. We believe that being in communication with the ones you are “speaking for” is very important, since predicting and assuming in their name can lead to wrong conclusions about their position and needs in general.

#### **5. Any difficulties or cautions? Anything you need to keep in mind?**

The general conclusion we came up to during the years of our work is that the most challenging part is to motivate target groups to be engaged in the processes that are significant for them. We do not mean that they are not interested, they are just not informed about possibilities to be actively engaged in the processes related to them. Because of that, we also value partnerships made through the URI network, which give us a new perspective of this challenge and the experiences of others in overcoming it.

<https://sec.org.rs/>

<https://www.facebook.com/SECsombor/>

**We achieve our goals of improving the position of children, youth and marginalized groups through different kinds of activities. We organize workshops, training, seminars, conferences, lectures, and other forms of non-formal education methods.**

# Respectful communication and integration

## Student Aid Drop CC, Bulgaria

### 1. Please explain your CC good practice

Respectful communication and integration is one of main good practises.

### 2. How do you do it?

We have regular meetings and have a safe space to talk about not just the work but also how we are feeling personally. So if breaks are needed we take them and use time to reflect and heal.

### 3. On what occasions do you use it?

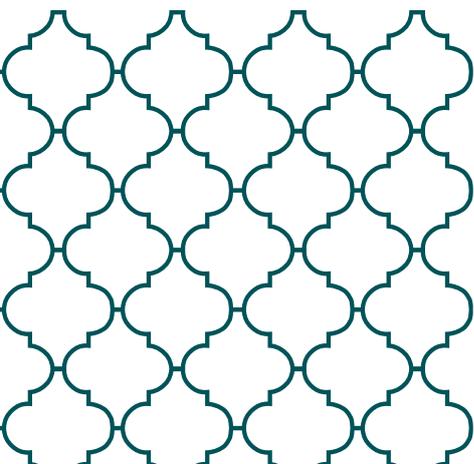
We try to use our good practices at every event and even leading up to it and after it. We are constantly having meeting leading up to an event and after we reflect and look for room for improvement.

### 4. Why does it work?

It works because we have constantly worked on improving and doing better. We have learnt to improve over the years and this has created a safe space for all of us.

### 5. Any difficulties or cautions? Anything you need to keep in mind?

We always remember that no matter how great our communication can get, when we work in a new environment with new people they might not be on the same wave. So we have to learn to adjust, and not take anything too personally while, at the same time, stay true to our own principles. This can cause some negativity to rise at times but we are so aware of these kind of issues so we always work through it by talking to each other and ourselves.



## COVID19 and your work

### 1. How you operate as a CC, did you adapt/change?

As a CC, we used the time of COVID 19 to reset and take time away just to reflect. It was a challenging time for everyone in the world and we realized that it was important to slow down in all aspects.

### 2. Did you organize an activity?

We were unable to organize any activities, but we had occasional Zoom meetings to plan for the future. We used the time to bring awareness to important causes that mean a lot to us on our social media platforms, a huge one being the BLM movement.

### 3. What inspired you to act, what was the need?

We believe that even if you can do something small to help a wider cause, then this will still contribute to a greater impact. It is all about doing your own part to help whether it is big or small. We mainly used this time to gather resources on important causes and showcase them on our social media platforms.

### 4. As a consequence of the 'coronavirus' what has changed e.g. between people, communities?

We have all needed to adapt, it has been a time in which we have all had to look at our lives, slow down and reprioritise. It has given everyone a chance to improve on their communication especially because it was difficult to see people face to face. In addition to this, we have all been able to reconnect with loved ones and most importantly our faith.

### 5. What 'learning' or 'change' will you or your CC take into the future?

The most important thing in any organisation is a good communication and the ability to be able to adapt. The main thing is that we will be transitioning from Student Aid Drop to Doctors Aid Drop as we will all be moving from being students to Doctor of Medicine/ Dentistry. Our aim is to continue our work back in the UK and hopefully set up medical/ dental camps in our countries of origin. I believe that if the communication is strong then anything is possible, this gives us the confidence that we will be able to achieve our goals in the future.



<https://www.instagram.com/studentaiddrop/>  
[https://www.facebook.com/StudentAidDrop\\_](https://www.facebook.com/StudentAidDrop_)

**We believe that even if you can do something small to help a wider cause, then this will still contribute to a greater impact.**

# The Sacred Space can take many forms

## Together in Action CC, UK

### 1. Please explain your CC good practice

Together in Action (TiA) Trust works on numerous projects, the details of which can be found at [tiatrust.org](http://tiatrust.org). TiA is a cooperation circle and part of the global family. One of our flagship projects is the Coventry Sacred Space Initiative.

Coventry Sacred Space Initiative commemorates the arrival of diverse communities to the city of Coventry. The city was seen as a safe haven for new arrivals and a place of sanctuary and solace. It offered a new home to so many communities which in turn help to shape the city for the next half-century into what it is today

The Sacred Space itself can take many forms. It can feature a pathway to discovery and eco-friendly environmental initiatives which can lead to re-invigorating individuals and leading them to physical, spiritual, and mental wellbeing. It can include technology, health, and mind initiatives – in fact any initiative that will open the doors to a greater wellbeing of individuals and communities.

### 2. How do you do it?

In the early parts of 2019, the city's religious leaders and community campaigners from places of worship surrounding Swanswell Park area came together to discuss local regeneration. They recalled their positive childhood memories and their personal and community journeys since the 1950s, when communities had little but still supported each other.

This was the spark that ignited the Coventry Sacred Space initiative. The coordinating Group for the Initiative stems from the 2019 Coventry Safety and Security Working Group, which was originally tasked to support the security of places of worship. In January 2020, a Summit with delegates from over 100 organisations formally inaugurated the Coventry Sacred Space Initiative.

### 3. On what occasions do you use it?

The Coventry Sacred Space Initiative is a long-term project with a deep rooted commitment to help grow the city with the brand of safety and security for all communities who reside in it. It has multi-fold initiatives with a common goal of making the city a great place to be for all.

### 4. Why does it work?

The basic ethos of the Initiative is to work with all the faith groups and those with non and getting people to work together for a common purpose. For these reasons, there is a lot of discussion and engagement with a wide variety of people to make things happen. Some of this work has already made a fantastic impact on the City of Culture 2021 activities.

### 5. Any difficulties or cautions? Anything you need to keep in mind?

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic thwarted further work and the Initiative is slowly working toward securing human & financial resources, crafting a development plan, and establishing a legal entity to drive forward.

## **COVID19 and your work**

### **1.How you operate as a CC, did you adapt/change?**

In terms of COVID-19, we have had to adapt and luckily have been endearing to technological developments. We have continued our work by engaging with people via Zoom conferencing and other digital means, whilst following all safety protocols.

### **2.Did you organize an activity?**

We have held Briefing seminars and have events linked to the City of Culture events.

### **3.What inspired you to act, what was the need?**

The confidence from years of experience and meeting so many inspiring people who offer the opportunity to share knowledge and ideas.

### **4.As a consequence of the ‘coronavirus’ what has changed e.g. between people, communities?**

The commitment and dedication is still the same – it is just that we have to do things differently in order to follow safety procedures. Our dreams will not be diluted.

### **5.What ‘learning’ or ‘change’ will you or your CC take into the future?**

Coronavirus has taught us that, no matter how difficult the circumstances, we can adapt and still succeed.

[www.tiatrtrust.org](http://www.tiatrtrust.org)

**“The Sacred Space itself can take many forms. It can feature a pathway to discovery and eco-friendly environmental initiatives which can lead to re-invigorating individuals and leading them to physical, spiritual, and mental wellbeing. It can include technology, health, and mind initiatives -in fact any initiative that will open the doors to greater wellbeing of individuals and communities.”**

# The brilliance in the eyes of the children

## Udhetim-i- Lire CC good practice

### 1. Please explain your CC good practice

Thanks to the cooperation with URI and BARAZA we were able to bring in Albanian the Interfaith Coloring Book. This is also our best practice as a CC of URI. Albanian children now have the opportunity to color and learn about the major religions in the world. During the time we provided psycho-social support to children affected by the earthquake, the coloring of the Interfaith Coloring Book was an activity that aroused much curiosity in children. They started asking questions about major religions and wanted to know more about the latter. During that time the book was not translated into Albanian but that did not stop the children from learning from it. On the other hand, we have also developed and continue to develop other initiatives in collaboration with other URIs and CCs.

### 2. How do you do it?

This practice was made possible as mentioned above thanks to the cooperation with URI and BARAZA, but also with other CCs. The book is not only in English and Albanian but also in Macedonian and Bosnian. Translation into Albanian was done by Ejona, one of our volunteers, and was edited by the staff. This realization encouraged even more our young people to join the activities of URI.

### 3. On what occasions do you use it?

We use the Interfaith Coloring Book as one of the most effective ways to introduce children to major religions in the world. During the quarantine period, we have held information sessions with children during which, in addition to distributing the book to children, we have also given some key information about each religion that is presented there. Staff and volunteers have been careful in editing the information and adapting it to the age of the children. We have also distributed the book to the children who have attended our Multifunctional Youth Center. The book was also distributed as a gift to some of the representatives of schools in Durrës.

### 4. Why does it work?

This good practice works because it is educational and fun at the same time. Through coloring or other requests children – and not only, as in some cases it is also adults who complete the book – learn about different religious beliefs and cultures that represent different people. This method stimulates curiosity in children and pushes them to interact with the book. Also, creating a special space in which they have the opportunity to express more about what they know about religion encourages them to start or deepen research on religious beliefs. The knowledge taken in early childhood helps them to be linked with religion as a tool of peace, dialog and tolerance. Moreover, they will ask for more information when they grow up, and will learn more about best practices and possibilities that bring the dialog between peoples of different religions.

### **5. Any difficulties or cautions? Anything you need to keep in mind?**

Each commitment has its difficulties, which are paid for through the fruits we reap in the end. Such has been the case with the Interfaith Coloring Book. Although it took some time to prepare and publish the moment, it arrived in our offices and we were able to make it available to children going through a difficult situation from the COVID-19 pandemic. It was an extremely happy moment. The brilliance in the eyes of the children who along with the book also taught about the major religions was the greatest satisfaction and appreciation of the work we had developed.

### **6. Did the Covid-19 pandemic influence your work and how?**

Of course the COVID-19 pandemic affects our work. We had just started recovering from the earthquake of 26 November 2019, and suddenly we had to face another challenge again, the global pandemic COVID - 19. At first we had difficulties in carrying out some activities, but very soon we mobilized and the working group decided that we should organized our activities online so as not to endanger anyone's health. This made it almost impossible to carry out normal activities. On the other hand, it helps us to improve our digital skills as well as use technology as a highly effective solution to various problems.

**“This good practice works because it is educational and fun at the same time. Through coloring or other requests children - and not only, as in some cases it is also adults who complete the book - learn about different religious beliefs and cultures that represent different people.”**

# Combating divisions strongly entrenched in nationalistic, extremist narratives

## Youth for Peace CC, Bosnia and Herzegovina

### 1. Please explain your CC good practice

We are actively facilitating peacebuilding work in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region designed to combat divisions strongly entrenched in nationalistic, extremist narratives. Creating an alternative narrative to the divisive and destructive situation, directly caused by the events from the past, is the greatest challenge of peacebuilding work.

### 2. How do you do it?

Reaching out to young people, listening to their voices, giving them a seat at the table, addressing their concerns, providing them with necessary knowledge and skills for active engagement in society and enhancement of peacebuilding through non-formal educational methods – that's the heart of our existence and work.

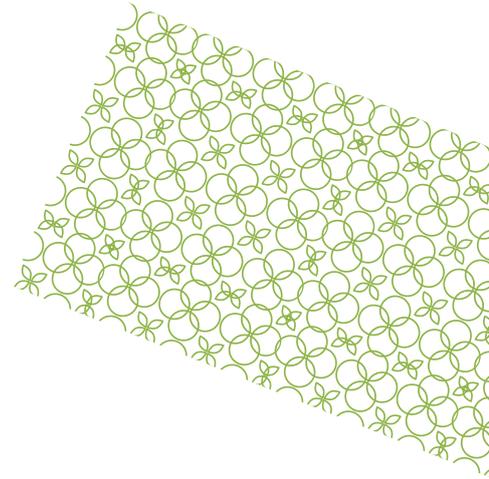
Activities that we conduct are designed for combating prejudices and stereotypes, defending human rights, advocating for democratic values and embracing freedom, enforcing equity and equality on all grounds: gender, religion, ethnicity, political affiliation, and disabilities. An important aspect of our work is leaving no one behind and ensuring equal opportunities and access for everyone.

### 3. Why does it work?

Our society has a chance to progress only if we understand and reinforce accountability and responsibility for the necessary change that has to happen. Youth for Peace task is to motivate and inspire young people to understand the importance of their role in society and its progress. Through our work, we mobilize young people and encourage them to take active participation in creating the future of the country and the region, stressing the uncertainty of a future without them and their participation.

### 4. Any difficulties or cautions? Anything you need to keep in mind?

Many people obstruct dialogue. They do it because of different reasons. We need to be aware of it, and realize that we need to invest more time into construction, that they invest in destruction. However, our direction is more difficult, but it is noble.



### 5. Did the Covid-19 pandemic influence your work and how?

Covid-19 pandemic has influenced everyone and everything, civil society as well. Pandemic has disabled in-person gatherings that are of utmost importance for peacebuilding work and training and seminars that Youth for Peace strives to organize. The whole life has been moved to the online world, we had to accommodate and work through it, but in-person meetings, and dialogue there is unreplaceable.

<https://www.youth-for-peace.ba/en/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/YouthForPeaceBiH>

**“Reaching out to young people, listening to their voices, giving them a seat at the table, addressing their concerns, providing them with necessary knowledge and skills for active engagement in society and enhancement of peacebuilding through non-formal educational methods – that’s the heart of our existence and work. ”**

# Epilogue

Still fresh in my mind the image of Sally Mahe, with a circle in her hand explaining the vision behind Cooperation Circles. It was 1999. In the gatherings held to develop the idea of a United Religions Initiative, we had heard our indigenous sisters and brothers speak about community circles, discussed about unity, equity, non-hierarchical, chaotic relationships and experienced the potential of bringing the value of appreciation to the dialogue among religions, spiritual expressions, and indigenous traditions. Little we knew what these Cooperation Circles were going to look like, but we believed that, bridges built in working together to address community issues, could be sustainable and bring change.

More than 20 years have passed and over 1100 have joined the network. Cooperation Circles (CCs) became the heart of URI. A whole support structure was created around them: a Global Council, Global and Regional Offices, other Committees and Members. Amazing leaders in different parts of the world through the years have nourished a network of locally rooted, globally connected interfaith groups promoting enduring, daily interfaith cooperation to end religiously motivated violence and create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings.

URI network however has grown differently in each region, responding to specific needs. It is with deep gratitude that I observe how URI Europe has grown. A network of 62 Cooperation Circles in 23 countries, with many languages and different realities. A network that addresses challenges, suffered wars and painfully still is under this scourge. A region full of natural beauty, incredible resources and amazing, committed leaders.

As I join the celebration of URI Europe CC work and grassroots efforts, allow me to express my admiration and gratitude to each and everyone, each of you as you became part of the “we” in our Preamble. Mahatma Gandhi invited us to “be the change we want to see in the world”. Let’s be it Together!

Maria Crespo, URI Director of Member Support



# URI Resources

People of URI share an incredible wealth of experience, and the URI network has developed many useful resources. Visit URI's resource library under: <https://www.uri.org/what-we-do/resource-library>

Here is a very small choice of them to give you a taste:

Interfaith Peacebuilding Guide: [https://www.uri.org/sites/default/files/media/document/2017/URI\\_Interfaith\\_Peacebuilding\\_Guide.pdf](https://www.uri.org/sites/default/files/media/document/2017/URI_Interfaith_Peacebuilding_Guide.pdf)

Appreciative Inquiry and URI: <https://www.uri.org/sites/default/files/media/document/2017/Appreciative%20Inquiry%20and%20URI.doc.pdf>

Bloggin guidelines: <https://www.uri.org/sites/default/files/media/document/2017/URI%20Bloggin%20Guidelines.doc.pdf>

Creative beginnings:  
[https://www.uri.org/sites/default/files/media/document/2017/CC%20Management%20Manual.doc\\_0.pdf](https://www.uri.org/sites/default/files/media/document/2017/CC%20Management%20Manual.doc_0.pdf)

You can also find videos, books and other resources online.

# URI Charter

URI's Preamble, Purpose and Principles are the foundational tenets of our Charter and our global network. Following the Preamble, Purpose and Principles in English. You can find them in many languages online under: <https://www.uri.org/who-we-are/PPP>

# Preamble

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.

We respect the uniqueness of each tradition, and differences of practice or belief.

We value voices that respect others, and believe that sharing our values and wisdom can lead us to act for the good of all.

We believe that our religious, spiritual lives, rather than dividing us, guide us to build community and respect for one another.

Therefore, as interdependent people rooted in our traditions, we now unite for the benefit of our Earth community.

We unite to build cultures of peace and justice.

We unite to heal and protect the Earth.

We unite to build safe places for conflict resolution, healing and reconciliation.

We unite to support freedom of religion and spiritual expression, and the rights of all individuals and peoples as set forth in international law.

We unite in responsible cooperative action to bring the wisdom and values of our religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions to bear on the economic, environmental, political and social challenges facing our Earth community.

We unite to provide a global opportunity for participation by all people, especially by those whose voices are not often heard.

We unite to celebrate the joy of blessings and the light of wisdom in both movement and stillness.

We unite to use our combined resources only for nonviolent, compassionate action, to awaken to our deepest truths, and to manifest love and justice among all life in our Earth community.

# Purpose

The purpose of the United Religions Initiative is 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.

# Principles

- 1.** The URI is a bridge-building organization, not a religion.
- 2.** We respect the sacred wisdom of each religion, spiritual expression and indigenous tradition.
- 3.** We respect the differences among religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions
- 4.** We encourage our members to deepen their roots in their own tradition.
- 5.** We listen and speak with respect to deepen mutual understanding and trust.
- 6.** We give and receive hospitality.
- 7.** We seek and welcome the gift of diversity and model practices that do not discriminate.
- 8.** We practice equitable participation of women and men in all aspects of the URI
- 9.** We practice healing and reconciliation to resolve conflict without resorting to violence.
- 10.** We act from sound ecological practices to protect and preserve the Earth for both present and future generations.

- 11.** We seek and offer cooperation with other interfaith efforts.
- 12.** We welcome as members all individuals, organizations and associations who subscribe to the Preamble, Purpose and Principles.
- 13.** We have the authority to make decisions at the most local level that includes all the relevant and affected parties.
- 14.** We have the right to organize in any manner, at any scale, in any area, and around any issue or activity which is relevant to and consistent with the Preamble, Purpose and Principles.
- 15.** Our deliberations and decisions shall be made at every level by bodies and methods that fairly represent the diversity of affected interests and are not dominated by any.
- 16.** We (each part of the URI) shall relinquish only such autonomy and resources as are essential to the pursuit of the Preamble, Purpose and Principles.
- 17.** We have the responsibility to develop financial and other resources to meet the needs of our part, and to share financial and other resources to help meet the needs of other parts.
- 18.** We maintain the highest standards of integrity and ethical conduct, prudent use of resources, and fair and accurate disclosure of information.
- 19.** We are committed to organizational learning and adaptation.
- 20.** We honor the richness and diversity of all languages and the right and responsibility of participants to translate and interpret the Charter, Articles, Bylaws and related documents in accordance with the Preamble, Purpose and Principles, and the spirit of the United Religions Initiative.
- 21.** Members of the URI shall not be coerced to participate in any ritual or be proselytized.

# URI Europe Partners

In the URI network our first partners are our Cooperation Circles, which whom we collaborate ongoingly. We treasure their grassroots work and partnership.

In addition, we work with various other networks and like-minded organizations who share similar ideals of peace, justice and healing. Some of these partners include:

- ENORB (European Network on Religion and Belief) <http://enorb.eu/>
- Arigatou International/Learning to Live Together <https://arigatouinternational.org/>
- Anna Lindh Foundation (BE) <https://www.annalindhfoundation.org/>
- RETOPEA <https://retopea.eu/>
- Religions for Peace <https://www.rfp.org/>
- KAICIID <https://www.kaiciid.org/>
- World Ethos Foundation <https://www.weltethos.org/>
- Parliament of the World's Religions <https://parliamentofreligions.org/>
- bpb (German Federal Agency of Civic Education) <https://www.bpb.de/die-bpb/ueber-uns/federal-agency-for-civic-education/>
- UN SDG Action Campaign <https://www.sdgactioncampaign.org/>
- UN Geneva <https://www.ungeneva.org/en>

# URI Europe events

Find a choice of our URI Europe conferences, workshops and events here: <https://www.uri-europe.org/who-we-are/uri-europe-events>



# URI EUROPE Conferences (in person)

- In planning: “Working for Heaven on Earth”, probably in September 2023, Lienz/Austria
- “Twenty plus – the 20 year URI journey: Cultivating inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, action & harmony in Europe”, October 3-6, 2019, in Ohrid/North Macedonia
- “Peacebuilding Together: a European interfaith and intergenerational training workshop & seminar”, March 22-25, 2018, in Damme/Belgium.
- “Cherishing the past, building the future – Co-creating our Vision and making URI Europe a strong Actor for positive Change”, October 6-9, 2016, in Damme/Belgium
- “Moving interfaith work forward in Europe”, URI Europe Conference in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, April 23-26, 2015
- “Walking our talk – bringing interfaith action to each town in Europe”, URI Europe Conference in Istanbul, October 27-31, 2011
- “Interfaith Dialogue: A tool for peace in Europe”, European URI Conference in Antwerp, Belgium, June 15-18, 2007
- “Overcoming irritations and prejudices between people of different cultures, religions and convictions in the EU enlargement-process”, European URI conference in Brussels, Belgium, September 22-24, 2005
- URI Europe’s participation in the ‘Parliament of the World’s Religions’ in Barcelona, Spain, July 8-13, 2004
- URI Europe & Middle East conference ‘Facing violence as a way to peace’, at the Catholic Academy, Berlin, Germany April 6-10, 2002
- European URI Launch at the European Parliament in Brussels. ‘What role for religions in the Europe of the 21st century?’, under the patronage of MEP Lord Inglewood, Belgium, February 26, 2002
- Inter-Traditions Symposium, ‘Unity in Diversity – Ethics and Spirituality’, organized by URI Europe and the European Buddhist Union, at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, November 19, 2000
- European URI Conference in Dobogókö, Hungary, March 24- 26, 2000
- URI Europe Conference in Antwerp, Belgium, October 3-5, 1997
- URI Conference in Oxford, UK, April 13-17, 1997

# URI EUROPE Workshops and Events in Partnerships (in person)

- URI Bulgaria – Netherlands Youth Camp, Plovdiv, Bulgaria, July 2019.
- URI cooperation in 2 Youth Camps in Turkey in partnership with SIRF, 2019
- URI participation in Coexist Europe Assembly, Berlin/Germany, March 2019
- Participation in the Inauguration of the Gandhi Peace Centre, 10th November 2018, Tividale, near Birmingham, UK.
- URI Bulgaria – Netherlands Youth Camp, July 16-31, 2018.
- Participation in Launch of European Institute For Dialogue (EIFD), Paris, June 8, 2018.
- Participation in the celebration of the “International Day of Living together in Peace” on May 16, 2018, in Frankfurt, organized by AISA and URI Merzig CC.

- URI participation in Coexister Europe Assembly, Granada/Spain, May 2019
- International “Connecting Action 2nd Symposium” in Paris, December 6 – 8, 2017, cooperating in a symposium organized by the Muslim Jewish Conference, Coexister, Pluralism-och Dialoginstitutet / Fryshuset.
- “All unique, all united – hand in hand for peace, justice and healing”, URI Europe sub-regional meeting, September 14-17, 2017, in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- URIE participation in Conference around the International Day for Tolerance (Nov. 18), Maskat/Oman, November 2016, organized by MARA
- “Connecting Actions 1st Symposium” – 1st convention for a European Platform of Civil Society actors for Coexistence, November 23 – 25, 2016, in Paris, cooperating in symposium organised by the Muslim Jewish Conference, Coexister, 3 Faiths Forum, the European Union of Jewish Students.
- 70 years of ecumenical formation at Bossey, “Peace-Building and the Role of Religions”, September 30 – October 2, 2016, WCC Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, Switzerland
- URI presentation in Conference “Do Religions have a significance for Europe?”, celebrating the 800th anniversary of the Dominican order, Zagreb/Croatia, January 8 –10, 2016
- “Dialogue interreligieux et action commune – Pourquoi et comment?”, conference in cooperation with Coexister and CINPA, Paris, France, November 15, 2014
- “Building & Maintaining Peace, Prosperity and Personal well-being in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, interfaith training workshop in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on June 8, 2014, as part of the Sarajevo Peace Event, June 7-9, 2014.
- URI Europe was represented with a booth at the big Day of Christian-Islamic Dialogue in Krefeld “Future in Dialogue” (“Zukunft im Dialog”) on May 10, 2014
- “Building & Maintaining Peace, Prosperity and Personal well-being in Poland”, interfaith workshop in Warsaw, Poland, February 8, 2014.
- URI participation in the conference “Beauty in Diversity”, in Saarbrücken, Germany, URI participated with a presentation, a film in the plenary and a booth, December 30, 2013 – January 1, 2014.
- “Overcoming Religious Prejudices – Construction and deconstruction of religious prejudices”, Training workshop in Dresden, Germany, May 11-12, 2013, workshop in cooperation with and developed by AUDIR (L’Associació UNESCO per al Diàleg Interreligiós), Barcelona, in cooperation with the Baha’i Hochschulgruppe Dresden.
- “Faiths united in Scandinavia – Action to peace”, Interfaith training workshop in Copenhagen, Denmark, October 27, 2012.
- “Sarajevo – a European beacon for harmony, hope and peace”, Interfaith training workshop in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, October 6, 2012.
- “Overcoming Religious Prejudices – Construction and deconstruction of religious prejudices”, Training workshop in Berlin, Germany, September 1-2, 2012, workshop in cooperation with and developed by AUDIR (L’Associació UNESCO per al Diàleg Interreligiós), Barcelona, and other partners, in the framework of the first Long Night of Religions in Berlin.
- “Life under the Rainbow”, Grügelborn, Germany, a day of URI workshops, presentations and conversation, June 16-17, 2012.
- “Sharing values across spiritual traditions”, Interfaith training workshop in Brno, Czech Republic, March 24, 2012.
- “Faith Paths through the Crisis”, Migration conference and interfaith training workshop in Varna, Bulgaria, March 27-28, 2012, (in partnership with European Alternatives, BRIDGE CC, DMLB CC).
- “Faith in Prishtina – Action to peace”, Interfaith training workshop in Prishtina, Kosovo, September 31 – Monday, October 3, 2011.
- “The Role of Interfaith Cooperation in Immigrants’ Integration”, conference and interfaith leadership workshop, June 22-26, 2011, Mehdiya/Kuneitra, Morocco (in partnership with URI MENA and others).
- “European Consciousness through Peace Actions”, youth training in Baia Mare, Romania, August 6-13, 2011, (in partnership with URI Globalyouth, Children for Children, and others).
- “Interfaith Symphony”, interfaith concert and dialogue event, Antwerp, Belgium, June 15, 2007.
- URI Global Council and Staff meeting, Antwerp, Belgium, June 6-15, 2007.
- “Interfaith Dialogue – Globally connected, locally rooted”, Academic conference, UCSIA/University of Antwerp, June 14, 2007.

# URI Europe Online Seminars

URI Europe organizes a variety of online events on an ongoing basis.

For more information, visit the URI Europe website at [www.urieurope.org](http://www.urieurope.org).

You can find the recording of our online seminars on URI Europe's YouTube channel:  
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJmJS3gieCRuGASYFdMP6lg/featured>

# URI Europe Awards

- GOLDEN STARS AWARD – URI Europe has been awarded a Golden Stars Award 2007 by the EU Commission. The award was given for URI Europe's effort in encouraging active civic participation
- URI Europe's Senior Advisor, Rev. Patrick Hanjoul, received the Pantheon Award for his local and European interreligious work.
- Also, other board members – such as Sheikh BASHIR Ahmad Dultz, Deepak Naik – hold important medals of their respective countries, honoring their interfaith and civil society work.

# URI Europe Regional Support Team

(at the time of publication in 2022/23):

Dr. Duncan Wielzen, Monster, The Netherlands, URI Europe President;

Jaume de Marcos Andreu, Barcelona, Catalonia/Spain,  
URI Europe Vice President, URI Global Council Trustee (Europe);

Daniel Eror, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, URI Europe Treasurer,  
URI Global Council Trustee (Europe);

Vjekoslav Saje, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, URI Europe Secretary;

Sheikh Bashir Ahmad Dultz, Bonn, Germany, URI Europe Board Member;

Marianne Horling, Bonn, Germany, URI Europe Board Member;

Deepak Naik, Coventry, United Kingdom, URI Europe Board Member;

Eric Roux, Brussels, Belgium, URI Europe General Meeting Member,  
URI Global Council Trustee (Europe);

Karimah K. Stauch, Bonn, Germany, URI Europe Coordinator,  
URI Europe General Meeting Member;

Lejla Hasandedic-Dapo, Ankara, Turkey, URI Europe CC Liaison Officer,  
URI Individual Membership Coordinator

Angelina Vladikova, Sofia, Bulgaria, URI Europe CC Liaison Officer.

URI Europe Senior Consultants:

The Rev. Canon Charles P. Gibbs, Houston, United States of America;

Rev. Patrick Hanjoul, Damme, Belgium.

URI UN Representative Geneva:

Petar Gramatikov, Plovdiv, Bulgaria, Former URI Global Council Trustee (2015–2022)



**United Religions Initiative is a global grassroots interfaith network that cultivates peace and justice by engaging people to bridge religious and cultural differences and work together for the good of their communities and the world.**

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