

Spring 2011

# INTERACTION

A PUBLICATION OF UNITED RELIGIONS INITIATIVE





Elisabeth Lheure, Charles Gibbs & Miquel Àngel Gelabert

Dear Friends,

We live in times of remarkable upheaval and URI is in the midst of it. URI leaders were in Tahrir Square in Cairo during the extraordinary 18 days that opened the door to a new future for the people of Egypt.

In Uganda, URI activists, led by our Great Lakes Regional Coordinator, Despina Namwembe, played an important role in reducing election-related violence.

And in Pakistan, URI Cooperation Circles and leadership are continuing to speak out for religious freedom in the face of extremist violence that took the lives of key allies earlier this year.

In 78 countries of the world, URI is building and strengthening civil society, lifting up a multitude of voices and tapping into the power of ordinary people everywhere to make change.

As you read more about URI's work across the globe, please consider making a donation. If there was ever a time for a United Religions Initiative, it is now.

In Peace,

Charles P. Gibbs  
Executive Director



## CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

URI held its 8th annual Circles of Light fundraising gala on March 5, bringing in more than \$225,000 dollars for our work in interfaith peacebuilding around the world. Two hundred and seventy people gathered in the ballroom of San Francisco's historic St. Francis Hotel to eat, drink and celebrate the work of URI's more than 500 Cooperation Circles (CCs), including this year's honoree, the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia, a pioneer in urban interfaith conflict resolution.

UNESCO Centre representatives Miquel Àngel Essomba Gelabert and Elisabeth Lheure spoke movingly about their work healing divisions in rapidly changing urban communities around Barcelona. Ms. Lheure, a Centre mediator who is also a URI Global Council Trustee told the story of the Centre's success in facilitating the funeral of a prominent member of the local Pakistani Muslim community in a Catholic church because there was no Muslim worship space large enough.

"That had been possible because of almost six years of daily working in that area...Six years ago we could not have dreamed of such a ceremony in such a place," she said.

This small yet powerfully symbolic accomplishment says so much about what URI does: creating daily, enduring interfaith cooperation to heal communities and help them thrive.



Cover photo: URI-MENA Office Manager Nancy Momany and Amena Dgragmeh from Iris women CC in Tahrir Square with two students from Jordan.

# notes from the field

## SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

URI's Pakigdait CC held a multi-day "Culture of Peace" training for members of the Philippines' military preceding the resumption of peace talks with Islamist separatists in Mindanao province. The Peacemakers' Circle CC also helped organize a peace ceremony to inaugurate the talks that was attended by more than 2000 people, including the president and other senior leaders. Local school children crafted a mandala, or sacred circle, for the ritual.



## ASIA

URI Global Council Trustee Swami Agnivesh is leading the call for peace talks between the Indian government and Maoist forces after successfully negotiating the release of Maoist hostages in two Indian states, work for which he has been the target of recent violence. In West Bengal, another hotbed of Maoist activity, URI's East India office and URI CCs have been holding health clinics for the poor and marginalized, helping address the poverty and inequity that fuels the ongoing insurgency.



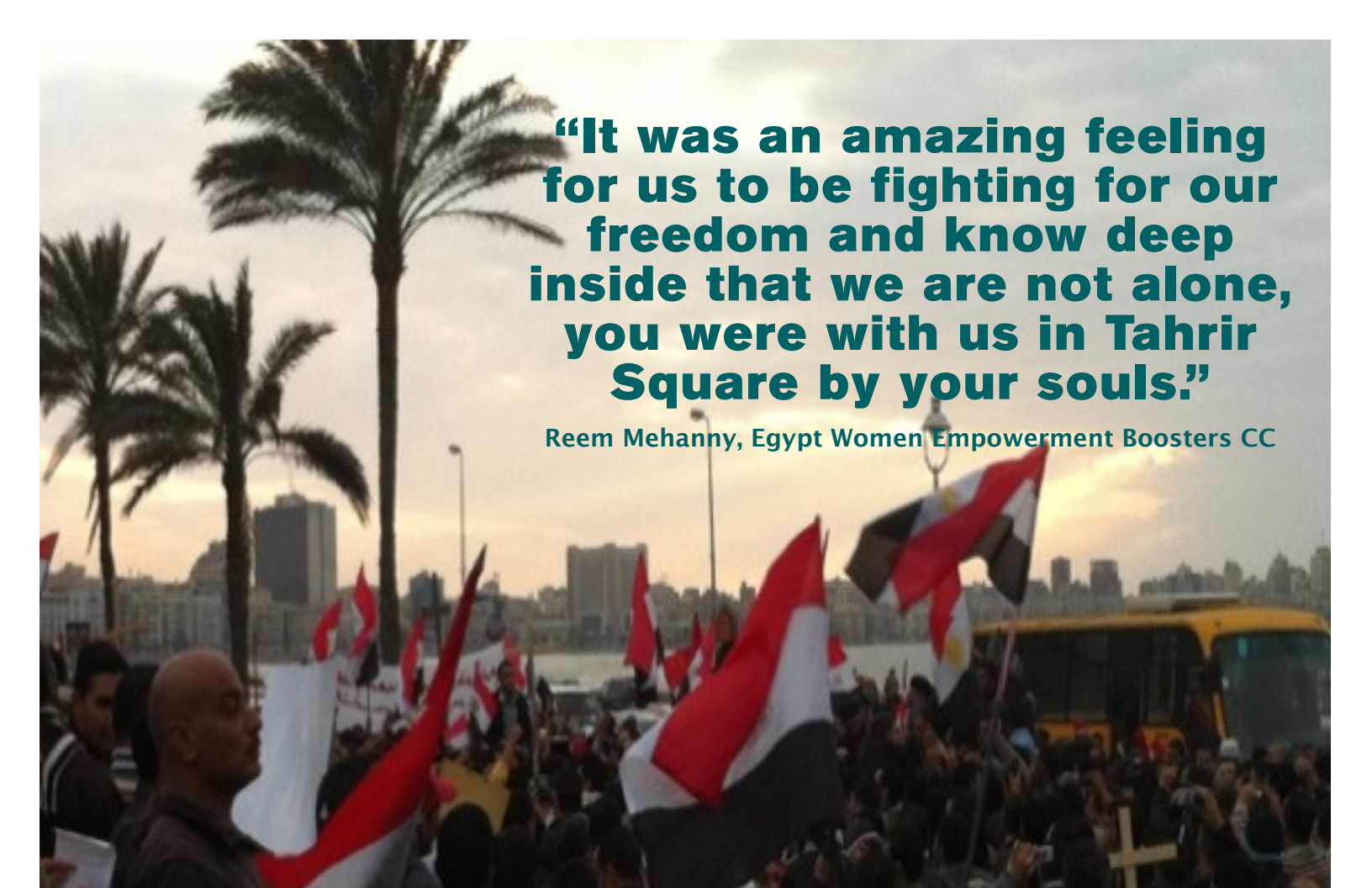
## MULTI-REGION

Voices for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons CC issued a public Call to Conscience for a global ban on nuclear weapons. Members, including URI President and Founder William E. Swing, former U.S. Secretary of State George P. Shultz, Stanford physicist and arms control expert Dr. Sidney Drell, and Global Security Institute President Jonathan Granoff vowed to work together to bring their message to their communities, places of worship and schools; persuade governments to make enforceable commitments to first reduce and then eliminate their arsenals; and align their religious institutions' investment policies with their goals.

## EUROPE

URI-UK is building social cohesion amidst growing diversity and interreligious tensions in the country through its innovative Faith in the Community program. In partnership with and with funding from local housing authorities and other agencies it provides community members with diversity workshops, tours of and encounters with other faith communities, and a youth photography program in which youth document the diversity of their communities.

*For more on these and other stories from the URI network, visit [www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org) or contact Julian Foley, URI News Desk at [newsdesk@uri.org](mailto:newsdesk@uri.org)*



**“It was an amazing feeling for us to be fighting for our freedom and know deep inside that we are not alone, you were with us in Tahrir Square by your souls.”**

Reem Mehanny, Egypt Women Empowerment Boosters CC

## EQUIPPING THE YOUTH REVOLUTION

When Rowaida Mroue, 2010 URI Youth Ambassador from Lebanon, took an internship at Radio Horytna in Cairo, she had no idea she would soon find herself in the middle of a revolution. But there she was on January 25th, watching as radio staff defied police security to take photos and videos of protesters facing down tanks—images that helped mobilize hundreds of thousands to take to the streets in the following days. The experience inspired her to launch a political and social reform campaign of her own when she returned to Lebanon.

Ms. Mroue, who founded and leads the International Training and Conflict Resolution Center in Beirut, is one of many young URI activists who have taken part in the recent wave of Arab uprisings, and will help shape their countries' futures. Among them are Naoufal El Hammoumi, another 2010 Youth Ambassador, who is helping lead the youth call for civil reform in Morocco; and the nine URI youth who participated in “Youth: A Revolution of Change,” a conference in Alexandria, Egypt of more than 600 youth involved in Egypt’s revolution.

Part of URI’s Global Youth Network, these young people are bringing to their work skills gained from URI’s regional youth leadership trainings and Youth Ambassadors program. The trainings, held most recently in Uganda, Istanbul and Washington D.C., teach promising young leaders from the URI network strategies in conflict resolution; interfaith organizing, dialogue and advocacy; civic participation; media outreach and more, and an upcoming training in Morocco for youth from the Middle East will focus on the changes occurring in that region. Our Ambassadors program goes a step further, providing intensive coaching to a select group of youth and helping them get established in their communities.

These skills are more important today than ever. As nations in the Arab world and beyond struggle to resolve the thorny question of the role of religion in government and society, URI is preparing youth across the globe to take leadership roles in bridging religious divides and doing the slow work of building truly inclusive civil societies.



## URI'S GROWING NETWORK

Since the beginning of 2011, 15 new Cooperation Circles have joined the URI network, bringing our total to 511 grassroots interfaith groups in 78 countries working for peace, justice and healing in their communities. Both newly formed groups and established organizations, they recognize in URI the opportunity to expand their horizons and connect with something larger. Many of them learn about URI from their peers; others through outreach by URI's regional coordinators, media coverage or our website. URI's Europe region increased its membership by nearly 20 percent in the last year by inviting new friends to its regional assembly in Istanbul.

### New Cooperation Circles since January 1, 2011:

<b>Australia</b>	WIN Foundation (Women's Interfaith Network)
<b>Belgium</b>	Prisma-Group
<b>Bulgaria</b>	East European Educational Center College Evropress Club of Journalists Help the Needy Foundation Saint Apostle Hermas Center for Ecumenical Dialogue
<b>Egypt</b>	Giving without Borders The Diversity of Becoming One
<b>India</b>	Beyond SARHAD Women Welfare and Rehabilitation Center
<b>Kenya</b>	Prolife Interfaith Kenya (see sidebar) Single & Widow/Widowers Association
<b>Russia</b>	Euro-Asia
<b>United States</b>	Euphrates
<b>Multi-Region MCC</b>	Earth Wisdom/Sabiduria de Nuestra Madre Tierra

## A COMMUNITY INVESTMENT

A new Cooperation Circle from rural Western Kenya was welcomed into the URI community in February 2011. Indigenous, Seventh Day Adventists, Catholics, Muslims and Protestants, the members of Prolife Interfaith Kenya CC are working together "to socially and economically empower the youth and the whole of society" regardless of religion, race or creed. They came together in 2008 as a youth self-help group following the post-election violence in 2007.

"We wanted to help ourselves as youth, and envisioned helping other less fortunate people of the community like the poor, orphans and families who were affected by the violence too," said Director Evans Ishuga Kinavuli. "We did so by uniting ourselves notwithstanding our faiths which initially were dividing us."

Today the group numbers fifty people from three communities, and is registered in its district. Members help support one another and their communities by pooling money to buy livestock and seeds and then returning a portion of offspring and crop proceeds back to the group for reinvestment.

# new cooperation circle spotlight

### GLOBAL COUNCIL PRESIDENT

The Rt. Rev. William E. Swing

### GLOBAL COUNCIL CHAIR

Yoland Trevino

### EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Rev. Canon Charles P. Gibbs

### ASSOCIATE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Debra Ballinger Bernstein

To support URI, visit [www.uri.org/get\\_involved/give](http://www.uri.org/get_involved/give) or contact Regan Murphy, [rmurphy@uri.org](mailto:rmurphy@uri.org), 415-561-2300 x17



## URI ANNOUNCES THE 2011 YOUTH AMBASSADORS

Fourteen inspiring youth activists from around the world have been selected from more than 100 applicants to participate in URI's 2011 Youth Ambassadors program. Over the coming year, they will be mentored by experienced interfaith leaders, participate in URI trainings and conferences, design and implement community service projects and start new Cooperation Circles.

Visit [www.uri.org/action\\_areas/youth](http://www.uri.org/action_areas/youth) to learn more.

**Australia:** Jessica Woodward, Catholic

**Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Ema Smajic, Spiritual, Muslim and Christian backgrounds

**Bulgaria:** Rosen Dimov, Eastern Orthodox

**Dominican Republic:** Cesar Rodriguez, Christian

**Jordan:** Morad Jarrah, Muslim

**Morocco:** Zakaria el Hamel, Muslim

**Nigeria:** Ogaga Maxwell, Pentecostal

**Pakistan:** Anqa Zarish, Protestant

**Peru:** Adriana Aguinaga, Catholic

**Philippines:** Vivian Baraguir, Muslim

**Sri Lanka:** Suchith Abeyewickreme, Buddhist

**United States:** Ajarat Bada, Muslim

**United States:** Jordan Limoges, Presbyterian

**United States/Jordan:** Hala Dasouqi, Muslim



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