



# URI Europe Dialogue-Letter No. 6

## February - July 2006

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## **1. Welcome and news from the URI EEC (European Executive Committee)**

**Dear friends,**

Best greetings – hopefully you are all in best health and having a peaceful time. We are very happy to present to you the URI Europe Dialogue-Letter No. 6.

We are pleased to tell you that the planning for the **European URI-meeting 15. – 18 of June 2007 in Antwerp, Belgium** is in process. We foresee a meeting, bringing together two people from each of our currently 22 CCs from 11 countries.

This European meeting will take place in connection with a **meeting of URI's Global Council**, likewise in **Antwerp, Belgium, 10 – 15 of June 2007**. **Bond zonder Naam CC has graciously offered to provide hospitality** for this Global Council-meeting **in co-ordination with URI Europe**.

There will be a public program as well. One of the highlights is going to be the reception with the mayor of Antwerp and an interfaith service in the cathedral. One evening during the Global Council meeting there will be an academic program at the University of Antwerp on the subject "Interfaith Listening - A Soul for Europe".

We are also very happy to announce, that URI Europe has a new folder. We are going to print folders in color shortly. We will send the flyer by e-mail together with the dialogue letter as well.

So, beautiful plans ahead.

We are looking forward to being in touch and, as always, invite your comments, suggestions and constructive criticism.

## **Peace and blessings to you!**

Mr. Dr. Raschid Bockemuehl, Dortmund/Germany, Treasurer URI Europe / Global Council Member  
Mr. Shaikh Bashir Ahmad Dultz, Bonn/Germany, Member URI Europe / Global Council Member  
Mr. Patrick Hanjoul, Antwerp/Belgium, President URI Europe  
Ms. Annie Imbens-Fransen, Eindhoven/The Netherlands, Member URI Europe  
Ms. Elisabeth A. Lheure, Barcelona, Catalonia/Spain, Member European Executive Committee  
Mr. Jean-Mathieu Lochten, Brussels/Belgium, Vice-President URI Europe  
Mr. Deepak Naik, Coventry/United Kingdom, Vice-President URI Europe  
Ms. Heidi Rautionmaa, Espoo/Finland, Member URI Europe / Global Council Member  
Ms. Karimah Stauch, Bonn/Germany, Co-ordinator URI Europe

## **1.a) In January 2006 5 new CCS approved**

We give a cordial welcome to the 5 new CCs (CC = Co-operation-Circle = URI membership-group).

*E-Mail, written by Maria*

Dear friends,

On January 12th we had a new cc approval committee meeting and as a result 5 new ccs joined our global family:

1. Press for Peace URI CC - Pakistan, ASIA
2. Common Ground CC - California, NORTH AMERICA
3. Iris WoMen CC - Jordan, MENA
4. Organization for Peace and Development CC -Pakistan, ASIA
5. URI Brasilia CC - Brazil, LATINOAMERICA

And they came to us in a very special moment: when we were looking forward to gather our vision and strengths in a challenging Meeting of Members. It was great to see them participating!

Let's welcome them and pray "May the people of these ccs fulfill their aspirations and live in peace!. May peace prevail on Earth!"

If you have received or know of a group that has prepared or needs support to prepare their application for future approval meetings please contact us. Remember we are having a meeting every second Thursday of the month and that we expect the applications by the end of the month before.

Yours respectfully,

María

For further information please contact: [mec@movi.com.ar](mailto:mec@movi.com.ar)

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## **1.b) A Bright at the URI conference – About the European URI conference in Brussels, Belgium, September 22-24, 2005**

e-mail from John Wiltshire

Since the Superfast Ferry service from Rosyth to Zeebrugge began in 2002, I have often seen these ships head out to sea just after 5 PM and found myself thinking "maybe ... one day..". That day came suddenly in the last week of September and I passed under the Bridges on the top deck of Superfast X on my way to Brussels as a delegate to a conference organised by the European Region of the United Religions Initiative (URI).

Because of a long-standing interest in Biological Evolution, I am not religious, I am a member of a relatively new movement called "The Brights". A "Bright" is a person with a naturalistic worldview that is free of all supernatural and mystical elements. The name has been chosen to reflect a positive outlook without the negative reference to religious belief that is implicit in "Atheist" and "Agnostic".

The conference had the challenging title: "Overcoming irritations and prejudices between people of different cultures, religions and convictions in the EU enlargement-process". The sixty delegates from all over Europe represented twelve different religions. I was there with my naturalistic worldview and I had many friendly and very interesting discussions.

I learned a great deal about the URI and the various faiths. I also had an opportunity to explain my naturalistic worldview and some of the science that underpins it. The URI tools and objectives represent a very impressive initiative in the quest to make religiously motivated violence culturally unacceptable by encouraging the understanding and tolerance of other faiths and other worldviews. The Keynote is peace between all peoples based on understanding, tolerance and an acceptance of an individual's right to a religion or a worldview of their own choosing.

My return route took me through the Channel Tunnel, Kings Cross and, four hours later, to Edinburgh and back over the bridge. We are very well served by our transport infrastructure. What we need is a world in which it is not under threat from acts of religiously motivated violence.

John Wiltshire

Dalgety Bay

E-mail: [emo@emotel.co.uk](mailto:emo@emotel.co.uk)

URI [http://www.uri.org.uk/events\\_uri/uri\\_europe.htm](http://www.uri.org.uk/events_uri/uri_europe.htm)

the-brights <http://www.the-brights.net/>

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## **2. European URI CC-activities – invitations, introductions, reports**

### **2.a) CC reports from the 2 Danish Cooperation Circles**

*Reports submitted by Soroush Zand, Secretary of URI Aarhus CC until January 2006-05-10*

#### **- Yearly CC Report from URI Aarhus**

Our meeting on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September was the initial gathering of in Aarhus, the second largest city in Denmark. This date was of importance in relation to the attack on the World Trade Center, three years prior, in New York. Our gathering of about 10 individuals marked the beginning of a tradition for URI Aarhus to meet every month on a Wednesday before or on the 11<sup>th</sup>. This we have done accordingly, except on holidays. Recently we met for our meeting no. 15 on the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 2005.

On our 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting, when the group was formed officially, we were 25 members representing at least 9 different spiritual traditions and religions; we have different “new age” groups, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Sufism, Theosophy, Bahai, Brahma Kumaris, Scientology, and Unitarism,

The forming of our CC in Aarhus went simultaneously with our sister group, which was formed the 24<sup>th</sup> of September, in Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark. As groups we follow a similar procedure but differ, however, in number and diversity. Søren Hauge, should be mentioned as the primary personal link between the two groups, which he contributed greatly in effort to establish. He brought with him the idea of URI, from the URI work shop he attended, at the World Parlement for Religions 2004 in Barcelona.

During the time of our existence, which is about 1 year and 3 months from this day (2nd of Jan. 2005) we have had 8 people leaving the group, and 7 joining it. Our diversity is today diminished to 7 different spiritual traditions and religions, as our Imam left the group (There are no indigenous traditions represented.).

Our ambition is to meet different places, in the homes of the members, or in the places where a member practices his or her spiritual or religious tradition.

We have met at least in 6 different places during the 15 meetings and had at least one or two locations, where we could meet if none other place was available.

We have started each meeting with a prayer, meditation, music or dance. Most of us have done this and shared our tradition in doing so. After dealing with the practical issues we have been sharing our background with the group in 20-40 minutes. During the brakes of approximately 10 minutes we have had refreshments and a lot of chat. After the brake another person has been sharing.

Almost every one of us has shared his or her life stories. We have done this especially by sharing those events and situations which were of great importance to our individual growth. Also we've spoken about our tradition and the reason for our participation in URI. A dialogue usually would start as we ask each other questions at the end of a person's monolog.

These dialogues have been important to understand more accurately what each individual means by his or her use of the terminology of their tradition. The dialogue is, of course, also to create relationships to one and another.

The group in its totality misses the Islamic tradition being represented. It is a hope and a goal for the group in the future to have a member who is Muslim, as it is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest religion practiced today, in Denmark, and most probably in Europe.

Today, the group is changing the focus during our meetings because we now know each other well enough, to find a specific way to contribute to our local community. This is, in fact, a main topic for our next meeting in January.

Secretary and rapporteur,  
Soroush Zand

**For further information please contact:**

**Mr. Søren Hauge, [sophia@post6.tele.dk](mailto:sophia@post6.tele.dk)**

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## **- Report for 2005 from URI – Copenhagen.**

The Copenhagen CC counts 20 members: 4 Teosophs, 1 Brama Kumaris, 1 Bahai, 1 Sikh, 1 Buddhist, 2 Muslims, 6 Lutherans, 1 Catholic and 3 from various Christian oriented movements. Unfortunately the two Muslims don't attended the meetings, so we are hoping to get in contact with some more active. But it's difficult. It's also difficult to find Jews who are interested, but we will try again. We are also getting contacts with more Buddhists.

We have held 10 meetings during 2005. First we took in turns to tell about our personal believes and to visit the various temples or places from each religion. Then we have had some meetings where we practiced "Appreciative Inquiry" to strengthen our ability to dialog.

At the moment it seems like there are two tendencies: some wants to continue our talks and some would like the group to be more active outwards.

Blessings to you all from Copenhagen.

**For further information please contact:**

**Mr. Søren Hauge, [sophia@post6.tele.dk](mailto:sophia@post6.tele.dk)**

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## **2.b) Lions in Zion: Sikhs in the Holy Land**

*e-mail and report from Eliyahu McLean*

Hello Friends,

For 8 days in December Ibrahim Abuelhawa and I had the honor to host a delegation of Sikhs who came to pray for peace in the Holy Land. We had an amazing week with them as we encountered in dialogue and prayer the major faith traditions of Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Druze and Bahai.

Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh Ji, the spiritual leader of this group had a dream for years to make this pilgrimage, and after visiting their gurudwa in Birmingham, England we encouraged them to come and join us in our quest for peace.

Highlights of their historic visit are featured in this article that was published in the Jerusalem Post on Dec. 30th, written by Lauren Gelfond.

Shalom, Salaam,

Eliyahu McLean,  
Rodef Shalom, Pursuer of Peace,  
Jerusalem Peacemakers, Director

### **LIONS IN ZION: Sikh leaders meet with Jews, Christians, and Muslims to forge new paths to faith**

The keeper of the Golden Temple in Amritsar looked out the window of the airplane and felt overwhelmed with emotion.

"You could feel the spirituality," Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh Ji explains, recalling the approach to Israel.

The land that is holy to the three Abrahamic faiths is not holy to Sikhs, except that "holiness is the legitimate heir for all humanity," Singh Ji says.

One of the world leaders of the Sikh faith, now living in England, Singh has never been to the Holy Land before and was anxiously anticipating touch-down.

"I felt like kissing the ground," he remembers, raising his eyebrows, his light green eyes flashing against his brown skin.

Curious security officials at Ben-Gurion Airport didn't know what to make of Singh and his 16 Punjabi Sikh disciples, including three women, from the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha community in Birmingham, England.

Religious leaders in robes and headdresses and faithful pilgrims regularly make their way through customs in this part of the world. But this group was distinct, with their long beards, high white turbans and tunics, and with each male traveler sharing a last name - Singh - a symbol of the initiation to their faith. Singh means "lion" or "lion-hearted" in Punjabi.

It was the first-ever Sikh delegation to Israel and the first of many encounters with people here who know little or nothing of the Sikh people and their faith.

The Sikhs were unfazed. Part of the logic for the journey was to raise consciousness about the world's fifth-largest religion. But more than that, it was a pilgrimage, to learn - one religion from the other - to pray together, and have a dialogue about the role of spiritual communities in healing ethnic and national rifts.

Sufi sheikhs, Druze sheikhs, a Muslim mufti, a Palestinian mayor, Christian Arabs, Catholic nuns and priests, an Ethiopian Orthodox priest, Bahai leaders and Jewish Orthodox rabbis, community members and children comprised the line-up of hosts, organized by the Jerusalem Peacemakers organization and the Elijah Interfaith Institute.

THE SPIRIT of the trip recalls the 1990 journey made by a delegation of Jewish rabbis to India, following a request from the Dalai Lama for interfaith dialogue. At the time, the exiled Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader called the survival and proliferation of the Jewish people "the Jewish secret," and wanted to unearth clues for continuity he could pass on to his own people. Jewish religious leaders were anxious to comply, explore and share traditions and history, and to consider from their own perspective the attraction of the eastern religion to Jewish youth.

The Sikh leader has similar aspirations.

"We are a relatively new faith, only 500 years old," he kept repeating. "We are here to learn."

Born into a North Indian Sikh family living in and moving around East Africa, Singh has met religious peoples all over Africa and India. Since becoming leader of the largest Sikh community outside India and traveling worldwide for interfaith missions, he has, like the Dalai Lama, become fascinated by the Jewish people's curious ability to thrive through periods of persecution, Diaspora and assimilation.

At one of the first stops, in the West Bank settlement of Tekoa, on a hill overlooking the wadi, the local rabbi joined the Sikhs as they prayed their sunset service, chanting from their holy scriptures in gold tomes, while playing the tabla and harmonium - ancient Indian instruments. Just before

the sun disappeared, Rabbi Menahem Froman stood up amidst the crowd without missing a beat and davened the mincha service aloud, keeping time to the Punjabi melody.

Later, the Sikhs were the talk of the local yeshiva students, after they came to observe Jewish study methods.

"There was a bit of an uproar in the beit midrash - suddenly 20 Sikhs came in while they were studying. [The students] were blown away," says Mordechai Zeller, a student at the Tekoa Yeshiva. "It opened them up to things they don't usually see - to see people of a different faith who believe in one God, who they [assumed were] idol worshipers. [The students] have ideas about Indian and eastern religions - that these people wouldn't usually believe in God."

The Sikh leader said the concept of students learning in pairs, was especially eye-opening.

"This is exactly what we want to import," he said.

AT MOSHAV Modi'in, the Sikhs also felt a connection to the Carlebach tradition of reviving music and melody as part of prayer.

Interfaith connections have not always been easy for them. Following hate crimes and increased prejudice against Sikhs in the western world after September 11, 2001, and most recently a sentencing of five New York men for harassing and beating Sikhs, the group said they felt wholeheartedly embraced by Israelis and Palestinians.

"[In England and elsewhere] People on the street sometimes say, 'Hey, bin Laden.' They think we have something to do with him, because they think our turbans look similar," says Sewa Singh Mandla, the group's chairman. "Or they think we are religious fanatics. Here, nobody made these associations. They had no idea who we were. After they did, everybody actually treated us like royalty."

In Safed, two community members pulled dusty books off their shelves after seeing the Sikhs, excited that they resembled the ancient Jewish high priests, according to artistic renditions of the Second Temple services.

"They were dressed like cohanim, all in white, like on Shabbat," says Kabbala teacher and artist Avraham Loewenthal, using the expression "blown away" to describe his reaction.

"Thing after thing [that the Sikhs explained about their religion], I said, 'Oh, we have that, we have that, we have that,' like he could have been a rabbi," says Loewenthal. "I felt a real spiritual kinship.

"Even though they are very strong in their own faith, they were open in a real way to discussing other faiths without being threatened," he added. "I don't know how well we've manifested [that] in Judaism."

At the Kotel, after being pulled into circles of Orthodox revelers singing and dancing in the rain during Kabbalat Shabbat services last Friday night, Singh pulled himself away to press his hands against the ancient wall and close his eyes in prayer.

"Beyond feeling my own heart beat, I could feel another beat in my palms coming from the wall, as if it were alive," he says.

Then the group made their way to a traditional Shabbat dinner at the home of Rabbi Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, head of the Elijah Interfaith Institute.

Singh has been involved with Elijah and the Jerusalem Peacemakers since meeting them at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Barcelona in 2004.

The group stared in awe as the rabbi laid his hands on his children's heads for the parental blessing before the meal.

Talk at conferences was different than witnessing spiritual life, Singh explained.

"The beauty of Shabbat showed us what we need in our family life. How inspiring to see every Friday they meet with the family - that parents bless their children [with their hands]."

Sikhs, who believe that blessings don't only come through words but through touch and sight, were making mental notes of what new traditions could help youth uphold their ancient ways.

"It was not the first time to meet, but [the first time] to really see the Jewish people," says Singh.

THE OTHER Holy Land religions also made a special effort to reach out to the Sikhs and find common ground.

The Bahai Temple in Haifa, the Tabgha Benedictine Monastery on the Sea of Galilee, the Qadiri Sufi center in Nazareth and the Muslim community of Faradis in Wadi Ara all welcomed the Sikhs.

At a monastery near Beit Shemesh, many of the Sikhs shed tears, moved by the silent prayers of the monastic nuns of Beit Jamal.

In Bethlehem, the mayor, overwhelmed with plans for Christmas, took time to join the group, along with the directors of the non-profit groups the Holy Land Trust and the Wiam Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center.

Sheikh Muhammad al-Jamal, head of the Jerusalem Higher Sufi Council, who usually receives only Muslims, invited the group into his office opposite the Dome of the Rock, saying he could see they were "true believers in the One God."

"For sure something positive can come of such gatherings; every person who is for peace and against violence has something to add," said Druze Sheikh Hussein Abu-Rukun, who invited some 60 Druze sheiks from around the Galilee to host the Sikh group for a vegetarian feast.

"In the Middle East, serving a meal without meat does seem deficient," Abu-Rukun says, laughing. "But we respect the Indian traditions."

Members of the Druze, Sufi, Muslim and Christian communities have previously joined interfaith efforts in Israel and abroad, hoping to forge common connections away from the political arena.

The Sikhs, Abu-Rukun said, are excellent models for dialogue because "they are educated, they behave respectfully to everyone and they give pride." Beyond that, he says, maybe they have a special role here as people who are not part of the mess.

WHEN FORMER Sephardi Chief Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron arrived to meet with Israel's first delegation of Sikhs, they all simultaneously stood in respect.

In a dialogue about the role of religious leaders in bringing about peace,

the two groups agreed that spiritual leaders must reach beyond their prayers and teaching to be role models.

"My learned friend," said Bakshi-Doron, "so many ideals we share in common. The way to spread peace is to follow the divine example and give to everyone, without creating distinctions between peoples. It is the responsibility of every religious leader to seek to minimize pain, suffering and bloodshed in the world, as well as in their own communities. We are all part of the larger world and must put our heads together."

When a Sikh asked the rabbi to be more specific, he suggested encouraging communities of faith to use the media and the Internet to inspire larger worldwide communities with examples of charitable deeds. He also suggested introducing international Jewish and Sikh communities to one another for their mutual benefit, and said he was open to exploring the idea of a joint prayer center in Jerusalem for all communities to pray side-by-side, each according to its own tradition.

Bakshi-Doron was one of only a few Israeli chief rabbis to regularly explore religious solutions to Jerusalem's problems with Muslim clerics.

"All religious leaders around the world must pay attention to this strengthening of a global family," he said.

A haredi teacher who happened upon the exchange stopped Goshen-Gottstein.

"He was astonished. He had never seen a religious dialogue between a Jew and a non-Jew before," the rabbi recalls. "He told me that it totally changed his life and he would now try to give his students a broader perspective on other religions and what it means to be religious."

Outside, haredi children and teens with black robes and sidecurls stopped Jerusalem Peacemakers head Eliyahu McLean to ask about the Sikhs. Were they Muslims? What did they want? When one boy heard that the Sikhs wanted to pray for peace, he smiled. "More power to them," he said.

Later that night, Bhai Sahib Mohinder looked out the window at the Jerusalem skyline and felt overwhelmed with emotion.

It was the last night of his group's seven-day pilgrimage and a group of locals had gathered in McLean's Jerusalem apartment to share devotional song, prayer, dialogue and Indian food.

"It's been soul stirring and I can't stop crying," the Sikh leader related. "When you feel that way, you know God is with you."

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Hope you were inspired by what you read...please help us continue our work for peace in the Holy Land with a tax deductible contribution.

In the U.S., write a check to "Rising Tide International" and make a note on it: 'for Jerusalem Peacemakers'.

Then send it to:  
Andrea Blanch, 520 Ralph St, Sarasota, FL 34242.

In England or Europe send a cheque made out to 'Jerusalem Peacemakers', marking 'Eliyahu' on the back, to:

Jerusalem Peacemakers, PO Box 2427, Glastonbury, Somerset BA6 8XX.

For further information please contact: [elijahu@jerusalempeacemakers.org](mailto:elijahu@jerusalempeacemakers.org)

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## **2.c) DMLBonn CC youth group takes part in youth-exchange in Jordan 2005**

*DML Bonn Delegation Takes Part in Youth Conference in Jordan*

*by Ilse Rudolf*

From July 14<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup>, a group of DML Bonn members took part in a Youth Exchange organised by the Young Women Christian Association, Amman, on "History & Religion".

A total of 60 participants from ten countries (Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Palestine, Poland, Spain, Turkey, UK) got together in Jordan's busy capital to learn more about other nationalities and beliefs, and to seize the opportunity to rectify some misperceptions about their own traditions, thereby promoting a culture of open exchange and tolerance, which is the basis for peaceful coexistence. With this purpose in mind, the multinational group of young people aged between 18 and 26 set about the conference's seven-day-programme crammed with workshops, lectures, visits and social activities, thus striking a good balance between work and fun.

The conference started off with ice breaking games to get to know each other and to memorise each other's names, which, not surprisingly, turned out to be a bit of a challenge and yet was crowned with success in the end. After some exercises intended to identify expectations (hopes and fears) and to enhance communication skills, the agenda foresaw group discussions and workshops on how to "break the barriers", i.e. how to overcome prejudices, and on similarities between religions. Moreover, each delegation had to give two presentations, one on history and religion in their country of origin and one on the organisation they represented. The programme also included an orientation on EuroMed, the EU programme that provided the funds for the event as well as visits to a mosque and church where lectures were given by an Islamic Sheikh and an Orthodox priest respectively.

Later during the week, a session on religious stories and a simulation workshop on how belief is practised gave the participants the opportunity to explore the conference theme in a less conventional, academic type of way, drawing instead on their artistic veins, which produced amazingly creative results.

On the social agenda, one of the highlights was the Intercultural Night, during which participants went to great lengths to present their respective nation in multiple ways: The hotels' courtyard was thus turned into an open-air bazaar-and-stage hustling and bustling with an international crowd of people, many in their traditional costumes, offering samples of culinary delights from their local cuisine. While everyone enjoyed good food and drinks, they watched (and in many cases joined in) a kaleidoscope of

music and dance or other performances from all four corners of the world, which continued until the early hours.

Half way through the week, everyone was eager to get out of the conference venue to see the sites the host team had chosen as places of interest for the conference's theme. Jordan proved to be an ideal place for that, featuring world-famous places like Madaba, Mount Nebo, the Baptism Site, the Dead Sea, Umayyad desert castles, prophets' graves and, last but not least, Petra. For most participants, the ultimate highlight of the conference was a night spent together camping in Wadi Rum, a valley in the country's South, where the beautiful desert setting provided the perfect stage for a farewell evening to remember, which everyone seemed to enjoy in their own way: some partying all night long, others engaged in hours of deep conversation, still others inspired to meditate or pray by the peace and quiet radiating from the contemplativeness and vastness of the desert surroundings, under a sky full of stars lit by the most amazing sight of a beaming full moon.

Despite the fact that each and every young person walked away from the conference with their highly individual new insights and experiences, there was an overwhelming consensus that the exchange had been highly enriching and an eye-opener in many ways. To many, it was the encounter with other young people on a personal level which made the conference so unique an experience. Since the end of the conference, people have been in touch through a newsgroup and many friendships have been forged, with people paying individual visits to others, taking the level of exchange yet one step further. Also, a lot of participants have expressed their wish to continue what has been started because they feel the need to dig deeper into many of the topics whose surfaces could only be scratched during the conference due to time constraints. A core team of leaders has therefore been formed to work on PART 2, which it is hoped will take place in 2006. This article cannot be concluded without yet another expression of deep gratitude to the incredibly dedicated Jordanian host team, which literally worked day and night to make this conference a great success and a week never to be forgotten. Thank you!

For further information please contact [ilse.rudolf@freenet.de](mailto:ilse.rudolf@freenet.de)

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## **2.d) URI Berlin CC promotes interreligious understanding among children**

*Written by Peter Amsler*

On January 2005 the Berlin Cooperation Circle of United Religions Initiatives (URI) established an interfaith children group. The group is located in the District of Kreuzberg, which is one of the main districts with a huge population of immigrants most of them with Turkish background. At present the group consists of six children with Muslim background and four children with a Baha'i background. Once a month they come together for two hours to learn together the common traditions and principles of both faiths e.g. the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments. Also both the children and their parents started to train non-violent conflict resolutions by adopting methods of forum-theatre, which is much affected by the children. The meetings take place in community centre of a protestant church. In addition to this regularly meetings the group visits hidden places of worships in Berlin as well. Here

the children get a perception of what praying and meditation could be, e.g. in a Hindu-Temple or in a Sikh-Gurdwara.

For further information contact [peter.amsler@mac.com](mailto:peter.amsler@mac.com)

## **2.e) Interfaith Dialogue conference in Ammerdown (Great Britain) - Announcement:**

*Nik Williams from the Ammerdown Center in Great Britain asked us to publicize this course.*

Shaikh **Bashir**, president of DMLBonn CC und member of URI's Global Council (GC) is part of the planning-team for this conference, alongside Rabbi Michael Hilton and Father Michael Healy.

**August 7 – 13 2006**

**Three Faiths Summer School** – A shared journey of discovery, study and fun! Led by Father Michael Healy, Rabbi Michael Hilton and Sheikh Bashir Dultz.

At **The Ammerdown Centre**, Radstock near Bath.

Email: [centre@ammerdown.org](mailto:centre@ammerdown.org)

Tel: 01761 433709.

Website: [www.ammerdown.org](http://www.ammerdown.org)

Here some more information about the conference

**6. - 13. August 2006 / 12. - 19. Radschab -1427**

**7. Jewish Christian Muslim Summer School**

*Jerusalem in the three faiths*

Responsible: Schech BASHIR Ahmad Dultz, Rabbi Michael Hilton and Father Michael Healy. Michael Hilton is a Reform Rabbi and writer who has led several summer schools at AMMERDOWN, and is author of "The Christian Effect on Jewish Life". Sheikh BASHIR Ahmad Dultz is the president of the German Muslim-League and the leader of the Sufi-Tariqah As-Safinah.)

Location: The Ammerdown Centre, Ammerdown, Great Britain (close to Radstock or Bath)

***There are some more interesting courses in Ammerdown, for example:***

26 – 28 May A Taste of Islam – How often have you heard it say, or have you said yourself, in recent months, that a better understanding of Islam would have much to contribute to inter-faith dialogue and conflict prevention. Here is an ideal opportunity to learn more about Islam from down-to-earth scholar *Dr Azzam Tamimi*.

16 – 18 June Jewish Christian Study Weekend – our annual weekend to deepen understanding between Jews and Christians. Led by the Council of Christians and Jews.

see [www.ammerdown.org](http://www.ammerdown.org) for more information about other interfaith courses

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## **2.f) Is God Stronger Than Drugs?**

*Report submitted by Govardhana das, a Hungarian Hindu who participated in the URI conference in Brussels September 2005*

## Interreligious Conference with a Spiritual Approach to the Question

The Hungarian Society for Krishna-consciousness organized an interreligious conference ("Is God Stronger Than Drugs?") with the participation of representatives of five world religions.

Statistics show that according to the majority of young people drug use is the most relevant social problem. This gave us the idea to organize this year's interreligious conference around the discussion of this social phenomenon. The program took place in the downtown of Budapest, in Bliber Program House on the 10th of October 2005 in front of an audience of sixty people. The lecturers were:

- \* Mihály Laczkó - catholic priest
- \* Sándor Polnauer - chief rabbi
- \* Tibor Porosz - professor of the Buddhist College
- \* Zoltán Sulok - president of the Church of Hungarian Muslims
- \* Sivarama Swami - ISKCON spiritual master
- \* László Végh - Protestant writer

Before the round-table discussion Dr. Ákos Topolánszky, director of the International Drug Prevention Institute opened the debate with a twenty minutes' speech on questions exciting both from a human and a professional point of view. Following this the lecturers were asked questions by the host of the program, László Tóth Soma, senior lecturer of the Bhaktivedanta Theological College. After the representatives of the different religions answered questions in connection with their own faith, the main question of the evening was addressed to each of them:

### WHAT IS THE FUNDAMENTAL CAUSE OF THE DRUG PROBLEM AND WHAT COULD BE ITS SOLUTION?

The lecturers gave detailed and practical answers to this question from the perspective of their own tradition. In the audience, apart from the interested laymen, there were also specialists of the field including the honoured guest of the evening, Károly Kály-Kullai, president of the Island Drug Information Foundation. After the lecturers reflected to each other's statements, the audience also had the opportunity to ask questions. At the end of the conference László Tóth Soma summarized the discussion as follows:

"Most of our lecturers shared the opinion that the fundamental reason of the problem is that we have turned away from God. And the solution is to look for the association of good people who are helping us to adjust our lives to higher values, to higher principles which are not temporary, since they originate from God. We believe that the sincere experience of religion gives a higher delight and satisfaction to its follower who will not be thus driven to drugs and intoxicants. And it will be the right and free will of each and every person to choose that religion which gives him/her the inner, spiritual peace."

After the conference the lecturers and the guests were all invited to a vegetarian buffet, where the discussion continued for a long time more. The Religion Department of the Hungarian National Television made a special feature with the lecturers of the conference for their regular program called "Many-coloured Religion".

The material of the evening is available in audio and video form for all those interested in the question.

Govardhana das (Gusztáv Tornóczy)

The person in charge of interreligious matters of MKTHK (The Hungarian

Society for Krishna-consciousness)  
phone: 30/563-3015  
e-mail: [govardhana.srs@pamho.net](mailto:govardhana.srs@pamho.net)

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Dr. Ákos Topolánszky,  
director of the International  
Drug Prevention Institute  
during his speech

The lecturers of respective  
religions answer the  
questions

The other half of lecturers

The audience

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### **3. URI global**

#### **3.a) Executive Director's Reflections 19 March 2006**

Dear Friends.

Greetings of love and peace.

I begin these reflections where I ended a week ago - with this question:

How do we, as a species, develop the skills and the will to deal with difference in ways that allow us to resolve conflict without resorting to violence, so that we might liberate the resources squandered on violence to build a better future for all?

I followed the question with this statement and invitation:

URI is a living attempt to provide answers to that question. The answers we develop - beginning with us as individuals and expanding to include the entire human community - are an offering to help change this tragic dimension of human history [where difference again and again and again has led to division and destruction.].

As food for our journey together, I urge you to share any answers or insights that you may have found.

As my contribution to what I hope will be an ongoing exploration, over the next many weeks I want to focus on URI's Charter and the answers I believe it offers for how we can live with difference without resorting to violence.

First, a few words about the URI's chartering process for those who may not know its history. In June 1996, 55 people of diverse religions, cultures, vocations and nationalities gathered in San Francisco for a week to chart a course for the creation of a charter for the global United Religions Initiative to be signed on 26 June, 2000. Key

understandings from that first global summit included:

- that the URI would be built from the grassroots up;
- that it would not be limited to recognized major religions, but would include people of diverse spiritualities as well;
- that the URI would value the leadership of women as well as men;
- that the URI would engage people of diverse faiths from around the world in creating the Charter so it would be informed by diverse worldviews and wisdom, and would speak with myriad voices.

Over the next four years, URI convened regional summits and consultations all over the world, set up an internet system for ongoing consultation about the emerging organization, and held annual global summits to consolidate each year's learnings and to launch a new year of deepening exploration and community building. During this time, thousands of people shared their visions of what the purpose of the United Religions Initiative might be, of who would belong and of what they might accomplish together.

During this time, URI gained a great deal of experience in how to deal effectively with difference, because we were regularly bringing together extremely diverse groups of people. We learned that hospitality, appreciation and mutual respect are critically important to creating a safe space where people can move from being suspicious or fearful of difference to being able to appreciate and celebrate difference.

We learned, in this context, that asking questions that put people in touch with their deepest values and highest aspirations and then asking them to dream and plan together helps to enrich and strengthen the emerging friendships and working relationships that are necessary for an interfaith community to thrive.

We learned that, in addition to asking good questions, practicing appreciative listening is critical. Nestor Muller, an early URI leader from Brazil, articulated an important rule during the global summit in 1999. He said that if he was in a group of eight people, he should listen seven times and speak only once. Nestor's wisdom could only have emerged if others were listening appreciatively to him.

And, perhaps most importantly, we learned that in and through all we are and do together, it is critically important to share experiences of the sacred. In this sharing, we were always clear about the importance of honoring the uniqueness of each expression of faith. But, again and again, we experienced how people of diverse faiths can stand together on sacred ground, each honoring the sacred in their own way, and from that sharing work together far more effectively.

I've often said that there were two ways we could have gone about creating URI's charter. In one way, a small group of people in San Francisco could have written a charter and then gone around the world trying to get others to sign on. In the other way, we could have gone around the world inviting people to help us write the charter, trusting that when we were done we would have a document and the beginnings of an organization that people felt was their own and would want to continue to be a part of. Wisely, I believe, we chose the second path.

It is as if we faced the choice of two ways to build a house for people to share. In the first model, a small group would design and build the house and then hope to entice others to come and live in it. In the second, a diverse group of people would be gathered and, together, they would design the house they would then live in together. Again, wisely, we chose the second way.

So, URI's charter not only speaks with diverse voices, it was developed through a four year experience that taught URI a great deal about inviting and celebrating difference, and a good deal of what we learned along the way is expressed in the words of the charter.

It is fitting that the charter begins, "We, people of diverse religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions throughout the world..." I believe that these words, and, more importantly, the process of getting to these words have something of great value to offer a world desperately in need of models of how to deal positively and nonviolently with difference.

What do you think?

Love,

Charles

P.S. To be continued...

The Rev. Canon Charles P. Gibbs  
Executive Director  
United Religions Initiative  
P.O. Box 29242  
San Francisco, CA 94129  
1-415-561-2300

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### **3.b) Request for prayers/meditation**

*E-mail from Charles P. Gibbs Executive Director United Religions Initiative*

Dear Friends,

Greetings of love and peace.

I write to invite your prayers and meditation in support of the Global Council and the global staff. Both groups will be meeting at Vallombrosa Retreat Center in Menlo Park, CA 21-26 of May. Also, the staff will have its annual meeting 18-19 May. The following are goals for the GC meeting:

*To deepen our connection with each other, the PPP and our spiritual roots so we can work together as gracefully and effectively as possible on behalf of URI.*

*To support well functioning regional teams, with clear a understanding of different roles and responsibilities (Trustees, Coordinators, Global Office, CCs), and a clear sense of the priority work to be done.*

*To cultivate a rich discussion of money to create more shared understanding of the diversity of perspectives and realities concerning money, and to discuss and make appropriate decisions about the following:*

*financial update and draft 2007 budget;*

*2006 fundraising efforts;*

*endowment campaign – Bishop Swing's transition; discussion and guidance for a model for endowment investment/oversight.*

*Develop a consensus around a shared action the GC wants to promote over the next two years for the whole URI.*

*Receive essential program updates and accomplish GC business needing decisions:  
2008 Global Assembly--decision about proposal from India;  
Updates on Peacebuilding, Youth, Environment, UN, capacity building;  
Other*

*Receive a preview of the 2007 Global Council Meeting in Antwerp*

As we gather, we will work, in the words of Biswadeb Chakraborty, founder of the Ektaan CC, a URI zone leader in Eastern India and tabla player extraordinaire, to have the vibrations of the CCs in the room with us.

So, in addition to offering your prayers and meditation in support of the GC and staff, I invite you to offer any thoughts or reflections that will help us to have the vibrations of the CCs with us.

*Love,*

*Charles*

*The Rev. Canon Charles P. Gibbs  
Executive Director  
United Religions Initiative  
P.O. Box 29242  
San Francisco, CA 94129  
1-415-561-2300*

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## **4. Europea and Global Interfaith News**

### **4.a) URI Malawi Hunger project report sent by Delix Missinzo**

Dear URI friends,

The URI Malawi Hunger Assistance program continues until the end of May. Please consider making a donation. See instructions below.

URI Malawi has sent photos and a report that shows the small but significant impact that has been achieved through the support of the URI network and through the efforts of URI's interfaith CC in Blantyre, Malawi. Funds were spent to purchase and deliver maize, beans and cooking oil to hungry families

Please read this summary of the most recent report sent by Delix Missinzo:

#### **DISTRIBUTION**

91 household families have benefiited from this very important life saving donation. These beneficiaries were identified by members of our church without regard to their religious beliefs. In fact more than half of the beneficiaries are not members of our Presbyterian church.

## TESTIMONY

Our distribution team went to deliver the foodstuffs in an area called Nkolokosa. A lady and her children had survived on SUGAR SOLUTION for six consecutive days. And here the family was, on the seventh day receiving the God sent life sustaining precious gift of food. They could not believe their eyes upon seeing the 50Kgs bag of maize, the 10Kgs of beans and 2 ltrs of cooking oil. The expression on their faces told it all. From sugar solution (nothing) to all this. They thanked God for His faithfulness and benevolence. Such is the impact of this donation. We sincerely thank URI for this timely donation and look forward to receiving more. The balance of the money carried forward will be combined with the next donation and used to buy more food for the less privileged people.

The distribution exercise has been rewarding to the St Columba Welfare Committee, especially seeing the happy faces and radiant smiles brought by the URI donation. However, the hunger has had some ripple effects in that these people lack many basic needs like soap, salt, clothing etc which unfortunately we have been unable to provide. Suffice to say that my committee and the whole congregation of St Columba church will forever be indebted to the URI for the generous charitable gesture rendered to the church and the larger community around it. May the good Lord bless each one of those that contributed towards the good cause and also bless the URI community worldwide.

Yours In His Service

Rev T N Maseya  
MODERATOR  
COMMITTEE

E H A Chimaliro  
SESSION CLERK

Brown C Mwanza  
CHAIRMAN WELFARE

**Please consider a donation:**

**One hundred percent of your donation will go to the URI MCC for hunger relief. You are asked to make a donation as soon as possible.**

**Please send your donation by credit card or check to URI office San Francisco between 27 January and 25 May, 2006. We will send collected funds to Malawi MCC at the end of each month from February - May, 2006.**

**1. By credit card - if you are anywhere in world - please call or fax URI office in San Francisco. Provide credit card name, account number, expiration date and the donation amount. Please state that the donation is for URI Malawi Hunger Relief. Phone: 1-415 561 2300, FAX 1-415 561 2313. For ONLINE Credit Card donation see #3 below.**

**2. By check within the USA, make checks payable to URI. On the memo line, write URI Malawi Hunger Relief. Mail to: United Religions Initiative, P.O. Box 29242, San Francisco, CA 94129 USA**

**3. Online - Go to [www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org) <<http://www.uri.org/>>>. Click "Be a Peacebuilder - donate now. Click "Donate online". Click "Malawi Hunger Relief." Follow instructions.**

For further information please contact: [smahe@uri.org](mailto:smahe@uri.org)

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THE END