



## OMNIA's Year of Countering Religious Extremism

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**R**eligious extremism is a massive global problem. We know about Boko Haram and the Islamic extremism it represents in Northeastern Nigeria. But many are startled to learn about Buddhist violent extremism in Sri Lanka, where, incited by monks, mobs rampage against those who are the other: first ethnic minority Tamils, then Christians, and now Muslims. We are also startled to realize that many policies of the US government - from war and violence, immigration and borders, to climate change, and wealth disparities - are often ideologically extremist views based on Christian theological premises.



Just over a year ago, OMNIA Institute set out to counter religious extremism by training religious leaders and people of faith around the world to dismantle old, colonially-inspired, top-down theologies, and helping them to build new, innovative, collaborative, bottom-up, contextual theologies. Its process is *Listening to, Learning from and Living in deep solidarity with those in the Margins*. At the margins, the urgent challenges of day-to-day living leave no time for philosophical arguments but require people to set aside their differences to work together on effective solutions.



Cook County President Toni Preckwinkle was the guest of honor at OMNIA's launch, Feb. 23, 2017

OMNIA trains such leaders to build power so they can collaboratively and effectively act for just and peaceful outcomes. When large numbers of people in churches, mosques and temples learn to collaborate, the cultural space available for recruitment by extremist groups

decreases, and the opportunity for just and peaceful outcomes increases.

In its first year, OMNIA operated in four countries: Bangladesh, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and the United States, and trained almost 900 clergy and lay religious leaders. Our training equips participants to build powerful relationships and alliances across walls that divide communities, so they can act collaboratively and effectively for justice and peace. Here are a few brief descriptions of those successes.

### Nigeria

Northeastern Nigeria, where Boko Haram is active, continues to be OMNIA's most prolific place of training. In four 3 day-long events, we have trained more than 600 Muslim and Christian leaders, both clergy and lay, women and men. Of that number, 120 participated in three Advanced training events designed to equip them to teach, preach and lead based on the OMNIA's method.

Government ministers, NGO leaders, attorneys, teachers and other professionals also participated in the training. More than 30 action groups of Muslims and Christians engaging in collaborative action are now functioning in and around the city of Gombe.



164 Muslim and Christian Leaders gathered for training in Gombe, Nigeria in March 2018

Boko Haram has arisen at least in part because of the lack of relationships between Muslims and Christians. Among the difficult questions our trainees identified was the wide-spread practice of polygamy, mostly, but not solely practiced by Muslims. This leads to large families in which parents are unable to feed and educate the children. Some, as young as 4 or 5 years of age, are sent to live with local teachers who teach them a radicalized interpretation of the Qur'an. These children grow up to become prime targets for Boko Haram recruitment. Questions such as access to public education, systemic poverty, freeing women from the oppressive socio-religious customs like polygamy, are addressed in the OMNIA training.

At the December 2017 training, a Christian woman and a Muslim woman engaged in a one-on-one conversation. As a result, when they returned to their village, they organized Christian and Muslim women to pair up and build relationships with each other. Three months later more than 20 women met with me to tell me of their progress and to discuss what they might do together in their village.

Two Muslim young men who defected from Boko Haram started their own barber shop and are planning to hire Christian young men to help them. Two Christian young women started their own sewing shop, making beautiful African dresses. They are committed to hiring Muslim young women. Once thought impossible, such

interreligious relationships are now a reality. They have learned that relationship-building between Muslims and Christians has theological validity, and they have gained skills to make such relationships work. Inspired by these stories, others are now seeking similar partnerships.

OMNIA leader in Nigeria, Rev. Abare Kallah, was one of the religious leaders engaged in direct negotiations with Boko Haram for the release of 82 Chibok girls in April 2017.



Rev. Abare Kallah receives a haircut from a young man he helped rescue from Boko Haram

OMNIA held productive meetings with the Deputy Governor of the State of Gombe, the Commissioner on Housing and Development, the chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Education, and many Traditional Chiefs, some of whom (uncharacteristically) participated in OMNIA trainings. They are eager for OMNIA to succeed because they are deeply interested in new ways to counter Boko Haram.

### Sri Lanka

OMNIA held three training events in Sri Lanka. In Kandy, 35 grassroots religious leaders – Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim – came together for a three-day training. Just one week after the training, incidents of ethno-religious violence erupted in several locations around the city of Kandy, where Sinhalese mobs incited by extremist Buddhist monks went on a rampage killing Muslims and burning Muslim businesses

and mosques. The participants of our training approached Bishop Kumara Illangasinghe, the primary organizer of our training, wanting to use their newly acquired skill to de-escalate violence and bring peace. Disappointed that they couldn't do more than take relief supplies to the affected people, some regretted that we didn't do our training earlier and more frequently.

Despite these violent episodes in the predominantly Muslim town of Puttlam, more than 50 Muslim women gathered for a day-long training event offered by OMNIA leader Soraya Deen, herself a Muslim woman.



OMNIA team member Soraya Deen teaching flanked by an Anglican priest and a Buddhist monk.

In Colombo, 39 grassroots religious leaders primarily from the North and East of the island, where the wounds of the brutal 26-year long war are still fresh, gathered for training. These leaders learned to work across religious divisions to bring relief to internally displaced persons, war-widows, and families of missing persons who still struggle 8 years after the war ended.

Ending Sri Lanka's Buddhist extremist violence is within the portfolio of Cabinet Minister for National Integration. Under his command are several field workers stationed in villages throughout the island whose responsibility is to de-escalate the violence and assure peaceful co-existence. However, as he says, they are ill equipped to stop a Buddhist monk who incites mobs into violence. We are discussing how OMNIA could provide training to them.

## **Bangladesh**

The National Council of Churches of Bangladesh convened 74 religious leaders, to receive OMNIA's training. Christians make up less than 1% of that populous country, so it was important that Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu leaders gave their affirmation to this training. Now they are ready to take the training to different locations in the country. Among their chief concerns were the rise of religious extremism, the immediate challenges of climate change, and the crisis of Rohingya refugees.

## **United States**

OMNIA's Leadership Summits in the US drew nearly 80 participants. While primarily in Chicago, OMNIA held day-long training events in San Francisco, and for clergy from Charlotte, NC. Questions such as racism, gun violence, white supremacy, and immigration were the primary issues at the leadership summits.

## **Partnerships with Governments and Humanitarian Agencies**

In its first year, OMNIA has forged critical partnerships with several governmental and humanitarian agencies.

### **1. Government Agencies**

OMNIA had conversations with

- The German Foreign Ministry in Berlin who expressed great interest in our approach to religious extremism
- In addition to Sri Lanka's Minister for National Integration, OMNIA met with the former Sri Lankan Ambassador to the US who encouraged OMNIA to build relationships with Sri Lankan and US governments.
- US State Department officials who promised to include OMNIA in their consultation on Nigeria or South Asia.

## 2. Humanitarian Agencies

- Action of Churches Together (ACT) Alliance is a global network of 145 church-based relief organizations. Their view that many Christians who work in those organizations are inadequately informed about the theological validity of interfaith relations and are unskilled in that critical discipline, has prompted ACT officials to seek training from OMNIA Institute.
- Bread for the World, Berlin, a large humanitarian organization, supports some 60 organizations in Nigeria. Aware that staff and volunteers at Nigerian Christian humanitarian agencies must be proficient in relating with Muslims, they are seeking to create training opportunities in Jos, Nigeria.

## Next Steps in 2018

In 2018, OMNIA will focus on four priorities:

### 1. Nigeria

OMNIA will expand its work from Gombe to the rest of the Northeast and to the city of Jos. We are training a team of high-level trainers to take it out to those locations. We will also collaborate with Gombe State government, to change the cultural narratives that affirm extremism, to fresh narratives that affirm pluralism. By the end of 2018 we expect to have trained over 1200 religious leaders, over 240 at advanced level, and built a high-level team of trainers. As Muslims and Christians learn to build power, learn to collaborate with each other in effective actions, the space for Boko Haram recruitment will shrink.

### 2. Sri Lanka

OMNIA will expand its presence from the North and East and the central city of Kandy to villages across the island through its vast network of religious communities, and

government field workers. By the end of 2018, it will have trained over 250 grassroots religious leaders and begun to train a strong team of trainers.

### 3. United States

OMNIA will take its one-day long trainings, and three day-long Leadership Summits from Chicago to cities around the country. It will seek invitations from religious networks such as congregations and interfaith organizations, and professional networks such as those in affordable housing, anti-racism and immigration advocacy. By the end of 2018, we will have trained a strong team of trainers able to take it out to many contexts.

### 4. Publications

To demonstrate our expertise and to establish credibility with governmental and humanitarian agencies, OMNIA will convene interreligious experts to research, reflect and publish materials that pertain to OMNIA's mission. OMNIA Press has been established to publish materials on subjects such as contextual learning, interfaith relations, religious extremism etc.

## Financial Sustainability

OMNIA's ground-breaking work requires significant financial resources, which it hopes to raise through individual donations and foundation grants. The return on the investment in terms of impact will be substantial. As the OMNIA model succeeds in these conflict regions we will be able to employ the same methods to scale up in other regions. The critical nature of OMNIA's mission, and our proven capacity to deliver, demonstrates the value that OMNIA will offer to donors in assuring a more just and peaceful world.

We invite you to contribute generously to this important work.