



OMNIA Institute for Contextual Leadership

Interfaith Peacemaker Team Stories from Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh (March 2020)

What are Interfaith Peacemaker Teams?

IP Teams are 15-20 member teams of religious leaders and people of faith. Trained in OMNIA's methods of collaboration across religions and other identity markers, and in building power for strategic action, teams take on urgent, relevant and winnable issues that arise from the ground-up in local communities. As IP Teams increase in number and impact, OMNIA expects that the effectiveness of interreligious collaboration will produce a cultural shift that decreases people's tolerance of extremist religion and increases their affirmation of pluralistic religion. The IP Teams are designed to become a component of a community's social-infrastructure that encourages democratic citizen engagement for peacebuilding. The following are a few stories of their accomplishments.

Organizing Women

1. Kaltungo Women Organize to Stop Violence (Nigeria)



Ruth Abner (left) and Zuwaira Alhassan (right)

At the OMNIA training in December 2017, Ruth Abner (a Christian) and Zuwaira Alhassan (a Muslim) agreed to go back to their village of Kaltungo and encourage Christian women and Muslim women to pair up and build relationships. In March 2018, 11 pairs of women convened to discuss what they might do. In October, over 120 women crowded into a small auditorium.

Historically, Kaltungo has been vulnerable to election-related violence. The IP Team decided that preventing violence related to the February 2019 election was an urgent, relevant and winnable goal. They called for a community feast. Over 2000 women gathered.

The women committed to demand that their husbands and sons reject violence. They threatened to go on strike if they didn't! There was no violence in Kaltungo during the election of February 2019. Now 2000 strong, they are in 20 IP Teams working on a variety of other issues.

2. Mowbray Teachers Score Branding Victories (Sri Lanka)

Mowbray College in Kandy, Sri Lanka, founded in 1922 by Anglican missionaries provides a high-quality education to students with a triple marginality. It is:

- for girls, built at a time when girls' education was not valued
- a prominent Tamil institution in a majority Sinhala town, with an aristocratic mentality
- designed to serve girls from families of tea estate laborers, who are among the poorest people in the country, and who because of their Indian lineage even further marginalized.

Encouraged by its former Principal, Ms. Dilanthi Manuel, many of its teachers (all women) received our training and have become our top leaders. The IP Team is infusing the school's structure with OMNIA's method of building power by organizing people and money.



Thai-Pongal (Hindu harvest) Festival at Mowbray College

The school already does well in academics. Raising its profile as an all-round school was their next priority. The IP Team started small.

First, they needed a sound system. They ran a raffle, raised the money, and today, they have a sound system. This small win resulted in many people affirming the IP Teams' value.

Second, the IP Team proposed that they raise its profile in the community, as the school that honors all the major religions. In January they organized an elegant Thai-Pongal (a Hindu harvest) festival. Students and teachers in brightly colored clothes engaged in traditional rituals and performances.

Next, they are planning similar events for Ramadan and Vesak.

- **How an IP Team Beat a Dowry-Thief (Bangladesh)**



Sumi is in the front row, 3rd from left. Her mother is behind her on her right.

The IP Team in a Bangladeshi village did one-on-one interviews and recognized a serious problem: child marriage and domestic violence. They knew that they had not yet built the power necessary to address this issue that was prevalent in the culture. Unsure of how to cut a thin-slice issue, they let it sit. That is, until they learned about Sumi, a 16-year old child-bride. Sumi's mother, who, herself was married at 14 brought her situation to their attention.

Sumi was given in marriage together with a customary dowry. In this case, the groom's demands were unusually high. Taka 75,000, a little over USD 900, was an impossible amount for her very poor family. Sumi says, right from the outset, she was subjected to physical abuse. Then one year into the marriage, she discovered that her husband was already married, and that his wife was working in the Middle East. Upon

this discovery, she promptly ran away and returned to her parents. In doing so, she sacrificed her dowry money. When the IP Team inquired into this, they discovered that the man had a pattern of hoodwinking young girls and stealing their dowry money. Sumi had no legal recourse because the sharia law operating in the area favored the man. So, the IP Team got involved, brought heavy social pressure upon the dowry-thief and forced him to return the money.

The thin-slice fell on their lap. This was their first victory. Now they are considering how they will expand that victory to address similar questions

- **How Dalit (Low-Caste) Hindu Women are Clamoring the Change their Reality (Bangladesh)**



Protima Robi Das

The paradigm shift from "received theology" to "contextual theology" is hard. Religious leaders who want to hold on to their privilege, find it particularly so. This was the case with a Hindu priest who attended OMNIA's training in Bangladesh. When the caste system was challenged by the contextual realities, he almost walked out.

Those who are marginalized, a clamoring for change. Protima Robi Das, a powerful Dalit woman leads an IP Team in her slum community in Dhaka. She worships at the Ramdas Temple. Swami Ramdas (1608-1681) advocated for equal rights for women and for the abolition of caste. Her IP Team, of over 30 young women, inspired by Swami Ramdas, are ready to take on the oppressive system.



IP Team meeting at the Ramdas Temple

- **Women in Periya Neelavanai Struggle to Overcome Poverty (Sri Lanka)**

In August 2019, three months after the Easter bombings we visited Periya Neelavanai, in the Eastern coast of Sri Lanka. Batticaloa, where Zion Church was bombed, is an hour away, and Kattankudi, the town that produced the suicide bombers, is half that distance. Heavy tension laced with nasty rumors pitted Hindus and Christians against Muslims.

Since then Hindu, Muslim and Christian women have formed an IP Team. Using one-on-one relationship building, the women have come together across religious divides. Rather than fight with each other, they are now focused on looking for a solution to their common problem: the lack of jobs. The men go out to work in nearby towns, but the women have no job opportunities. There are no government agencies or private companies that can hire them.



Thevika Thevanesan leads the IP Team

The women are enterprising. Some are skilled, eager to work, and keen to start small businesses of their own. However, they don't have the capacity to develop adequate business plans, nor do they have start-up funds. Over the years, international NGOs have created a culture of expectation, with the promise of micro-loans, and they think micro-loans is the answer.

Once seen as the panacea for small entrepreneurs, recent research has shown the hazards of micro-loans. Inadequate business plans and poor execution has caused many to become poorer and indebted.

Thevika Thevanesan is a courageous and powerful leader of the IP Team. With her Team, she is considering ways to cut an urgent, relevant and winnable issue.

Organizing Money

- **An IP Team Builds a Lab and Classroom for Local School (Sri Lanka)**

"We raised Rs. 84 million" exclaimed Dharmasena at OMNIA's Advanced Training in Kandy. He leads the IP Team in the village of Hantana, near Kandy, Sri Lanka. The sum equivalent to \$50,000 (USD) was raised by the Team, which recognized that everyone in the village had a stake in constructing this building. Dharmasena, a retired officer of the Sri Lankan Customs, led the team to talk to lots of people in and out of their networks to raise the money. Over 60% of the amount was raised by organizing a musical concert featuring a prominent singer. A year later, the building was completed. The IP Team members organized many people in the village to come together to help build the structure.



Bishop Kumara Illangasinghe, OMNIA's National Coordinator for Sri Lanka in the foreground, with 2 Team members in front of the new school building

- **An IP Team Saved a Bank in Talasse (Nigeria)**

After a Boko Haram attack, the local bank in Talasse never recovered. To avoid closure, the bank needed 50 million Naira in deposits. The bank's closure would have caused severe hardship to the people who would have to travel 76 km to Gombe city to do their banking. The village head pleaded with those who had moved out of the community for jobs and business to deposit their money in the village bank, but to no avail. The local IP Team led by Sanda Abubakar saw this as a serious concern, decided that it was an urgent, relevant and winnable project, and mobilized the Muslim and Christian communities to action.

A series of one on ones revealed that the villagers did not have the capacity to keep the bank solvent. They went outside the village to those who had moved out and found one who deposited N30 million. They also found a few others who deposited N5 or N10 million making up more than the N50 million threshold. Now the bank is solvent and is doing good business. The IP Team has had its first success.

- **An IP Team Organizes to Dig a Deep-Well to Address Cholera (Nigeria)**



The IP TEAM in the village of Kembu met under a tree.

In the village of Kembu, 6 people died in a cholera epidemic and 55 were treated. The IP Team agreed that the problem was the lack of safe drinking water and that the answer was to dig a deep-well. They built power gathering a large number of community residents, and made representation to the state government. Since the change in government was delaying the process, they went to the community and started to raise money. They need N500,000 for this project and expect to raise N100,000 from the community. They are also exploring doing this jointly with Gelengu, the adjoining village.

Peacebuilding and Solidarity

- **Two Students Came Out of Boko Haram (Nigeria)**

Five students (Muslim) from Bauchi State University attended the Advanced Training. They will start an IP Team there as soon as they go back.

Two of them came out of Boko Haram. One student showed his OMNIA certificate to his father. The following day, the student and the father came to see



Students from Bauchi State University at IP Team Training

Rev. Abare Kallah, OMNIA's National Coordinator in Nigeria. He profusely thanked Abare for showing his son a path to peace. He promised to help Abare to take the training to school teachers. They need to teach it to students, the population most vulnerable to Boko Haram recruitment, he said.

- **Muslim Young People Guard the Churches; Christian Young People Guard the Mosques (Nigeria)**

The neighborhood of Nasarawo has 7 churches. The history of violence has caused churches to ask their young men to work as security guards screening people for weapons as they come to church. The IP Team called a meeting with the pastors. The Muslim leaders said, you shouldn't have Christian boys guarding the church; they need to be inside at worship. We will have Muslim boys guard the church. The pastors agreed to do the same for the mosques.

Muslims acknowledged that there is a problem in the Muslim community -- some preachers advocate extremism. The IP Team organized Christian and Muslim youth to go together to visit the Muslim preachers and tell them to preach peace, rather than extremism. Because it is the young people who suffer most in extremist violence, their voice is more powerful, they said.

Every Village a Peace Village

There are many more powerful stories of community transformation that have become possible because religious people are discovering a way to work together. Today, Nigeria has 71 IP Teams, Sri Lanka 20 and Bangladesh 15. OMNIA's commitment is to build IP Teams in every village in the next ten years, so every village can be a peace village.