



OMNIA Wins Prestigious Paul Carus Award

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November 2018

The Parliament of the World's Religions meeting in Toronto November 1-7, gave its prestigious Paul Carus award for interreligious understanding and action to OMNIA, and to two of its change agents, Rev. Abare Kallah, its lead organizer in Nigeria, and Ms. Soraya Deen, its lead organizer in Women's Initiatives and Partnerships. Over 8000 participants from around the world representing over 220 religious traditions participated in the Parliament. The award is given by the family of Paul Carus, a key leader of the first Parliament in 1893, for "outstanding work in the international interreligious movement for a just, peaceful and sustainable world."



Soraya Deen (L), Shanta Premawardhana (C) and Abare Kallah (R) after receiving the Paul Carus award.

Citing OMNIA's unique method of peacemaking, the Parliament Executive Director Rev. Dr. Larry Greenfield said, "The OMNIA Institute is building teams of trained, engaged, and committed leaders who understand that faith, human dignity, equality, and opportunity are vital to achieving basic human rights across the globe.... but also recognizes that these must occur contextually at the grass-roots level. The OMNIA Institute is particularly concerned with challenging what is called 'received theologies' and to develop new theologies that arise from the ground and involve the marginalized people of the world."

In other affirmations, the US State Department invited OMNIA to a conference of 320 religious leaders, to consider the implications of religious freedom around the world. Subsequently, following a competitive process, the State Dept.

chose OMNIA to be one of six organizations to participate in a Religious Freedom Accelerator. This three-day event opened the door to many new relationships both in Washington, DC and around the world. It also opened us to relationship with US embassies in Nigeria and Sri Lanka.

OMNIA's Change Theory: Interfaith Peacemaker Teams

OMNIA equips people of faith to counter religious extremism and religion-based oppression, domination and violence. It creates Interfaith Peacemaker Teams (IPTs) whose leaders are trained to be change agents, collaborating across differences for effective actions.

OMNIA's IPT training creates opportunities for:

- Intergroup (religious, racial/ethnic etc.) contact: The *Contact Theory* establishes that when people of different identities build deep relationships, distrust, antagonism and violence decrease.
- Learning about the other's religion: The *Religious Literacy Theory* establishes that the more one knows about another's religion, the more one can appreciate the other while articulating what in their religion compels them to relationship with the other.

- Building power for interreligious action: Religious people, good at talking, must now act together. OMNIA's methods of *Community Organizing* train participants to build extraordinary power by organizing people and money so they can act effectively on urgent, relevant and winnable issues.

A Critical Milestone Reached

This September, for the first time, simultaneous trainings were held in Sri Lanka and Nigeria, signaling OMNIA's capacity to train in multiple locations at the same time. Its 19-member Resource Team of high-ranking scholars and leaders are training its best IPT leaders to be trainers themselves.

In October, 20 IPT leaders participated in a Training of Trainers in Gombe, Nigeria. They made commitments to organize between 1 and 3 trainings in their local communities bringing in anywhere from 20-40 potential IPT leaders. This will have a multiplying effect on the number of IPT leaders that OMNIA creates in Gombe.

As of now, in Nigeria, over 850 Muslim and Christian leaders have participated in basic training, and over 160 in advanced training. In Sri Lanka, over 150 have completed basic training and some 45 have received advanced training. The resulting IPTs are established in some of the most conflict-ridden areas of both Nigeria and Sri Lanka.

As religious leaders learn to preach, teach and lead their congregations and organizations according to the principles of contextual learning, the religious and cultural narratives that support violence will change. In Nigeria, the prevailing narrative has been that extremist religion is more authentic because people have been willing to die and indeed, kill for it. In Sri Lanka, it is that the island belongs to the Sinhala-Buddhists by decree of the Buddha himself, which excludes (ethnic) Tamils, Muslims and Christians. OMNIA's contextual learning deconstructs both of those narratives and replaces them with ones that affirm that notion that pluralistic religion is more authentic because it teaches us to love our neighbor.



In the village of Kaltungo, in Gombe State, Ruth Abner, a Christian, and Zuwaira Alhassan, a Muslim, organized Muslim and Christian women to pair up and do 1 on 1 relationship building. During my visit in March, 11 pairs of Muslim and Christian women gathered. This October, 120 women representing 5 IPTs gathered ready to get to work. The blue T-shirts and veils with OMNIA insignia were created by these women!

We are just beginning to gather data, but there are already indicators that change is on its way; a paradigm shift is taking place. As change happens the space for Boko Haram or Sri Lankan extremists to recruit, will be reduced.

Interfaith Peacemaker Teams and You

By December 2019, there will be over 150 IPTs in Nigeria and over 25 in Sri Lanka. People of faith will be working together, resulting in a demonstrable reduction in extremist violence.

These are ambitious goals. We are clear that we cannot do this alone. *We need you.* Here are some ways you can engage:

1. Be a cheerleader for OMNIA. Tell its story, share our emails, newsletters, Facebook posts and re-tweet our tweets. We have a great deal of material including videos on our website. Invite friends over for tea and tell them of your excitement about OMNIA's mission.
2. Go with us to places where we work, immerse yourselves and learn from those in the margins.
3. Give generously and encourage others as well.

If you have more suggestions, please contact me at shantap@omnialeadership.org.