



OMNIA Institute for Contextual Leadership

Interfaith Peacemaker Team Stories from Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh (October 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 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.

"When Conflict Occurs, They Call (OMNIA's National Coordinator) Rev. Abare Kallah" (Nigeria)



Rev. Abare Kallah

In July a conflict broke out between two tribes in Adamawa State in the Northeast. The Nigerian newspaper *TG News* (July 17, 2020) reported, "As it happens often, when conflict occurs, they call Rev. Abare Kallah," "I called on Lunguda and Waja people to look back with the eye of wisdom

of hard-earned peace and coexistence between our people and to sustain it. All Traditional Rulers who are the custodians of our culture and heritage, religious leaders, youth, women and opinion leaders are responsible to ensure peace reign in our region." Abare said.

IP Team Leaders Resolve Conflict (Nigeria)

On August 26, 2020, in Kaltungo, a conflict arose between the Muslim community and a food vendor who sold pork. The restaurant primarily catered to travelers from out of town. The Muslim community had told this Christian woman to either stop selling pork or to indicate to her customers the kinds of meat she sells, since Muslims didn't want to inadvertently eat pork.

This felt insulting to the woman who mobilized support from her community and regular customers to join her to resist the Muslim community. Her supporters brought dogs and pigs, from the village and slaughtered them on the street. They called out names and incited Muslims to come out and challenge them in a fight.

Rev. Abare Kallah immediately brought together two Muslim IP Team leaders, to create a response team. Together they worked to quell the conflict and avert deadly violence. Two days later, this team helped bring together over 200 pastors and imams for a post conflict peacebuilding gathering under the auspices of Traditional Ruler. He gave the OMNIA team opportunity to address the gathering which eventually ended the conflict in a peaceful resolution.

Fulani Herders and Farmers Resolve Conflict Over Grazing Land (Nigeria)

Conflicts between Fulani herders and local farmers caused when cattle encroach on crop farms, came to head this year in Shongom. A leader of the herders who participated in an OMNIA training made a commitment to rein-in the conflict with farmers.

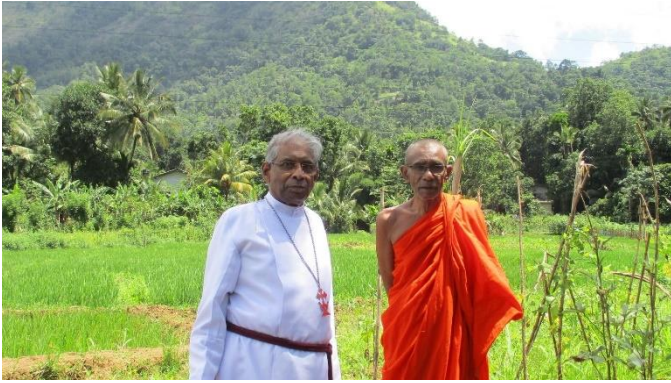
The Muslim leader announced to his people his new conviction for peacebuilding learned at OMNIA's interfaith peacemaker training. He used an interesting story to illustrate his point. His young son suffered a snake bite and was nearly at the point of death. The boy was in hospital in desperate need of blood, but there was no blood available. A group of Christian farmers, having learned of this need, donated blood on his behalf. The Fulani leader said, "my son is strong and healthy today because Christian blood flows in his veins. So how can I fight Christians?"

Joshua Yahaya, the IP Team leader reports that there were no conflicts in Shongom in 2020 between Fulani herders and farmers for all of them have come together to address and resolve the conflict.

IP Teams Start a Home Agriculture Project (Sri Lanka)

The potential threat of food insecurity following Covid isolation prompted 5 IP Teams to jointly promote home agriculture, since most villagers' backyards are arable.

The local Buddhist temple provided them land to be used as a nursery for vegetables and yams, out of which, the IP Team members took shoots to plant in their backyards. Assisted with innovative methods by the Agriculture Faculty at Ruhuna University, the nursery's produce was plentiful. One innovation was to introduce mushrooms to Sri Lankan cuisine.



Bishop Kumara Illangasinghe (OMNIA's National Coordinator in Sri Lanka) with the Buddhist monk at the nursery.

The nursery's bounty resulted in a new Farmers' Market to which the IP Team members also brought produce from their own backyards. The project which started in May has now completed its first cycle with harvesting completed in September. Now, the nursery is being prepared for the second cycle.

These actions resulted in two important victories:

1. At the outset, some politicians tried to stop the project. The IP Teams using the OMNIA's key organizing strategy, did one-on-ones in the community, built coalitions and alliances, and out-organized the politicians.
2. The temple gained goodwill of the community. A defunct Montessori School in the temple premises was resurrected by an IP Team member who attributes her success to the agitation she received from the OMNIA training.

Buddhist Temple and Mosque Hold Language Classes to Build Relationship (Sri Lanka)



Tayyib Mohamed (left) and a colleague garlanded while campaigning.

Tayyib Mohamed is a school teacher and a local politician in Valachchinai, an Eastern Province town in Sri Lanka. A practicing Muslim, he has participated in all levels of OMNIA trainings, and leads an IP Team.

In November 2019, Sri Lanka elected a new president, whose rhetoric emboldened extremist groups. Naturally, minority communities such as Muslims were concerned. Using OMNIA skills, the IP Team organized a disciplined group of multi-ethnic and multi-religious leaders to declare that they will non-violently resist any potential extremist threat that will come against the Muslim minority from the outside. The anticipated extremist violence never materialized.

Recently, Tayyib brought the local (Sinhala speaking) Buddhist monk and the local (Tamil speaking) Imam to a dialogue that didn't materialize because they didn't know each other's language. The IP Team following one-on-one conversations with people in the Buddhist and Muslim communities suggested that a way for Buddhists and Muslims to build relationships is to organize Tamil classes in the (Sinhala speaking) Buddhist temple, Sinhala classes in the (Tamil speaking) Mosque, and that both Buddhists and Muslims should learn English together.

The planning itself has brought the Buddhist and Muslim leaders to collaborate. They have made the plans and are ready and excited to start. They are currently seeking a bilingual teacher.

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 a solution for small entrepreneurs, recent research has shown the hazards of micro-loans. Inadequate business plans and poor execution have caused many to become poorer and indebted.

Thevika Thevanesan, a courageous and powerful leader, together with her IP Team is working on a variety of options that are urgent, relevant and winnable options for her community.

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 Shibaloy, a village in Bangladesh recognized a serious problem: child marriage and domestic violence. They had not yet built sufficient power to address this problem so prevalent in the culture. They knew that they needed to cut a thin-slice that was urgent, relevant and winnable. Then 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. One year into the marriage, she discovered that her husband was already married, and that his wife was working in the Middle East. She promptly ran away and returned to her parents. In doing so, she sacrificed her dowry money. Upon inquiry, the IP Team 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. The IP Team brought heavy social pressure upon the dowry-thief and forced him to return the money.

This was the "thin-slice" they were waiting for. And it resulted in their first victory. Now they are considering how to expand that victory to address larger questions.

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



Protima Robi Das

The paradigm shift from “received” 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 marginalized, however, are 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, is ready to take on the oppressive system.

Two Students Came From Boko Haram (Nigeria)



Students from Bauchi State University at IP Team Training

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 Rev. Abare Kallah. 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.

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 villagers who would have had to travel 76 km to Gombe city to do their banking. 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.

Muslim and Christian Young People Guard Each Other’s Houses of Worship (Nigeria)

The neighborhood of Nasarawa in Gombe 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 a problem –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. Since it’s the young people who suffer most in extremism, their voice is more powerful, they said.

Every Village a Peacemaker Village

There are many more powerful stories of community transformation that have become possible because religious people are discovering ways 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 peacemaker village.