

Changemakers stories

The following stories are read out while introducing the 'Changemaker story buzz group exercise' in session 6. They are illustrated by slides 3-10 of the session PowerPoint.

Rahul's story, India

Rahul lives in Bhagalpur in eastern India. About 80% of the city's population is Hindu and 18% Muslim, and the city has a history of violence. In 1989, over 1000 Muslims were reported dead after riots that displaced 50,000 people.

Rahul, a Hindu, is involved in the interfaith peace centre in the city. They work to build relationships and trust across divides, for example through peace committees, by arranging an annual cultural festival and by connecting religious leaders. This long-term peace work forms a foundation from which urgent action can be taken when events begin to spiral out of control. This is needed all too often.

Violence is particularly common during election campaigns. In 2019, a Hindu nationalist election candidate led a parade through a Muslim area and used hate speech taunts to try to spark a riot. When some Muslim youths shouted back angrily, the candidate started the violence, which led to shops and homes being damaged. There was a serious risk that rioting would spread to other areas and become more violent. Rahul and his colleagues knew how dangerous this could be.

In the following days, Rahul and his colleagues held community meetings in the Muslim and Hindu neighbourhoods most at risk of violence. At the meetings, groups of peace volunteers were formed, who went from door to door in their own neighbourhoods.

Rahul says, "It was important that men and women went together in pairs, so that there was someone who could talk freely with whoever opened the door."

The volunteers handed out leaflets and talked and listened to their neighbours, emphasising how rioting would make things worse for everyone, regardless of religion. Thankfully the neighbourhood meetings and volunteers helped calm the situation in the city.



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Sources

Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism, India

Don't judge a book by its cover – The Human Library™, Denmark

In the mid-1990s four friends started a youth organisation to campaign against urban violence. Its membership grew and the organiser of a Danish music festival asked them to come up with an idea for an event to foster dialogue between festival visitors. They came up with the idea of a human library from which visitors can borrow human 'books' – people who are willing to engage in respectful conversations about their identity and life experiences.

Usually, human books are people from the local community who volunteer to let their 'story' be a learning experience for others. Volunteers are typically people for whom an aspect of their identity is associated with prejudice or stigma – for example their religion, belief, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability or HIV positive status. This helps reduce misinformed stereotypes. The Human Library™ Organisation now has activities in over 85 countries.

Sources

The Human Library Organisation www.humanlibrary.org



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Persuading power to act, Kyrgyzstan

Following the revolution of 2010, a small gang of intolerant vandals started looting places of worship belonging to Protestant and Orthodox Christian denominations. The attacks continued for about six months. Despite many complaints, there was no reaction from the Prosecutor's Office, the State Commission on Religious Affairs or the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The authorities even advised the communities to deal with the issue themselves.

Frustrated, religious leaders got together to contact a national newspaper to highlight the incidents and the authorities' inaction. Information reached the President who took the case under her direct control. All the gang members were caught within four days.

Sources

Nellya Shakirova, Pastor, United Methodist Church in Bishkek.



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