**OMNIA Institute for Contextual Leadership**

**Solution to the Challenge of Boldline Religious Freedom**

**Preliminary Information**

* 1. Name of Organization: OMNIA Institute for Contextual Leadership
  2. Address: 155 N. Michigan Avenue, Suite 519, Chicago, IL  60601
  3. Non-profit Status: 501(c)3  (EIN: 36-2887286)
  4. Industry affiliation: Education -- Interreligious Leadership Training
  5. Links to biographies of the participants or LinkedIn profiles (preferable)
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* 1. Has your organization ever partnered with the U.S. government? No
  2. What stage is your partnership business plan? Existing program going to scale
  3. Signed Commitment statement to participate in the full three-day accelerator program in or around Washington, D.C.

Yes.

A picture containing object

Description generated with very high confidence

Shanta Premawardhana

**The Problem:**

Violent religious extremism is pervasive across religions. The attacks of 9/11 brought it home to us in the United States, yet people around the world live with its horrors every day. OMNIA Institute for Contextual Leadership (OMNIA)’s mission to equip religious leaders and people of faith to *Counter Violent Extremism* is a high priority of the US government as well. While each expression of religious extremism has its unique set of causes, it grows in an environment of antagonism between religions. Correspondingly, effective counters require flourishing pluralistic environments in which religions can work together. *Promoting Religious Freedom*, another priority of the US government, is critical to creating such an environment.

Governmental options for addressing religious extremism are limited. Military solutions are not very effective because perpetrators are often embedded within local communities. Diplomatic solutions are difficult because religious extremists are usually non-state actors. The solution that has most potential is *winning hearts and minds*. Religions, which for centuries have practiced the art of persuasion, are best at this strategy. OMNIA trains religious leaders to shift their theological paradigms, provides skills to build deep relationships, and to work collaboratively for effective results.

In three international locations impacted by religious extremism: Northeastern Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, OMNIA trains religious leaders and people of faith to build Interfaith Peacemaker Teams so that they could build relationships and collaborate with each other for effective action. Positive results in any of these locations will enable OMNIA to take its training to other countries.

**The Idea:**

Most religious beliefs and practices are “received” traditions handed down from previous generations. They have a top-down orientation with built-in attributes of exclusivity and superiority that tend to enable and sustain environments conducive to extremism.

OMNIA’s goal is to shift the paradigm from a top-down to a bottom-up orientation, and from “received” religious traditions to “contextual” learning. Bottom up orientation requires starting with existentially relevant questions and examining them in the light of scripture and tradition. This method encourages neighbors of diverse religions to work together to seek shared solutions, building a pluralistic environment as they do so. OMNIA’s training provides them

* tools and accountability structures to build capacity,
* skills to analyze the power of their relationships and leverage new partnerships and alliances, and
* sharpening of their political insight to discern, and the skill to lead people to undertake small winnable issues. Small victories lead to building greater power, and thereby to larger victories.

OMNIA’s trainees learn to build Interfaith Peacemaker Teams (IPTs) that includes both their neighbors and key leaders in their communities. To date they have started more than 50 IPTs in Northeastern Nigeria, in the context of the Boko Haram insurgency. In Sri Lanka, where communities continue to struggle with the aftermath of its 26 year-long war, they have started 8 IPTs to address such issues as missing persons, war-widows and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). OMNIA has forged partnerships with local NGOs who organize the trainings, support and encourage the local IPTs, and hold them accountable.

**Resource Requirements**

1. Funding Sources: OMNIA’s strategy of creating IPTs in many global locations to counter pervasive religious extremism requires a substantial financial base. While individuals and foundations currently provide philanthropic support, scaling up requires the support of the US government. The successful implementation of OMNIA’s mission will effectively address the government’s priorities.
2. Stakeholders and Network: An 18-member Resource Team of renowned scholars, organizers and trainers from multiple faith traditions and global locations provide training and thought leadership. OMNIA also has a carefully cultivated, substantial network of global religious leaders giving it access to religious communities across the world, and relationships with organizations such as the Network of Traditional and Religious Peacemakers, Parliament of the World’s Religions and Chicago Theological Seminary.
3. Legal Requirements: OMNIA is a 501(c)3 organization registered in the State of Illinois. In countries where it works, OMNIA has partnerships with registered local organizations such as Community Peace Dialogue and Interfaith Initiatives (CPDAII) of Nigeria, and Sarva Dharmata Kendra (Center for all Religions) of Sri Lanka.
4. Feasibility: The key to OMNIA’s success is the development of local leadership. In 18 months, OMNIA has trained 600 religious leaders in Nigeria, 120 in Sri Lanka and 74 in Bangladesh. Selected leaders are invited to Advanced trainings which enable them to lead IPTs. Of these, select leaders are invited to a “training of trainers.” Their work significantly expands OMNIA’s reach. OMNIA expects that within 5 years, local leaders will take responsibility for its work.

**Best Potential Partners**

OMNIA’s best potential partners are:

1. **Government agencies** whose mandate is to counter violent extremism and promote religious freedom. Despite concern for the security of its people, most governments do not know how to engage the most critical partners in this struggle, the religious communities. OMNIA, with its global expertise, and access to a wide variety of religious communities, can be a valuable ally to governments.
2. **Foundations and Individual Donors** concerned about religious extremism. Many want to address this question but don’t know how. OMNIA presents an innovative solution and is developing evidence from contexts such as Northeastern Nigeria.
3. **Religious Traditions,** particularly those whose adherents engage in violent behavior, recognize the need to address this problem. Even those religious leaders who may worry that a paradigm shift diminishes their power and authority, recognize the need for a fresh approach to Interfaith Peacemaking. In the Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, OMNIA is encouraged to see large numbers of people clamoring to be trained.
4. **Most NGOs,** unfamiliar with religion, are reluctant to work with religious communities. However, many agree that the problem of religious extremism must be addressed religiously. OMNIA seeks such NGOs to find synergies.

1. **Research Institutions such as Universities and Think Tanks** find OMNIA’s bottom-up method and its engagement in situations of conflict, valuable to students and researchers. OMNIA’s work provides an opportunity for cutting edge research in religion and conflict resolution.

**Ideal End State**

OMNIA anticipates that a revival of religions with pluralistic commitments leading to their collaborative and effective engagement with each other, will result in a marked reduction in incidents of violent extremism and usher in an era of peace. This ideal state is achievable.

OMNIA’s contribution is unique among other NGOs in this space. It engages the most critical institution in addressing religious extremism – religious communities; it recognizes and addresses the problem in religion that leads to extremist ideology; and shifts the paradigm to encourage pluralistic commitments, and collaborative and effective actions.

To do so, OMNIA builds Interfaith Peacemaker Teams that use two constituencies. First, it builds mass movements of people able to collaborate across religious difference and engage in skillful action. Second, it engages leaders with power and influence to impact public policy: religious leaders from many traditions, political leaders, executives of NGOs, business leaders, teachers, lawyers and other professionals.