

Report on the Mercy Global Concern Conference held in New York, October 2008.

Bridging the Gap Between Policy and Practice



In 1912, a gentleman by the name of Bradfield conceived the idea to build a span bridge across Sydney Harbour to connect the southern and northern shores. As a result of Bradfield's vision, enthusiasm, engineering expertise and detailed supervision the Bridge was built and opened in 1932, 6 years after work commenced. It has always been a source of inspiration to me to imagine what it must have been like to see the two half-arches built out progressively from each shore meet finally on 20 August 1930 after the arch was successfully joined. As I stood beneath the Bridge on my return from New York I was struck again by the solidity and majesty of the four 89 metre high sandstone pylons supporting the arches and began to reflect on this Bridge as a metaphor for what I had experienced at Mercy Global Concern. The coming together of Mercy Women from the northern and southern hemispheres, each with their own experiences and perspectives, with a desire to share their vision, expertise, enthusiasm, hopes and dreams for a more just and unified world.

The UN, the gathering place of nations was conceived out of a spirit of dialogue as nations brought together pledged to work to relieve the world of the menace of aggression so that all people would enjoy economic and social security. Often criticized as being a "toothless tiger" –a place where a lot of talking is done but little listening, it was good to have my understanding of the machinations of the UN broadened, The imperative to engage with the UN through the advocacy channel of Mercy Global Concern and other NGO organizations on the global issues of injustice has been made more feasible.

I am humbled to have met and shared the MGC experience with an inspiring group of Mercy women from across the globe and to have had the opportunity to listen to their stories and share a little of their experience of poverty and injustice in countries far removed from my own. Their personal and communal response to the challenge of Jesus Christ to heal the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked and free those imprisoned from all forms of oppression, enfolded the corporal and spiritual works of Mercy enshrined in the Gospel.

Like the spans of the Harbour Bridge slowly but surely moving towards a connecting point, the challenge to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor was never so evident as when the

cries of the voiceless, dispossessed, despised, forgotten, violated, rejected, suffering humanity, and the earth, were brought to the table by these humble champions of mercy and justice.

Through the testimony of the conference speakers and participants the gaps that exist today between the rich and their wants and the poor and their needs, between the powerful and the powerless, the included and the excluded, the connected and the disconnected, the policy makers and the policy enablers were highlighted and given context.

Many strategies were identified and offered as possibilities for bridging the aforementioned gaps.

- **Refocus Attention on the Millennium Goals**

Whilst recognising the achievements which have been made thus far, we are called to continue to challenge our respective governments to realise the commitments made by the leaders of governments in 2000 to achieve the United Nation Millennium Goals by 2015.

- **Build Co-operative Relationships**

We cannot work in isolation from organisations who work for good and for peace. The importance of partnership and collaboration was reiterated to enable meaningful participation in consultations, conferences, seminars and events to bring about change.

- **Engage Other in Action**

Using our International, national and local networks we must engage our Mercy communities, families, schools, local communities in ACTION

- **Develop a global relational spirituality**

- **Make PEACE a VERB and the protection of women and children a priority**

- **Reconnect With the Earth,**

Recognize the fragility of the planet and revision ways to live in closer relationship with it.

In brief what I heard was that we need to work out strategies to bridge the gap between:

- Those whose relationship is based on power to a model of effective and meaningful partnership
- Governments and institutions which exclude women's voices to a model that demonstrates partnership of women and the empowerment of women and girls
- Policy Makers who design and implement policies without accountability to a model where the policies made connect quantitatively and qualitatively to the needs of the global community
- Human beings using the Earth's resources out of a model of dependency and exploitation to a model which views all of life as interconnected and interdependent

It is difficult to single out highlights of the Conference.

The visits to Mercy Haven and Mercy Centre were inspirational to say the least. Men and women caught in Mercy's net, (a microcosm of our work colleagues across the world), enlivened by the vision of Catherine Mc Auley were magnanimous in their hospitality and eagerly shared their

ministry of Mercy for the marginalized in New York, bringing us back to the reality of working locally whilst thinking globally.

The unique legal advocacy work being done through Mercy Haven was a powerful example of walking with the marginalised to achieve justice.

It was indeed a wonderful occasion to be present at the United Nations on the occasion of the commemoration of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty and the have the opportunity to be present at the Round Table dialogue which brought together many voices from a variety of backgrounds to discuss how to build meaningful partnerships for poverty eradication, and the implications of a partnership model for the development of policy.

Two voices I heard loud and clear that of Sylvia Borren (Executive Director of Oxfam Novib)

“ We had to beg nations for Food Aid to save the lives of dying children and managed to receive only \$8 billion yet we have just seen three trillion dollars released to save failing banks. We have the money to achieve the Millennium Development Goals but governments do not have the political will “

The other voice was Sujita Kallaourakkathu the Superior of the Sisters of Notre Dame, who has spent 20 year working with women in India.

Passionately she spoke about the empowerment of women with these words

“No empowerment of civil society is possible when over 50% of society is excluded from participation .We must learn to listen with respect to the poor for the greatest poverty for the poor is lack of respect”....

Carol Rittner’s paper on “ Rape as a Weapon of War” provided us with graphic details of the acts of sexual violation and atrocities endured by women and children during and following, national and international conflicts throughout the world.

Sexual violence has been identified as a war crime, a crime against humanity and a form of genocide.

The statistics Carol presented and the stories recounted, called for an urgent response from Mercy women globally (and all women) to make the protection of women and children a priority for action.

“Even if we do not TRIUMPH over EVIL let us not remain SILENT in its presence.....

We must leave here inspired, enspirited, challenged

To do WHAT we CAN

With WHAT we HAVE

To act on behalf of the women and children in our world

And do not hesitate, even for a moment “

This call to action leads me to ask myself “How will I apply what I have learnt at the local level”?

Throughout the Conference I became ever more convinced of the importance of the power of education and the role educated women play in effecting change in the community, business and society.

The young women in our care need to be conscientised to the realities of poverty and made more aware of the global realities impacting on the status of women throughout the world.

As a Mercy educator I believe it is our responsibility to develop the skills that theses women need needed to critique the structures that keep all people, and particularly women, in poverty, oppression and subservience.

I will continue to promote action on the Millennium Goals through the Congregation, and in the Monte Sant' Angelo College community. I propose to develop a plan to ensure that the staff in all faculties use the MDG's to further develop the student's understanding of global economic development, peace and justice issues in and through the College curriculum.

Using the networks I have made during these 2 weeks I can expand the Mercy horizons for our staff and students and engage the students in new service and advocacy projects run by the Sisters of Mercy particularly in the Asian and Pacific region.

Working to eradicate chronic homelessness in Australia I will engage the Board of the Mercy Foundation in ways to implement the Tool Kit for Partnership Development written by the Fourth World Movement, as well encouraging Advocacy using the strategies modeled by Denise Coghlan in her work in Cambodia.

I will dialogue with others and share what I have learnt. Importantly .I will seek ways to raise awareness amongst the members of the Congregation of the valuable resource we have in Mercy Global Concern as a catalyst for change at the UN and

The possibilities I guess are endless –All that is needed is the political will to be a bridge builder and to work collaboratively to achieve these goals.

Lastly I thank all those whose generosity, insight and commitment to Mercy partnership made it possible for us to attend the Bridging the Gap Conference.

Carmel McDonough RSM
North Sydney
29th October 2008