

## Bridging the Gap

Mercy-UN Programme October 13<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> 2008

Designed and organised by Sr. Deirdre Mullen RSM, Director of the Mercy Global Concern Desk in New York, I found this programme – Bridging the Gap – a very interesting and effective instrument for immersion in the issues which we, Mercy Sisters and others, are concerned about throughout the world today, particularly the implementation of the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It had a focused graduated structure and a fine balance between information, reflection, experience and challenge. It brought together 26 Mercy Sisters from the four corners of the world - from the Philippines, Tonga, New Zealand and Australia in the far East, to Newfoundland, USA, Jamaica in the far West, and to Ireland, Gt. Britain and Africa in the middle! It blended us into a genuine international group of Catherine's walking nuns!

It would be no exaggeration to describe this programme as something of an international crash course in being a global Mercy woman. All of the participants were engaged in Mercy work in their own home places, and they covered a wide spectrum with regard to age, type of activity, and social context. Many in the group had first hand experience of working among people suffering great poverty, particularly in developing countries, and this kept our discussions from any tendency to mere talk-shop or theory-based exchanges. The group came with an openness of mind and heart and resembled a field where the soil had been ploughed and softened by the rain of compassion and so was ready and receptive to the seed – to the input and challenges put before us.

The title of the programme – Bridging the Gap – focused our attention on the enormous distances to be closed between political promises and implementation, between those who are rich and those who live in extreme poverty, between those who have easy access to necessary healthcare and those who live with epidemic illnesses. The Millennium Development Goals of the UN touch most of these GAP areas but as progress is slow and spasmodic, the imperative of being a voice for those who cannot wait that long was brought home to us so clearly, echoing within us the heart of Catherine. The time frame between the cry for help (as in Darfur, or in The Congo, or in city slums) and the answer of aid is an unacceptable gap. As one speaker put it so succinctly – we have everything except political will and that is a renewable resource!

Throughout our two week in-service the 8<sup>th</sup> Millennium Goal – that of Partnership – emerged again and again as a critical hinge for all Religious and NGO agencies in opening doors to peace and justice for the poorest of people. And if truth be told, there is a great gap to be bridged between ourselves - voluntary and charitable bodies - who have long acted for good but often as independent groups. The time has long come to bridge that gap for the other gaps will only be filled if we can learn to co-operate and work together in seeking to effect systemic change. The range of action required to be effective will include Direct Services, Advocacy and Organisation.

During our two week session we had some very well placed and excellent inputs from a variety of speakers. Among the issues raised were:

- The role and capacity of MIA – our Mercy International Association – in enabling us to place our resources in an optimum way at the service of those most in need today. A challenging question was put to us – do have we a presence in the top 50 of the officially listed poorest countries?
- The capacity of technology – especially the instruments of our Mercy Fraynetworks – in engaging us, challenging us and equipping us to bridge the gap in our place and time;
- The inspiration from organisations like The Fourth Movement, Caritas, and other NGOs at the UN as they shared their work for sustainable development and human rights, enabling poor people to participate as equals in eradicating poverty;
- The necessity for a partnership between us humans and our earth in order to redeem the damage being done which causes much tragedy for many people and puts the future at risk;
- The call to be informed about and engaged in action against Rape as a Weapon of War, the Use of Land Mines and Cluster Bombs, and to lobby more strongly for help with the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa;
- A window into the harrowing circumstances of extreme poverty in the Makuru slums of Nairobi and the painful journey of accompanying people affected by HIV/AIDS.

We had the privilege of visiting two Mercy Projects close to New York. Mercy Centre grew up in a disadvantaged area and provides many support

services for immigrant, unemployed, and beleaguered women and their families at the edges of society. Mercy Haven was a large social Housing project for mentally impaired people conducted in an atmosphere of welcome, beauty and support. This project has a lawyer based advocacy activity which took the State and Federal government to court recently and successfully challenged them on a sudden drastic reduction in the food-stamp programme. There was truly great rejoicing on this major David-and-Goliath achievement, the outcome of which was the doubling of the food-stamp value!

Visiting the United Nations Complex was a very important dimension of our programme. The Office of Mercy Global Concern (MGC) is just opposite the entrance to the UN building. It is a marvellous location. We got a tour of the UN building, which apart from its various meeting and Assembly Halls, has very impressive displays on various UN issues – like hunger, displacement of peoples, wars, peace efforts etc. It has a beautiful stained glass ‘peace window’ by Chagall and a prayer room set up by Dag Hammarskjold. We had the privilege of attending a session on extreme Poverty in various parts of the world, at which one of our group – Sr. Senolita from Tonga – addressed the gathering and spoke of the situation in her land. We marked the world Day for the Eradication of extreme Poverty by joining many other groups in a ‘Stand Up Against Poverty’ protest at the UN that day.

One of the lasting UN memories for me is of seeing so many streams of people, often many of them young, going through Security, pouring through the large foyers, all bent on presenting a case for some issue of justice or peace in some part of the world. The UN has its official side – the ambassadors of 192 governments who try to influence one or other of their members to bring peace, healing and development where needed. But the unofficial side – the many NGOs – seem to make the bigger impact. They are all buzzing around, making links, presenting papers of facts and figures, and getting heard by the official side. Some of these have a status level in the UN (like MGC) and can look for more attention. This was to see a side of the UN that we do not hear about in our home countries and it convinced me that there is great potential for good in the partnership which is the UN, and great potential for good in the lobbying work of the NGOs. The religious groups at the UN are affectionately known as RUN, an appropriate term! We are very fortunate as Mercy Sisters to have our own Representative at the UN in Mercy Global Concern.

All in all, the Bridging the Gap programme gave me more than I could have expected and I feel privileged to have been part of it. The input and

experience was very invigorating. It expanded my horizon of what Mercy can do in the individual and corporate sense; it invited me to value and seek partnership wherever possible; and it gave me new sisterly links with mercy women across the world. I would hope to share the fruits of this experience with my companions and colleagues for many days to come.

Helena O'Donoghue RSM,

Dublin, November 2008

GAP, October 2008

Evaluation Sheet

Name: ..... Helena O'Donoghue

Type of Work:.....Healthcare Ministry

Work Constituency.....Sisters, Associates, Facilities

Country.....Ireland

1. My participation has given me new ideas, revitalised me, motivated me to keep in touch with colleagues on the course, stimulated my interest in international affairs, empowered me to work for change and given me a broader perspective.
2. My participation has increased my understanding of the work of the Sisters of Mercy worldwide, and of the role and capacity of the United Nations.