

## **MERCY GLOBAL CONCERN**

### **Bridging the Gap Conference 17 – 24 October 2009**

I was delighted to hear that I had gained a place in this year's Mercy Global Concern Bridging the Gap group. I little thought the experience would be so wonderful!

Our first visit to the United Nations building was thrilling. I felt humbled to walk through the entrance, past the row of national flags, arranged in alphabetical order, into the vast entrance area, adorned with posters and stands addressing aspects of social justice. A guided tour of the building introduced our group to the noble aims of the United Nations. As we visited the great main chamber it was awe inspiring to stand where the representatives of the nations of the world all sit down together as equals, trying to address the most pressing issues of social justice and the future well being of our planet.

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and as Monday 19 October was International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, we attended a commemoration event, entitled 'Children and Families Speak Out Against Poverty'. The brochure for the event summed up its purpose as follows: '...we commemorate this International Day for the Eradication of Poverty by providing a space to hear children, young people and adults from the global north and south talk about their experiences and efforts resisting poverty and exclusion'.

As we visited projects and heard about the work of Mercy across the United States, I was impressed by the sense of belonging to Mercy among the associates of the Sisters. At Mercy Centre, which supports vulnerable families in the Bronx, a low income area of New York, it was inspiring, and moving, as Spanish-speaking service users sang a song of praise of 'Catalina McAuley'. In the Centre, the spirit of Mercy, of the spirit of Catherine, was palpable, and service users and associates spoke warmly of their affection for her and their sense of being 'Mercy'.

During the week, we heard from our Sisters in widely scattered locations throughout the world - America, Australia, England, Ireland, Philippines and South Africa. I was inspired and deeply impressed by their commitment and generosity, and their stories demonstrated the power for good of even one person, to address injustice and support the excluded and disempowered.

Sr Patricia Hartigan, a Mercy Sister who is a lawyer from the Mid-Atlantic Community of the United States, reminded us of Catherine McAuley's response to the needs of her time. This response was both practical and systemic. As well as setting up the House of Mercy, Catherine challenged the rich and powerful of her time. In response to the question of where Catherine would be today, Patricia

suggested that she would be found challenging the systems and structures that perpetuate poverty and sickness.

We heard about a range of Mercy projects. Pat Griffith and her team at Mercy Haven told us about their work among people with mental health difficulties. Kevin Dance, a Passionist priest who is Director of Passionists International at the United Nations and works closely with Mercy, spoke about the plight of indigenous peoples. Lynda Dearlove spoke about her work with commercial sex workers in London, England. Margaret Farley and Eileen Hogan told us about the Sister to Sister project, which provides support for Sisters infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. Karen Schneider, a paediatric doctor at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, inspired and intrigued us with stories of her innovative project in support of poor children in a number of South American countries. With a small group of interns from Johns Hopkins Hospital, Karen has provided medical aid to an incredible 37,000 babies and children, many of whom would not otherwise still be alive.

All these, and other Mercy works, were contextualised by Mary Kate Hagan, a Mercy Sister from Ireland, who gave an informative and inspiring presentation on the new cosmology and the interconnectedness of all of life.

At the end of the week, what learnings remain? First, it was a privilege to spend time at the United Nations, the one place where the nations of the world at least try to meet as equals and to agree ways of addressing the pressing issues of our world.

Meeting the Sisters from around the world deepened my sense of solidarity in Mercy and pride in the heritage of Catherine. It is truly uplifting to belong to a world wide congregation of women who are doing what they can in a huge variety of ways to help the poor and the suffering, and to empower them to address the factors that exclude them from the goods of this life that we so often take for granted.

The Bridging the Gap experience challenges me to work in partnership with our Sisters and with others, to address the systems and structures that cause inequity in our world. I feel charged with a sense of responsibility for my presence on this planet, a presence that I believe that cannot be neutral. I can sum this up in no better words than those of Pat Hartigan, 'We must join our efforts to those of others who are working to address injustice. The poor need advocates and we have the skills and the tools to be those advocates'.

I cannot finish this report without expressing my deep appreciation and thanks to the generous sponsors who made the trip possible, and to Deirdre, whose professionalism, commitment and kindness made it all flow so smoothly and pleasantly. I am proud that we have such a gifted, articulate and dedicated Sister

at the United Nations, and I admit it – it is a cause of great pride that she is a native of Northern Ireland and a member of Northern Province, Ireland!!  
The other members of our group were fine Sisters and lovely women. I valued their presence and will continue to treasure new friendships.

I will let George Bernard Shaw finish for me:

‘ I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me; it is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations’.

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