'Bridging the Gap’ Conference Report: Number 13

A Reflection on My Experience of the Mercy Global Concern UN Program

September 4-15, 2006, is an unforgettable period of my life. It was two weeks that brought the world before me in a way that significantly influenced my understanding of being a Sister of Mercy in the world today and will continue to influence me for a long time to come.

There are three distinct aspects of the Mercy Global Concern (MGC) Program that I wish to reflect on: the attendees, the UN conference, and the MGC presentations.

Meeting the 18 other Sisters of Mercy from around the world was in itself a deeply moving and educational experience. We seven Novices from the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas were joined by Sisters from Panama, Ghana, Cambodia, New Zealand, Ireland, Australia, New Foundland, and England. I was touched by their warmth and inclusivity. More than that, they brought a perspective to discussions on global issues such as hunger, HIV/AIDS, gender inequality, that was refreshingly different from what we here in the U.S. often think about these issues. Many of these sisters work beside and with the people for whom these issues are a daily struggle and who lack the most basic necessities of life. It brought home to me the importance of always having those who are on the ground, doing the work, living the reality, present in our discussions about ministry. While this may seem obvious, in more than one group discussion, it was a sister who was ministering in or who was from a developing country who pointed out to us that while an idea or a ministry might be well-intentioned, it would not work because it failed
to meaningfully engage the people of the country or in some way did not respect their cultural traditions and thus their human dignity. It impressed upon me that we constantly can teach one another and in so doing make our world-wide Mercy Community the better because of it.

My understanding of the actual reach of the Sisters of Mercy in the world was helped tremendously by this gathering. The presentation by Adele Howard, conversations over dinner, and one on one conversations over the two weeks gave me a deep sense of belonging to a global and very deeply committed group of religious women and that is heartening for me at the early stages of my life as a Sister of Mercy.

The second aspect that was so impactful for me was the United Nations Conference – “UNfinished Business”. Some 1,500 people from at least 92 countries participated in this 3-day conference. The mixture of people – cultures, languages, accents – was a veritable feast. Prior to coming to the MGC Program, I hadn’t paid much attention to the Millennium Goals or how we, as Sisters of Mercy, were trying to address them in our own ministries. For me, the conference workshops and plenary sessions were like pieces of a puzzle coming together and suddenly a new view, a new understanding emerged. I have long had a particular interest in Africa so I chose to focus on workshops that addressed issues prevalent in Africa, namely HIV/AIDS and gender inequality.

What did I learn? That there is a lot more progress being made to combat HIV/AIDS than one might think, yet nearly an entire generation has been lost to the disease leaving countless orphans, many of whom are also living with HIV. I learned that while drugs might be available, they are simply not getting to the people of Africa and for myriad reasons. There remains a lot of work to be done. I came to understand more clearly how one issue is linked to another: The HIV/AIDS pandemic is directly linked to issues of justice and inequality of women which is linked to issues of poverty and global capitalism…. While I may focus on one issue in particular in my ministry, I need to be informed on the other issues and in conversation with those who are working on them.
More than once I heard how what might be useful in combating one problem actually perpetuated another one. We truly are a global society.

The UN Conference was a source of much information, data, and resources. While at times overwhelming, I left with a strong desire to return and work there in the future as a Sister of Mercy, be it with Mercy Global Concern or another entity.

The final aspect I’ll reflect on is the MGC Program presentations. Over the two weeks I heard outstanding presentations that explored how we as Sisters of Mercy are bridging or could bridge the gap between policy and practice. We had the opportunity to not only listen but to engage in meaningful conversations on issues of environmental degradation, poverty, hunger, HIV/AIDS, and Genocide. What I found most impressive was that each speaker candidly presented the difficult and at times harsh realities of the issue she was addressing.

This was not a program to simply sit back and listen. At our very first orientation session we were challenged to look at our own complacency and ways in which we had become comfortable with the way things were, and that to be truly counter-cultural and respond to the needs of our time, we needed to move away from our comfortable places. The presentations did just that. With each one I returned to my hotel room thinking about how I had lived my life and how I wanted to live in light of the information I’d received. It may seem like a trite example, but now I finish each glass of water I have after hearing first-hand how precious and scarce this resource is for countless people. As small as this may seem, I believe that many people, each making an effort, can effect big change for the good of humanity. After attending the two-week Mercy Global Concern program, I am even more convinced of this.

I will be forever grateful to Sr. Mary Waskowiak and Sr. Anne Curtis for sending us novices to this program. A debt of gratitude is also due to Sr. Dierdre Mullan who put this program together, who attended to us on many levels, and who demonstrates a
commitment and love of God’s people that is inspiring and a sense of humor that is beyond compare!

I truly hope many more Sisters of Mercy are able to attend the Mercy Global Concern Program in the years to come.

With deepest appreciation,

Sr. Shari Roeseler