A new era for Indigenous Peoples

‘Together the cultures of the world make up an intellectual and spiritual way of life, an ethnosphere that envelopes the planet – but it is under threat. There is a fire burning over the Earth, taking with it human languages, ancient skills and visionary wisdom. Quelling this flame and kindling in its wake a new respect for cultural diversity is one of the great challenges of our age.’

Wade Davis, Cultural Survival
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This text appeared with a photographic exhibit mounted in the main UN visitor’s lobby for the very first meeting of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The establishment of the Forum, comprised of sixteen experts, eight nominated by Indigenous organisations around the world and eight nominated by UN Member States, represented a huge step forward for the recognition and promotion of Indigenous Peoples’ interests and concerns within the wider United Nations system.

The Forum, connected to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) will meet annually. The work on Indigenous Peoples’ rights within the Human Rights Commission in Geneva will continue. At the opening session, held at the UN in New York 13 – 24 May 2002, attracted a large number of representatives of Indigenous communities from around the world.

As well as celebrating and giving direction to this stronger voice within the UN system, it illustrated the extent to which Indigenous Peoples from all over the globe have built strong and empowering networks to promote their rights and interests in the global community. It is truly a cause for celebration by all of us that they are refusing to let their ‘human languages, ancient skills and visionary wisdom’ be enveloped by the ‘flames’ of ‘progress’!

New organisational directions

In October 2001, as the Mercy International presence at the United Nations was nearing the end of its third year, Deirdre Mullan from the north of Ireland joined Wendy Flannery as Associate Director in the MGC Office. The capacity once again for sharing responsibility meant that more avenues for Mercy engagement could be pursued and more opportunities opened up for wider Mercy participation.

Both Deirdre and Wendy participated in the Mercy International Justice Conference held in South Africa in September 2001. This was an important opportunity for communicating about Mercy UN activities and for clarifying and developing communication channels.

New directions for UN engagement became evident in the two new arenas for global Mercy focus identified by conference participants:

- violence against women in all its forms, and
- racism in all its manifestations

The first meeting of the newly constituted MGC Advisory Board took place on 1 May 2002. The Board members are: Marie Chin rsm, (Jamaica) President of MIA and MGC liaison; Isha Dyfan (Sierra Leone), International Women’s Tribune Center; Noeleen Heyzer (Singapore), Director of the UN Development Fund for Women; Daniel Martin (USA/Ireland), member of the Interfaith Partnership on the Environment of the UN Environment Programme New York Office; and Carol Rittner rsm, Professor of Holocaust Studies, The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

Although only three of the five members were able to attend, it was a good opportunity for the MGC personnel to provide an introduction to the worldwide Mercy reality and structures, and to outline the direction and focus of its UN work to date.

Since January 2002, MGC has facilitated a UN connection for Fr Kevin Dance CP, who has the assignment of seeking UN
affiliation for the international Passionist family of organisations.

Mercy engagement at the UN

As well as continuing to be involved in a number of major UN processes mentioned in previous reports, MGC personnel have taken on new involvements and have opened up further opportunities to others in Mercy circles. Below is a broad overview of Mercy UN participation over the past year.

UN Conferences/Events

World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, 31 August – 7 September 2001, Durban, South Africa. Two European Mercies, Ann Scully (Ireland) and Patricia McMahon (Great Britain) attended preparatory meetings in Geneva, and Wendy was part of a preparatory group of UN-related NGOs in New York. There were eight Mercy participants at the Conference, six accredited by Mercy Global Concern and two by other organisations. They were Immaculata Devine (South Africa), Helen Kearins (Australia), May Lynam (Ireland), Patricia McMahon (Great Britain), Winifred Njuguna (Kenya), Ann Scully (Ireland), Maria Luisa Vera (USA) and Wendy (MGC). An additional two participated in the preceding NGO Forum. The strong and diverse Mercy presence in the WCAR carried over into the MIJN Conference and influenced the emergence of the new global Mercy focus on racism.

Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) 46th regular session, 4 – 15 March 2002. Responding to the MGC advertisement issued to the ‘Mercy public’ worldwide, two Sisters of Mercy, Mary Dennett (Australia) and Tina Geiger (USA) joined Deirdre and Wendy for the session and for the NGO orientation and parallel meetings and side events. The two special thematic issues were: ‘Eradicating poverty, including through the empowerment of women throughout their life cycle in a globalizing world’; and ‘Environmental management and mitigation of natural disasters a gender perspective’.

A special Mercy side event was a prayer service, with a focus on empowerment of women experiencing poverty, prepared by Tina Geiger rsm and Marilee Howard rsm of the Americas Institute, and attended by representatives of other NGOs and the Mercy New York region. During the session, MGC provided hospitality and logistical support for two women from East Timor, one of whom is the ‘gender equality’ advisor in the newly established independent government. A fuller report of the session can be found on the Mercy Global Concern page of the Mercy World website.

International Conference on Financing for Development (ICFFD), Monterrey, Mexico, 25-29 March 2002. The conference, focusing on major issues of global economic justice, was preceded by a one-week NGO Forum. During the two-year preparatory process, Wendy was a member of a small Working Group which facilitated worldwide NGO involvement and organised orientation programs, briefings and liaison with key UN personnel. Karen Donahue rsm (North American Focal Point, MIJN) participated in all except one of the preparatory meetings and Dina Altamiranda rsm (Panama) attended the Conference itself. All three Mercy representatives worked as part of an international Ecumenical Team, collaborating also with other NGOs advocating on specific issues or sectoral concerns (e.g., women, labour). A report on the Conference and follow-up activities is in preparation.

Second World Assembly on Ageing, entitled, ‘Building a Society for All Ages’, held in Madrid, Spain, 8 – 12 April 2002. Deirdre attended the PrepComs in New York, and made initial arrangements for eight Mercy representatives at the final Assembly and the prior NGO Forum. In addition to Deirdre, they were: Simone Courtade rsm (USA), Brenda Dolphin rsm (Ireland), Mary Ellen Howard rsm (USA), Ann Itotia rsm (Ireland/Kenya), Deirdre & Max Moran (Australia), and Moya Mullan (Ireland). The focus of the Assembly was how unprecedented demographic changes are transforming today’s world and having discrete impacts in different regions of the world. One of the Mercy representatives, Deirdre Moran from Australia, provided input at an NGO side event on ageing and the environment. A report on the conference is available on the Mercy Global Concern page of the Mercy World website.

2002 meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission – Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Geneva, April-May. Patricia McMahon (Great Britain) and Ann Scully (Ireland) participated in this meeting.
when their governments were scheduled to report. They worked closely with other NGOs with whom they had networked for the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. A copy of their report on the Geneva meetings is attached.

UN General Assembly Special Session on Children, 6 – 10 May 2002
This meeting had been rescheduled from the previous September. Because both the new dates and the accreditation process were unclear until close to the event, MGC was unable to advertise the event in the normal manner to the Mercy public worldwide. Last minute accreditation was possible for Deirdre and Eileen Hogan rsm (USA). A report was circulated via MGC’s communications liaisons and can also be found on the Mercy World website.

World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), scheduled to be held in Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 August – 4 September 2002. For the first time, MGC was able to organise Mercy participation in the official preparatory meetings at the regional level. Sisters Angela Hartigan and Winifred Njuguna (Kenya) Kenya attended the African regional meeting in Nairobi; Sr Julieta Hayrosa (Philippines) attended the South-East Asian sub-regional meeting in Manila; and Sister Senolita Vakata (Tonga) participated in the Asia-Pacific regional meeting in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Two US Mercies, Mary Bilderback and Jackie Moreau have attended the preparatory meetings (PrepComs) in New York, and have worked with Wendy as members of an international Ecumenical Team. As well as being involved in preparation of the Team’s lobbying documents and special events, they were involved with the wider NGO community in caucuses focusing on special issues or group interests. These included freshwater, energy and climate change, earth values, women and Indigenous Peoples. During the second PrepCom, MGC organised a major side event entitled, ‘Global Warning: Small Island Communities and the Fate of the Earth’, co-sponsored by the Permanent Mission of Samoa to the UN and the UN Environment Programme. Two Mercies from Brooklyn attended. During the third PrepCom, MGC organised, with the help of other NGOs, a reception co-sponsored by the Permanent Mission of Tuvalu, to once again highlight the concerns of Small Island Developing States in the WSSD process.

Six Sisters of Mercy have been accredited to the Summit in Johannesburg: Mary Bilderback (USA), Angela Hartigan (Kenya), Julieta Hayrosa (Philippines), Jackie Moreau (USA), Mary Tinney (Australia) and Wendy (MGC). MGC has also made accreditation to the Summit possible for Kevin Dance (Passionist), Pauline Coll (Good Samaritan Sister), and Ms Annie Homasi (NGO Tuvalu). Briefing Notes about the Summit process, including extensive documentation, will be circulated via the MGC communications liaisons and posted on the Mercy World website.

The 2001 Annual DPI-NGO Conference, for which 6 USA Mercy representatives were registered, was cancelled due to the events of September 11. Planning for the 2002 Conference, with the theme ‘Rebuilding Societies Emerging from Conflict: A Shared Responsibility’, is already under way, and Deirdre is a member of the planning committee.

Many interested members of the Mercy public on short visits to New York City were able to participate in single events such as the Thursday morning DPI briefings on topical UN/global issues, and the International Women’s Day commemoration.

An up-coming event for 2003 is the World Summit on the Information Society, for which the preparatory meetings are being held in Geneva. One dimension of this issue which evokes Mercy concern is illustrated in a report of an independent expert on ‘Human rights and extreme poverty’, submitted to the Human Rights Commission in 2001. As the report states: ‘The expert...emphasizes the growing gap, in terms of culture, between those who have access to the information society (enterprises, government) and those who never will. Unbreachable walls are being built that go much further than the mere criterion of living standards...’

Examples of regular activities

The MGC personnel have participated on a regular basis in many UN-related NGO activities, sometimes exercising leadership, coordination and facilitation roles. These include the following:
• Weekly briefings by the Department of Public Information
• Working Group on Girls
• NGO Committee on the Status of Women
• NGO Committee on Social Development
• Ad Hoc NGO Working Group on Financing for Development
• Interfaith Partnership for the Environment of the UN Environment Programme
• NGO Committee for the Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples
• Ad Hoc NGO Working Group ‘Keeping Durban Alive’
• Meetings at the center for International Catholic Organizations

Communications

The MGC personnel are continuing to develop implementation strategies based on the broad framework presented to MIA in 2000. Having a named communication liaison in place for each MIA member grouping has proved essential. However, the evidence indicates that there is still need for tracking and streamlining the onward communication flow.

All communications sent to the liaison persons are sent simultaneously to the MIA leaders, the MIJN Focal Points, the Mercy World website and the MIA Executive Director. Apart from short pieces in the Mercy World Newsletter, all other MGC communications are in electronic format. MGC personnel have yet to make a permanent arrangement for Spanish translation.

A major challenge continues to be relating MGC communications to Mercy reality ‘on the ground’ and the diverse interests of the Mercy public. When requested or where relevant, UN documentation on major global issues, for example, HIV-AIDS, poverty eradication and violence against women, is circulated to selected Mercy groups or the MIJN Focal Points. A few experiences by MGC personnel to date indicate the value of using opportunities when they arise for face-to-face meetings with Mercy groupings on the Mercy-UN relationship.

A concluding reflection

‘The UN reflects both aspiration and a falling short of aspiration, but the constant struggle to close the gap between aspiration and

performance now, as always makes the difference between civilization and chaos’ Dag Hammarskjold

The fact that it is those already in situations of disadvantage – whether social groups or whole nations – who suffer most from the impact of the chaos to which Hammarskjold refers, provides strong grounds for continuing international Mercy commitment to engagement with the UN.

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(Report by Patricia McMahon & Ann Scully attached.)
Sisters of Mercy attend meeting of the UN Committee on Economic, Social & Cultural Rights, Geneva
Monday 22 April - Friday 3 May, 2002

Both the United Kingdom and Irish Governments reported to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights during the last week of April and the first week of May, 2002. Sisters Ann Scully (Ireland) and Patricia McMahon (United Kingdom) attended as representatives of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas/Mercy International Association. They worked with representatives of other Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to provide information and raise concerns about the states parties’ reports, and to respond to the Committee’s questions and requests for clarification. This meant that issues which were glossed over in the official reports could be probed in greater depth, or angles to an issue highlighted.

The Irish NGOs had an opportunity to present their comments on how the Irish Government had implemented the Covenant and the recommendations of the first examination. Issues raised were: Disability; Travellers; Housing; Unemployment and the gap between rich & poor; Refugees / Asylum seekers / Migrant workers / Trafficking of women and children; Health. The members of the Irish NGO group introduced themselves to relevant Committee members to raise the issues. Ann focused her efforts on issues around Refugees / Asylum seekers / Migrant workers / Trafficking of women; and unemployment trends and basic income.

One of the issues raised by NGOs was the extremely high levels of illiteracy among Travellers. 92% leave education with no qualifications. There is a 70% unemployment rate and an infant mortality rate around ten time that of the rest of the population. The Irish and UK states parties were urged to take measures to improve the educational participation and attainment and reduce the social exclusion of Travellers.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights commission requested that the UK delegation be asked why people with disabilities have been accorded more extensive rights in Great Britain than in Northern Ireland.

The delay in promised legislation around equality law in Northern Ireland was raised and it was suggested that a single Equality Act might serve globally as a model of anti-discrimination law for the new century.

The average earnings of women in NI is less than 80% of men’s earnings – a greater disparity than Great Britain. The UK was invited to explain this.

The national minimum wage is currently set at less than the Council of Europe’s poverty definition of 60% of average earnings. There have been numerous instances of individuals who believing that they have been refused appointment to public office because of discrimination on ground such as sex, religion, race or national origin have found that they have no redress through the courts or tribunals. Some improvement in respect of sex discrimination has been secured with the implementation of the
European Union Equal Treatment Directive but there is concern at the lack of protection on grounds of race or religion.

Questions were asked about the numbers of children living in poverty, the treatment of children in care and children in contact with the criminal justice system.

The rights of refugees and migrant workers, and the detention of asylum seekers in prisons, were concerns which were also raised.

**We were able to submit questions about Care of the Elderly and the closure of Care Homes.**

Regarding the trafficking of people, there is no accurate estimate of the levels, due to the clandestine nature of the act. It is estimated that organised crime is behind 75% of these cases. There is a promise of future legislation to combat trafficking for sexual purposes and labour legislation when Parliamentary time allows.

Bad prison conditions continue to be a concern in the UK, including overcrowding, high suicide rates and lack of useful work. Recent changes have been put in place by the Government to provide occupation, training and education, but the delivery of these services remains problematic.

We were able to meet with various people who head up the Human Rights office, including Sandra Aragon who is the NGO liaison for the follow-up to the World Conference Against Racism, in which both of us had participated. Ms Aragon indicated that this would include regional meetings. The outcome document is available in booklet form. Unfortunately, only two questions have been tabled in the UK House of Commons with regard to WCAR, but there is a promise of an NGO meeting later on in the year.

Ann also had an appointment with the person responsible for Europe at the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, courtesy of the UNHCR office in Ireland. This was a very profitable meeting. Issues raised were: pre-emptive exclusion by Irish officials of people wishing to apply for asylum in Ireland at ports or points outside the country; the detention in Irish prisons of people awaiting deportation, eg, Mountjoy Prison in Dublin; the conditions in Hostel and Direct provision; the importance of UNHCR’s having a strong presence in Ireland, at least for the next number of years, to ensure proper treatment of Asylum Seekers and Refugees and to monitor racism in the country in relation to the practical implementation of Government policy.

Ann also had meetings with ILO & the International Organisation for Migration. The ILO will be holding a conference on Migration in 2004.

Ann Scully & Patricia McMahon
May 2002