



Resolutions To Action

LCWR Global Concerns Committee

Volume 19, Number 4

October 2010

Global Seed-Stories of Hope

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EXPERIENCE

In September 2000, leaders from around the world gathered at the United Nations to adopt eight Millennium Development Goals for education, poverty, food security, health, gender equality, HIV/AIDS, the environment, and partnerships, to be achieved by 2015. Catholic sisters around the world, already addressing many of these issues, were drawn to be more strategic in their efforts to contribute to this global movement. In a publication, *Seeds of Hope: Catholic Sisters in Action Around the World*, published by the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters in 2009, 28 stories of creative projects reflect the commitment of sisters to plant seeds of hope that meet these goals in the most remote areas of the world.

The stories take place in countries where there is little infrastructure for meeting basic needs of families and communities; electricity and access to clean water are often non-existent. Sisters are teaching women about **solar energy- solar cookers** for preparing meals and purifying water and small panels to charge lamps for light, and

about **bio-fuels** produced from animal waste that can also be used for cooking and light. These technologies not only save women hours of searching for wood and water, but give them time to learn to read, write, and calculate. Solar and bio-fuel power are also used in sisters' clinics and schools. Solar energy powers pumps to bring water to schools. Stu-

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dents no longer need to spend hours of their school day searching for water and can study at night. Delivering babies or doing emergency surgeries by candlelight or the headlights of a truck is replaced by turning on a solar switch or lighting a gas lamp. These projects are small and community-based, but highly effective in bringing about the fulfillment of the millennium goals.

Food security and environmental preservation can lead to development of **healthy communities**. Sisters provide training in sustainable agriculture, forestry, nutrition, and water technologies. Traditional methods and use of commercial fertilizers are no longer viable for small farmers. Fertilizers are too expensive and frequently destroy the soil's nutrients, creating new health problems. The earth needs regeneration and better seeds need to be planted. Some say that sustainable farming cannot feed the world. Small farmers say, "We are not here to feed the world. We are here to feed ourselves." **Communal farming** is another strategy sisters use to teach women to work together in food production. Such methods

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often include **micro-lending programs** enabling women to generate income to provide good health care and education for their children.

Sisters also create access to adequate **healthcare**. In Latin America, Asia, and Africa, sisters are learning to produce and effectively use natural medicines because commercial ones are often inaccessible. These new methods cost less and give communities alternatives that are safe and better controlled than traditional ones that, although helpful, frequently led to complications or worsened conditions.

Developing partnerships with women and community leaders is daily activity for sisters who know that ownership is the basis for long-term community

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development. They are also honing **skills of collaboration** with national and international organizations of sisters, civic leaders, and international partners. One example is a recent meeting in Rome of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) where leaders of women's religious congregations affirmed the necessity of solidarity with and partnering among sisters from the developed and developing world. A similar building of solidarity is evident in the sisters' growing ability to apply for grants from national and international agencies involving them more deeply in global collaboration.

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

The sisters' stories in *Seeds of Hope* are reflective of their commitment to live and work for change among the poorest of the poor, particularly women, whose lives of poverty are

deeply rooted in gender bias. This bias not only disenfranchises women but keeps entire communities underdeveloped. Once women are freed from various oppressions they can become contributing members of society, and communities thrive. Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, in their book *Half the Sky*, confirm the sisters' experience, but they also reveal how difficult it is to change entrenched patriarchal systems that keep women ignorant of their dignity and talent as persons.

While many countries have laws that provide for women's rights, they lack enforcement and promulgation. Only education can counteract the intractable cultural beliefs and practices that keep girls from school, and women from owning the land on which they labor, from having voice in their homes or communities, from being victims of domestic and community abuse and from perceptions that they are expendable – the last to be considered for food or healthcare. According to the 2005 World Health Organization report, maternal mortality is the highest cause of death among women in the developing world because of poor nutrition, the young age at which they become pregnant, and lack of access to pre- and post-natal care. The sisters' commitment to convincing women that they have more value than their strength to engage in hard labor, the money they bring to the family in child marriages, and their ability to bear children is challenging and at times heartbreaking.

REFLECTION

The image of the mustard seed in Matthew 13:31-32 is most appropriate for reflection on the seeds of hope being planted by sisters worldwide. Scripture says that although the mustard seed is the smallest of seeds, it produces a tree whose branches provide comfort, food and sustenance for many creatures. The small, creative community projects of sisters worldwide, flourishing in the most difficult of places, are bringing about the gospel story but are rarely recognized or acknowledged by local church authorities

or the global community. Although the sisters hold little or no social or political power in the church or society, they hold personal and communal power in skills to empower others. Their efforts are contributing to the accomplishment of Millennium Development Goals.

ACTION

These seed-stories of hope promote the Millennium Goals, but they need nurture and sustenance. Hence, there is great need for us in the developed world to renew our commitment to promoting them by participating even in small ways. I suggest two simple ways to build solidarity with women religious in their development efforts.

One: promote recognition of sisters' activities in both the secular and religious worlds. Secular NGOs and sisters often share similar goals, but they are unaware of each other. Many of our church communities are ignorant of sisters' contributions locally or globally. The hierarchy of our church rarely gives public recognition to the value and contributions of these women and seems unaware how this lack of voice and recognition inhibits the church's growth worldwide. Giving voice to their stories is within our capacity and competency.

Two: share resources. Sisters in developing countries have few resources; their communities, countries, and churches are poor. They struggle daily to become educated and trained for needed ministries; many labor without even a secondary education. Small funding contributions, "the widow's mite," can go a long way to support the growth of the seeds of hope. Building solidarity by partnering with these women whose stories promote the Millennium Goals can bring about the dramatic changes needed in the global community.

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