



NETWORK 
Connection

PEOPLE LOBBYING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE • NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2007

**Poverty and
Our Global
Family:
Advent Call
to Solidarity**

dear members

I have a keychain from a friend that has the "countdown" to the end of the current presidency. I must say that I can hardly wait! Repeated revelations of the abuse of power, use of torture, and greed in the privatization of government services take my breath away.

Congress is only a half step better. Monetary earmarks continue to fund pet projects. And the rhetoric is often more about "gotcha politics" than what is good for our country.

This underscores for us that WE HAVE TO MAKE A CHANGE. It is not just about electing a new president or Congress. We must engage our government and demand something better, something new. Let's make a firm pact with each other—we will use 2008 to turn a corner and shake up voter apathy. Let us celebrate civic engagement—and take our country back!

Let's work to register voters and make sure that they vote. Let's honor first-time voters with parties for them all over the country. Let's celebrate doing things differently. Let's ask hard questions of our candidates, and let's vote for the common good. The time to make a change is NOW —Let's do election '08 differently!

Simone Campbell, SSS

"We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born."

—Meister Eckhart



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NETWORK

A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby

NETWORK—a Catholic leader in the global movement for justice and peace—educates, organizes and lobbies for economic and social transformation.

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call to conversion

BY SIMONE CAMPBELL, SSS

Recently, I was puzzled during a meeting with a congressional staffer. After talking about the economic needs of people living in poverty in the United States and Iraq and what I thought we should do to respond, the staffer responded with something like, “But, Sister, don’t you know that Jesus said that the poor will always be with us?” This was offered as an explanation (or I would say an excuse) for not signing on to an economic development program that we were advocating.

The encounter made me ask the question: What did Jesus mean by this statement? Instinctively, I have always known that it was not a rationale for refusing to change the economic disparities of our world.

So why then did Jesus say it?

Ironically, I believe that Jesus might have meant it as a piece of good news for us in our time —news of opportunity. But how can this be? I don’t mean to romanticize poverty. Poverty is just plain hard. It is terrifying to worry about getting enough food or next month’s rent. It is daunting to wrestle with a bureaucracy for healthcare or food stamps. It must be humiliating to beg on the streets. To live this way is to know a level of desperation that seems far from the reign of God.

But our age and culture of wealth

also seem to pull us far from this reign. In the U.S., we are told over and over to “make it on our own” and “pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.” Our age of individualism has spawned the notion that “self-fulfillment” is accomplished by the isolated “self,” and self-help books have mushroomed into a whole industry. But all of this effort seems only to increase the loneliness and isolation of our time. We see this in a malaise that substitutes “reality television” for real relationships and a fear-based political life for one built on the common good. Albert Nolan puts it, “Rampant individualism leads to the limitless accumulation of wealth by some while billions of others live in misery and die of starvation.” (Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom, 2007)

It is in the context of rampant individualism and consumerism that Jesus’ statement becomes good news and a message of hope. Rather than serving as an excuse for doing nothing, it becomes the gateway to a conversion of heart. In my view, Jesus is saying that there will always be gateways for us to enter if we follow in his path.

Following Jesus is very difficult in our individualistic nation, with our growing wealth disparity. We have built a society based on consumption of

resources, goods and services. Remember that after the tragedy of September 11, 2001, President Bush told us that it was our patriotic duty to go shopping! Our standard of living (that we are scrambling to maintain) is based on keeping for “me and mine.”

But the way of Jesus is the opposite. To walk this path, we are called to let go of our self-sufficiency and share our time, talent and treasure. As long as there is poverty, there will always be new ways to learn what discipleship means. Maybe this should be the measure of this Advent—are we working to bring about the reign of God through responding to the needs of people living in poverty? Are we working together to be an antidote to the rampant individualism of our age? For NETWORK, this means working on federal policy. In our local communities, it might mean responding to the needs of specific families. But at whatever level, I rejoice that there will always be around me opportunities for conversion. I eagerly await the next time a staffer puts me off by quoting this scripture since I might finally have a worthy response. This is a call to conversion, not an excuse for inaction!

Simone Campbell, SSS, is NETWORK’s Executive Director.



Advent Journey

By DONNA GRIMES

Advent has its own predictable rhythm. For four weeks, we light a sequence of purple and pink candles circled within an evergreen wreath. We sing ancient verses of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” Then, as children count down to Christmas, adults struggle to grow spiritually amid the chaos of ever expanding holiday preparations and the mundane busyness of life. Many of us desire a powerful element of surprise.

This year, the Advent liturgical season awakens us with an invitation to climb God’s mountain so we may be instructed and walk in God’s paths. (Isaiah 2:3)

Perhaps this year we will find ourselves freshly immersed in the Word of God. Otherwise, if we are not careful, we can be easily distracted by the shimmer and tradition of the “holiday season” that have become the annual build-up to the re-enactment of the Nativity story. We may forget that Jesus was born a poor child of an oppressed people. Aside from quick references to having been wrapped in rags (swaddling clothes) and laid in a trough where animals ate (a manger), what do we understand about the reality and significance of Jesus’ life in poverty?

Poverty and Solidarity

Poverty is a central theme in the messianic story. God left heaven to become one of us in all things but sin, choosing to be born into a poor family with

all of the burdens and challenges that accompany a life of poverty. Thus, Jesus identifies intimately with those who are poor in the world and invites us to do the same. Jesus calls us to be in solidarity with poor and low-income people in this country and around the world. Perhaps an intentional focus on poverty could open the doors of our hearts to new and surprising encounters with Jesus in this Advent season.

Poverty—what a curious backdrop for pre-Christmas devotion. How would reflection on economic poverty influence our gift-giving, card sending and decorating? Would spending time in prayerful study and meditation about poverty in Jesus’ day as well as our own have any appreciable effect on our approach to the abundance of food and festivity encountered at this time of the year?

During designated holy times of the year we often confront our spiritual poverty and the spiritual deficits in the world. Yet, how and when are we prompted to face the injustice of economic disparities and the sin of vast poverty in our world and nation? How does the world look from below the poverty line?

If we believe that the Word of God gives us valuable insight into God’s priorities and intentions, then we understand that the subject of economic poverty is of the utmost significance to God. “There may be no subject in Scripture so fully addressed as the work of

solidarity. The Psalms praise God, who loves justice and mercy and hears the cries of [those who are] poor. The Proverbs remind us to listen to and be kind to [people who are] poor. The prophets cry out for justice...One can hardly open the Scriptures without finding reference to God’s command to live our lives in solidarity, especially with those who are poor.” (*Solidarity with the Poor*, U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996)

Is it not enough to wish one another, “peace on earth, goodwill toward all” and pray, “God bless us, everyone”? Given all the concerns of our lives and the world, why focus specifically on poverty?

There is a strong connection between peace and justice for people who are poor and vulnerable. Poverty is not only the result of injustice; it is also a great impediment to peace and security. Solidarity is the remedy.

As the prophet admonishes, “Justice will bring about peace. Right will produce calm and security.” (Isaiah 32:17) If we miss the connection between justice and poverty in this sense, it may be because our modern, colloquial understanding of justice often is skewed by the secular concept of crime and retribution. Biblical justice, on the other hand, refers to being in right relationship with God and others, and it always includes concern for and compassion towards those who are poor and marginalized.

Can We Ignore the Suffering?

How can we live our lives unmoved by the suffering of those who are living in poverty when the data tell us that:

- 2.8 billion people live on less than \$2 a day
- 1.2 billion people live on less than \$1 a day
- 37 million Americans live below the poverty threshold
- 30,000 children worldwide die every day because of poverty
- 1 in 2 children worldwide lives in poverty
- 1 in 6 children in the U.S. lives in poverty
- 1.1 billion people have inadequate access to water

- 2.6 billion people lack basic sanitation; and
- millions of women spend several hours each day just collecting water.

Likewise, how can we ignore the suffering of so many in the human family when God has given us these commandments?

Love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. (LUKE 10:27-28)

Let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. (1 JOHN 3:18)

There are many ways to help alleviate global and domestic poverty, including working in your own community with national Catholic organizations such as

Catholic Charities, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and NETWORK. The initial thought from our willing hearts may be to make a donation or to volunteer our services. Financial contributions and direct service are vital. Yet, it is also essential to work to remove the causes of poverty. This course of social action (social change) is often more challenging, but it is necessary and rewarding.

If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (JAMES 2:15-17)

If someone who has worldly means sees a brother (or sister) in need and refuses him (or her) compassion, how can the love of God remain in him (or her)? (1 JOHN 3:17)

In his 1967 encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI taught us that, "It is not just a question of eliminating hunger and reducing poverty. It is not just a question of fighting wretched conditions, though this is an urgent and necessary task. It involves building a human community where everyone can live truly human lives, free from discrimination...free from servitude to others or to natural forces which they cannot yet control satisfactorily."

Remember, the goal is solidarity. We are not called to save the world. Jesus already did that. We are called to love one another as we love ourselves.

"The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the followers of Christ." (*Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II, 1965)

Solidarity in Action

What does solidarity in action look like? The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) provides many clear and hopeful examples. CCHD is the domestic anti-poverty, social justice



program of the U.S. Catholic bishops. It carries out its mission of addressing the root causes of U.S. poverty by supporting the community-based self-help initiatives of poor and low-income people and by building solidarity with non-poor Catholics to work together for lasting solutions to poverty and injustice.

CCHD-supported community organizing and economic development projects provide affordable housing, better schools, safer neighborhoods, community-owned enterprises, employment, health care services, expanded public transportation, and similar relief for families and individuals struggling with poverty. Often the solutions they work toward reflect new insights and innovative approaches to common problems. This happens precisely because these projects are the result of poor and low-income people coming together to identify their needs, develop strategies, and advocate for themselves, often in collaboration with their middle- and upper-income neighbors. The success of these efforts takes the form of legislation, worker-owner businesses, collaborative partnerships, new sources of funding, civic education programs, and improved business practices.



RENNIE COMEAU

End asked their hosts to teach them a trade. Haley House, which receives grant support from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, responded by offering training in bakery skills after the day's last meal was served in the soup kitchen.

"The demand for both the training and the baked goods grew rapidly. Haley House opened a storefront bakery and later expanded the three-month breads-and-sweets course to a six-month program that now includes preparation of soups, salads and sandwiches, customer relations and basic business principles.

"More than 70 trainees

have completed the program and found work in the Boston area. According to Haley House Executive Director Kathe McKenna, the bakery profession typically pays a living wage and is one of the few industries open to people who may have a criminal record.

"The bakery training program has expanded in several directions to meet the needs of the trainees and the demands of the market. On the bakery side, the trainees are producing muffins and organic pizza dough for wholesale clients. At-risk teens participate in a cooking class taught by the bakery café's head chef and a local police officer. And so many non-profit organizations in Boston asked for catering services that the catering department holds the promise of putting the bakery café in the black during its march to profitability as a model business.

"Kathe says that 'the way we do what we're doing is an important part of our mission,' which is summarized in the bakery café motto, 'nourishing our community while fostering economic independence.'"

Called to Action

What did you learn about poverty from this story? Are there similar efforts in your community? Do you know the needs of poor and low-income people in your area? How might you help by working in solidarity with poor and low-income people in your community? If you don't know, how might you find out? One step could be to talk with your CCHD Diocesan Director or the Social Action Director in your diocese. Also,



PHOTOS COURTESY DIDI EMMONS, HALEY HOUSE

A Justice Story

What does justice for people in poverty look like? The following is a true CCHD-success story from Haley House in Boston, Massachusetts. It is taken directly from CCHD's online archive at www.usccb.org/cchd/featurearchive.shtml.

"Ten years ago, a group of regular guests at Haley House's popular soup kitchen in Boston's gentrifying South

Left and above: Participants in the Haley House training program. See www.haleyhouse.org.

to learn more about poverty in the U.S., visit www.povertyusa.org and www.usccb.org/cchd.

If you want to make a significant global impact, Google “U.N. Millennium Development Goals” and direct your efforts accordingly. Along the same lines, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has excellent resources for building awareness and taking action to address poverty outside the U.S. Visit CRS on the Web at www.crs.org.

Whether your attention lands on international or domestic poverty, building solidarity remains the goal. Achieving true solidarity requires awareness of poverty and compassion. Solidarity is a virtue that can be cultivated.

Building solidarity with people in poverty requires work and prayerful consideration. The process involves give-and-take, compromise, and struggling to understand and overcome perceived differences. Cultivating solidarity is a means of growing that, as with other forms of personal and spiritual development, brings us unanticipated challenges and grace.

What thoughts do you have in

response to the following examples of Catholic Social Teaching?

“Those who are more influential... should feel responsible for the weaker and be ready to share with them all they possess. Those who are weaker, for their part, in the same spirit of solidarity, should not adopt a purely passive attitude or one that is destructive of the social fabric, but, while claiming their legitimate rights, should do what they can for the good of all. The intermediate groups, in their turn, should not selfishly insist on their particular interests, but respect the interests of others.” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Pope John Paul II, 1987)

“It is one thing to give intellectual assent to the notion that we are all members of one human family. It is quite another to believe that we are family. Cultivating the virtue of solidarity helps us to grow in our belief that we are one family, with God as Father and Mother to us all...The work of love is solidarity in action.” (*Solidarity with the Poor*, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996)

How do these statements inform your understanding of God’s intentions and priorities concerning solidarity with

people who are poor and vulnerable? In response, what actions could you (will you) take today to practice solidarity?

One of the best opportunities for cultivating genuine solidarity and increasing compassion is through JustFaith Ministries, which offers outstanding parish-based social justice formation programs for adults and older teens. Check out JustFaith at www.justfaith.org. JustFaith’s mission is “empowering people of faith to develop a passion and thirst for justice.”

This year, let us include our brothers and sisters living in poverty in our circle of love and concern as we light the Advent wreath. May God’s light and favor shine on all of us. And, may our compassionate and merciful God guide us together, side-by-side, on the path of justice.

Donna Grimes is Poverty Education and Outreach Coordinator at the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.



Heated Battles on Budget Priorities and Children's Healthcare ...but There's Good News on Housing Trust Fund

By SIMONE CAMPBELL, SSS, MARGE CLARK, BVM, CATHERINE PINKERTON, CSJ, AND JON GROMEK

This is a busy time for NETWORK, with movement on many of our issues and Congress and President Bush engaged in a battle over spending priorities. These next few weeks will be critical as House and Senate leadership strategize about moving an FY 2008 budget past threatened White House vetoes. The president insists that discretionary spending stay within his \$933 billion target. Congress is proposing an additional \$23 billion, primarily to address human needs.

Keep up the calls, letters and emails to Congress and the White House to ensure that government is working for the common good.

Children's Health Insurance

The reauthorization of SCHIP, the State Children's Health Insurance Program, has been contentious. On October 3, President Bush ignored the pleas of healthcare and children's advocates as he vetoed the bipartisan compromise bill that came out of the conference committee. On October 18, the House failed to override the veto. The tally was 273 to 156, which was 13 votes short of the necessary two-thirds majority of the representatives voting.

The compromise bill closely followed the contours of the earlier Senate version, including a \$35 billion increase in funding over five years to be paid for by a 61-cent increase in the cigarette tax. Unfortunately, legal immigrants in residence for less than five years were not



NETWORK Lobbyist Catherine Pinkerton, CSJ, calls for passage of SCHIP bill at Capitol Hill press conference. Appearing with her are Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) and other legislators and faith leaders.

included. Despite this major disappointment, NETWORK supported the bill as a step in the right direction since it would provide healthcare for an additional 4 million children.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) said Democrats would immediately begin work on another bill to send to the president.

NETWORK intends to continue our advocacy for SCHIP. All children, including immigrants, deserve access to healthcare.

Trade

NETWORK in alliance with the Interfaith Working Group on International Trade and Investment has continued our efforts to encourage Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY), Chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, to oppose pending trade agreements as they are now written with Peru, Colombia, Panama and South Korea. Our advocacy is based on the

agreements' negative impact on farmers and poor and indigenous people and the need to develop a just trade policy worthy of the United States. Faith principles that guide our analysis of these agreements, as well as the broad global outreach of our religious communities, who can validly testify to their effects, make us important voices in the formulation of trade policies. We have met with numerous legislators and staffers, always stressing the critical

need to see trade as a vehicle of mutual development for all partners to an agreement.

Budget

Before the August recess, the House passed all twelve appropriations bills. Overall, however, completion of the appropriations process promises to be long in coming. The Senate has passed roughly half of its bills, and none of these have gone to conference. Additionally, the president has vowed to veto at least seven of the twelve bills for appropriating funding above his recommendations. The pay-as-you-go rule reestablished this session is creating difficulty as legislators battle over where funds can be cut or new sources of revenue adopted to pay for proposed increases.

A Continuing Resolution was passed, which will allow the government to continue functioning into FY 2008, which began on October 1. The resolution will expire on November 16. NETWORK continues to advocate for a budget that serves the common good.



Need up-to-date information about legislation in Congress? Check out NETWORK's Legislative Action Center at <http://capwiz.com/networklobby/issues/bills/>. ★ To learn what happened to legislation you followed in the past, go to <http://capwiz.com/networklobby/issues/votes/> and enter your zip code in the "Key Votes" field.

National Affordable Housing Trust Fund

In the early 1980s, President Reagan forced the reduction of affordable housing production by approximately 75%. H.R. 2895, the National Affordable Housing Trust Fund, is the first new legislation since 1990 to increase production of affordable housing. It focuses on extremely low-income families, defined as families making less than 30% of the median income in a given area. The trust would fund construction or rehabilitation of 1.5 million units over a 10-year period, allowing for long-term planning without the uncertainty of the annual appropriations process.

Authorization of the National Affordable Housing Trust Fund (H.R. 2895) passed in the House on October 10th by a vote of 264–148. During the summer, the House approved funding from Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac (H.R. 1427), both government-sponsored enterprises, and from Federal Housing Authority profits (H.R. 1852).

We continue to work to secure a strong base of support through gaining co-sponsors for a comparable set of bills in the Senate. We hope that they will be introduced by December.

Farm Bill

The House passed its version of the farm bill in July, but the Senate continues to struggle with the difficult task of drawing up its own version. Without strong leadership on either side of the aisle, action has stalled. Senate Chairmen Harkin (D-IA) of the Agriculture Committee, Baucus (D-MT) of the Finance Committee, and Conrad (D-ND) of the Budget Committee are all vying for influence. There has been heated debate between senators over bill drafts in the Senate Finance and Agriculture committees.

The Senate Finance Committee passed



an agricultural tax package, the funding section of the bill, on October 4 by a vote of 13–8. The package finances programs with strong support from Senators Baucus and Conrad, including the Agricultural Disaster Relief Trust Fund, which

assists farmers during major agricultural disasters such as drought or floods, and \$3.8 billion in tax credits for farmers participating in the Conservation Reserve Program.

Senator Harkin will have his chance to push his priorities in the mark-up. Provisions in the tax package passed by the Finance Committee failed to adequately address many of the issues raised by religious groups. NETWORK and our partners are disappointed at the lack of attention to our priorities, and will continue to push

for more focus on alleviating poverty and hunger through nutrition programs, protecting our natural resources, and promoting development in rural communities in the U.S. and around the world. We need you to contact your senator and key committee members to call attention to these priorities. Check NETWORK's Web site for the latest news and ways to take action.

Iraq

While much of the discussion on Capitol Hill is focused on the U.S. troop deployment, NETWORK continues its work to make a difference in the lives of ordinary Iraqis. In December and January, focus is expected to fall

on the escalating humanitarian crisis in Iraq. An estimated 4.5 million Iraqis are refugees outside of their country or displaced within Iraq, and the United Nations High Commission on Refugees is coordinating a response to meet the basic needs of these families. The U.S. needs to increase its participation in an effort to provide a safe and secure place for these families fleeing violence in their homes.

Additionally, NETWORK continues to work to secure funding for Iraqi-led community organizing efforts and conflict resolution training. Through our on-the-ground partners, we have heard heartwarming stories of incremental progress. It is slow but steady.

Only by keeping the funding in place for these vital programs will there ever be anything approaching stability in Iraq and the region.

Immigration

Since Congress failed to pass comprehensive immigration reform last summer, NETWORK, like many of its coalition

partners, has shifted its work to a more piecemeal approach. The latest focus has been on the DREAM Act, which would give young people who have grown up in the U.S. a path to obtaining immigration documents. The focus of our work has been in the Senate, where Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) has promised that the bill will come to the Senate floor before the end of this session of the 110th Congress. This important legislation would be a step to remedy the predicament of many young people who are contributing effectively to our society, but live in its shadows for lack of proper documentation.

Marge Clark, BVM, and Catherine Pinkerton, CSJ, are NETWORK lobbyists. Simone Campbell, SSS, is NETWORK's Executive Director. Jon Gromek is NETWORK's Field Associate.

Africans Care for the Common



As an Ethiopian, I Have to Help

By ESHETWA GEBREYESUS

I grew up in Debrbrhane, which is in North Shawa in Ethiopia. My mother and my father were also born there, and my mother still lives there. I was married there and had three children. I first studied at the Selassie Ethiopian Orthodox church, and then at public schools named Ata Zerikobe and Hailmarimemamo.

When I was in 6th grade I was aware that people from North Walo, an area north of my town where there was a drought, did not have enough to eat and didn't have clothing to wear. The government moved them to a new area to plant food, and the people in my area helped them by giving them food and other things they needed. I saw babies crying because their mothers were dying or couldn't give them breast milk. I was shocked.

Our churches were also poor so they couldn't help the people. That's why the people in our community stepped in.

We didn't know these people, but we knew we were the same, brothers and sisters, so we knew we had to help. It didn't matter what their religion was. Everyone is the same.

Later, when I was an adult and separated from my husband, I knew that I needed help too, so I moved in with my family. My mother, father, aunt, uncle, sister and other family members helped my children and me. I was lucky because I had a family to help. I struggled to be

somebody so I could support my children and myself.

Around me, many other people also struggled and people able to help gave them food and other assistance. In our country, people want to help each other.

Later, I came to the United States, followed by my children, and I struggled to get a better life for us. I worked as a daycare assistant, in the dining room of a senior living facility, in an Ethiopian restaurant, at a 7-11, and as a caregiver for older people. I am now studying to be a nursing assistant, and I am pushing my children and godchildren to get a good education so they can live and do well.

I struggled to be someone, and now that I have money, I have to support my family members and others who need help. I send money for food and clothing. My mother tells me about someone who is sick and needs to go to a hospital, and I send money. I am a human being, and I know what it is to struggle so I have to help. My sister, aunt and mother in Ethiopia don't have jobs so I support them, too. I also send money to my cousins when they tell me they need it.

Everybody from my county who lives a better life in the U.S. needs to support our families and other people in our country. How can we ever watch people suffer when we have food on our own tables? We have to help.

In our Ethiopian Orthodox church

Left: Ethiopian farmers in the Shawa region. Above: Author's neighbors share a meal. Photos courtesy of the author.

here, we also hear about how we need to assist our people. One of our priests is now going back to Ethiopia so he can help directly. He asks us for clothing and money to take along. My friend is also giving him a sewing machine so he can help people find work.

When I see homeless people in the street here in the United States, I try to buy lunch or juice for them. I didn't expect to see homeless people in such a rich country. I don't know how they became homeless. In my country, I know that a drought or something like that causes homelessness. I think that the rich people here in the United States should help poor people through the government. Church people should help, too.

We have a better life here, and we pray for peace and prosperity for everyone in Ethiopia and everywhere else.

Eshetwa Gebreyesus currently lives in Virginia, where she works in a restaurant and as a caregiver. She is studying to be a nursing assistant.



Ngwa Sisters of Nigeria Reach Out from the U.S.

By JOY UGO WIGWE

I am a founding member of Ngwa Sisters United, Inc. (NSU), a group organized in 1995 by Ngwa women in Washington, DC. We are making a difference in communities in the United States and our home country of Nigeria, and are working to preserve our sense of shared culture for ourselves and for our American-born children.

Like the other NSU members, I grew up in Ngwaland, which covers an area of about 520 square miles, situated in the tropical rain forest of the Southern Igbo (Ibo) plain in the present Abia State, Eastern Nigeria. It is a low-lying flat country with an annual rainfall of between 80 and 100 inch-



Ngwa Sisters United, and a Nigerian family and primary school which they support.

es, and temperature of about 80°F. It is a fertile land rich in agricultural food production. Growing up, I lived in the city, but my parents would take us to visit our village during holidays. The villagers really understood the meaning of community. They would choose a day, and everyone would work together to address community needs, such as cleaning the roads.

I came to the United States to attend college. In 1992, I began working with nonprofits and developed a deep appreciation for their work, which I wanted to

extend to my people. When I was growing up, the things Nigerians lack now, such as healthcare, schools and social services, were in abundance. The government made sure that people were taken care of. But during the oil boom in the 1970s, we lost our community culture to an emerging "me first" attitude. Nigeria suffered through military coups and extreme government corruption. Government officials began filling their own pockets rather than serving communities. A former governor in my home state took millions and millions of dollars for himself while schools and hospitals became defunct.

Through NSU, we are trying to create an awareness of poverty in Nigeria. In our home country, we are trying to help people repair and run healthcare centers and schools. We are also trying to help people here, where we make up grocery bags for poor families for Thanksgiving. I feel so blessed to be able to serve, both here and in my home country.

Joy Ugo Wigwe is NETWORK's IT Coordinator. For more information about NSU, see www.ngwasisters.org.



Helping Nigeria's Poor Villagers

By DR. OBINNA UBANI-EBERE

Nigeria's poor villagers include children, parents, elders, youth, homeless people, orphans, widows, widowers, peasant farmer and college graduates who live with no money or on less than 50 cents a day. Poor villagers are thirsty but have no access to clean drinking water. They have no money to buy clothes, and they are homeless. They are motherless and fatherless babies who need milk, love, care and comfort. They are AIDS victims whom nobody wants to touch. They are people incapacitated by strokes and other illnesses. They are sick children with no access to hospitals.

Why are Nigeria's villagers poor?

The main causes of village poverty in Nigeria include:

- lack of government actions meant to address the common needs of poor citizens
- corruption and ineffective government
- limited access to social and support services
- village illiteracy, unemployment and low incomes
- unequal distribution of wealth

- capital flight by political and economic gatekeepers to foreign countries
- lack of village investment, subsidies or access to village microfinance
- lack of vital infrastructure and institutions
- lack of village capacity-building
- lack of information, awareness and enlightenment.

What we are doing about it

Helping the poor villagers in Nigeria has become a project of individual groups residing outside the country. For instance, members of my ethnic group (the Ngwa people from the Ibo tribe) who reside in North America are making concerted efforts to award scholarships to children from impoverished families, renovate school buildings, provide school uniforms and school materials, provide free health clinics, and fund low interest loans to farmers and small traders.

Dr. Obinna Ubani-Ebere is the former President of the Ngwa National Association USA. For more information about how you can contribute to their health projects in Nigeria, go to www.ngwahealth.org.

We Do What We Can

By PAULA MERRILL, SCN

Holmes County is located partly in the Delta and partly in the “hills” of rural central Mississippi. The people here are economically poor and suffer from many chronic diseases. There is limited access to healthcare because of financial constraints and because a million people in the state lack health insurance.

I am fortunate to minister in healthcare at the Lexington Rural Health Clinic. The clinic is part of the University of Mississippi Medical Center, and we do not refuse to see anyone regardless of ability to pay.



Communion of Saints

When I see the faces of people here, I see the communion of saints.

I see Willie Paul, a man in his 50s who cannot read because he never had the opportunity to go to school. He has worked in cotton fields all of his life. He found out that he has diabetes when he had a foot infection and needed a partial foot amputation. Afterwards, he could not afford his medicine. Four years ago, a state representative referred him to our clinic. We are able to help him get the medicine he needs through the assistance programs of pharmaceutical companies. He faithfully keeps his appointments and continues to work at a cotton plantation.



I see Otis, a four-year-old who sustained burns to his foot after falling against a wood stove used to heat the house. His mother brought him for daily dressing changes. The other children in the family always wore the same clothes when they accompanied him to the appointments. At Christmas, the staff of the clinic collected money to give gifts to Otis' family. They bought clothes and other necessities for each family member.

I see Miss Betty, a woman in her 50s, who worked at a chicken processing plant. She lived from one paycheck to the next but was able to make ends meet. Miss Betty had a heart attack and bypass surgery and is no longer able to work. She needed help with her rent so, again, the generous people in her life collected from their meager savings and paid it for her.



I see Tasha, a ten-year-old sick with a fever, and her mother. The family's home was recently destroyed by fire so they moved to Mississippi to live with relatives. Although Tasha's mother had applied for Medicaid/SCHIP, the complicated bureaucracy prevented her enrollment. She was embarrassed because she could not even obtain non-prescription medicine for her child's fever.

I see Rosalind, whose 20-year-old son was shot and killed. She did not have the resources to pay for a funeral. Church members, coworkers and friends collected and helped with the funeral expenses.

We Help Each Other

Earlier this year, a school in another state adopted the clinic. The children at that school donated books, stuffed animals, school supplies and other items to share with the clinic patients. Our children here are so excited when they receive one of these donated gifts.

There is a Catholic sister, now in her early 90s, who had served in Mississippi for years. She stays connected to people



in poverty by running a thrift store in Kentucky and donating the profits from the store to help the patients in our clinic. All who have benefited from these funds in any way have been very grateful.

These stories are repeated again and again. People are sustained and lifted up by their faith. The churches are the mainstay of their lives. Their belief in a God who loves them is evident. People open their hearts and homes, willing to share what little they have with someone in need.

I have been blessed to serve the health needs of many people in Mississippi for 26 years and hope to be able to do so for many more years. We simply do what we can wherever God places us.

Paula Merrill, SCN, is a nurse-practitioner in rural Mississippi. Photos courtesy of the author.

Advent—A Time to Re-imagine and Change the World

“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up in mine, then let us work together.”

—ABORIGINAL ACTIVIST SISTER

During Advent, we echo God’s gift of Jesus to the world through the generous actions of holiday charity. Clothing drives, food collections and opportunities to donate money come from almost every faith organization throughout the country.

Yet, with all the opportunities to give, it can be easy to lose sight of why we give or if what we are giving is what Christ would ask of us. Advent calls every person of faith to re-imagine our world anew through eyes of hope and love, just as our world was transformed when Christ set it on fire with a new way of peace, compassion and justice.

What would it mean to re-imagine our world in such a way? And why is Advent such an important time to consider our own role in the preparation for Christ’s coming?

Take a moment to reflect on all that you do or all that you hope to do in response to your call as a person of faith and a disciple of justice. We are each pulled in many directions, spreading ourselves thin by our many attempts



to build a better tomorrow. The needs of our world demand attention and the pain of our most vulnerable populations cries out for relief.

As we consider the meaning of Advent, reflect for just a few minutes on what the message means to you, right now, in your own daily experiences. Ask yourself some of the following questions:

- What does the “common good” mean to me?
- How have I sought to address the needs of the world?
- What gifts and talents do I have that I can share with others?
- How are my resources, gifts and talents unique?
- How have those who are “needy” impacted my own life and heart?
- What are my own needs?
- Do I offer my needs to those whose needs I attempt to fulfill?

Written by NETWORK Associates Kathleen Byrne and Jon Gromek.

We encourage the reproduction and distribution of this back-to-back fact sheet.

Walking through Advent with the Two Feet of Social Action

We all need both feet firmly planted in charity and justice if we are to follow Jesus' example of compassionate action that transforms the world.

Walking in those footsteps, however, can sometimes seem a daunting task. Solidarity with our neighbor may seem an unreachable goal. Here are some small ways we can integrate the footsteps of charity and justice into our everyday lives, from the book, *The Revolution: a Field Manual for Changing Your World* (www.relevantbooks.com).

- Mentor youth.
- Get to know someone who asks you for money on your way to work—invite the person out for a meal.
- When it's cold, give someone on the street the jacket off your back.
- Explore volunteer opportunities on Web sites like www.volunteermatch.org and www.211.org.
- Instead of just giving a donation, fast and pray—and then give money to an international hunger charity.
- Attend a conference on social justice.
- Study the writings of Church fathers and mothers. They can be just the kick in the pants one needs to do something!
- Shop conscientiously.

And invite someone you know to be part of NETWORK's mission of educating, organizing and lobbying for economic and social transformation! www.networklobby.org



- Plant an organic garden and share your harvest with friends, neighbors and those who are poor.
- Tithe and develop a relationship with the organizations and causes you support.
- Help your neighbors and get to know the people in your community.
- Write letters to elected officials about issues that trouble you. Get involved in local politics, and don't forget to vote!
- Subscribe to or buy "street" newspapers often published by local homeless coalitions and sold on the streets by persons experiencing homelessness. Get to know a vendor.

Wisdom from NETWORK Board Members

"The only Jesus whom many people in poverty will see, read or know about, is in those who give not just material gifts but their time, heart, knowledge, etc. They must be able to see your care in the giving. During Advent, we need to do more than just write a check; we need to meet with the people in the organizations to which we are giving, see the money and ministry in action. We must hold each other accountable. Christ came and gave the world hope when there was despair. Is there a life that you have touched?"

—Linda Howell-Perrin, Cincinnati

"People are taught to be different. The rich are taught to be rich, and people in poverty receive education that teaches them to be different, to be poor... At Advent, it is critical that we prepare for the coming of Christ by becoming involved with someone else. Take a risk. Step out there and do something. Do something with another group of people... different from you, and begin breaking down those barriers that separate us."

—Barbara Lange, Raywood TX

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NETWORK—A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
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TO EDUCATE FOR JUSTICE

BY SARA DWYER, ASC

This section of the *Connection* is called “Making a Difference.” Really, what does that mean?

I believe I have made a difference in people’s lives whenever I served in solidarity with people who are impoverished or marginalized. In mid-April, I began a new job as NETWORK Education Program Coordinator. I trust that, with your help, I can continue to work toward “making a difference.”

I have heard your stories and learned of your legislative advocacy and outreach services. I have read with pride about the many efforts and accomplishments of NETWORK members and staff. Little things can make a difference—one phone call, a letter, a response to an alert, a visit to a legislator, attendance at a town hall meeting, or participation in social justice events. Your generosity, commitment, energy and faithful citizenship certainly give testimony to making a difference. I am eager to continue with you in this justice journey.

In my new role, I will make every effort to support, develop and expand our educational programs for legislative advocacy, voter education and civic engagement. Continuing NETWORK’s mission of lobbying, educating and organizing in “the global movement for justice and peace” is a clarion call as we face an election year.

In the coming months, we will have a great opportunity to ensure that our election-year candidates and elected officials address the root causes of poverty, economic inequality and systemic injustices. Along with other resources, we plan to post an Election Proclamation Scroll on our Web site as we ask you to help in this effort.

During this time, our education Web pages will begin to offer more resources for personal and professional use. Some of the pieces we hope to offer are: voter education materials with links, study

guides and analysis tools; civic engagement materials on topics and strategies for legislative advocacy; and interactive options to engage your gifts, concerns and questions.

Two special election-year opportunities will be a section entitled “We Hold These Truths...” and a calendar of events. Here, members will share hopes and convictions in our efforts to serve the common good, along with descriptions of individual grassroots activities.

We want to be more dynamically NETWORK-ed with you! So send in your ideas. What would like us to provide? What resources do you need?

We also ask you to consider what professional gifts and skills you have to offer. Perhaps you have an hour or a day a month when you could write, research or offer consultation on issues and perspectives reflecting your public policy passion. Are you an artist or poet? There are projects where we might be able to really assist one another.

In the box on this page, you can see

Some possible gifts to NETWORK Education Program (NEP)

- Hold a gathering of local NETWORK members or potential members.
- Connect us with educational opportunities in your parish, diocese or group.
- Encourage voter registration, especially for first-time voters and underserved populations.
- Contact us for legislative advocacy resources.
- Recommend us for retreat days or to create prayer services.
- Sponsor town hall meetings and/or candidate forums.
- Host voter education sessions.
- Volunteer with your election commission.
- Offer your individual gifts and skills to NEP.

some gifts we’d like from you during the coming year. For example, you can organize gatherings for NETWORK members—new or potential; send us names of people or organizations we could partner with in your area; or recommend us for presentations on social justice and for retreat days. You can help NETWORK expand our educational mission and work to build regional networks.

Always remember: We are THANKFUL for you! You are a gift we treasure. Together we truly are making a difference!

Sara Dwyer,
Coordinator of the
NETWORK Education
Program, is a member
of the Adorers of
the Blood of Christ,
U.S. Region.

Adult education and retreat work have been her professional ministry. She can be contacted at 202-347-9797, ext. 209 or sdwyer@networklobby.org.





**SAVE THE DATE:
Ecumenical Advocacy Days
MARCH 7-10, 2008**

**CLAIMING A VISION OF TRUE SECURITY
IN THE FAMILY, NEIGHBORHOOD,
NATION AND WORLD.**

See: www.advocacydays.org
Or look for it on Facebook Groups

THE POVERTY LINE

How long could you hang on?

What would you give up to keep your grip? Clothes? Medicine? Food? These are the kind of tough choices 37 million Americans living in poverty will be making today. Find out what you can do to help. Join the numbers who care.

Go to www.povertyusa.org and get involved.

calendar

November 2-4, Milwaukee WI
NETWORK staff will be at the Call to Action national conference. Simone Campbell, SSS will give a presentation on "Race, Class, and Government for the Common Good—An Opportunity in Election '08." Marge Clark, BVM and Melisa Rivera will be at the NETWORK table in the vendor/display area.

November 5, South Bend IN
NETWORK Lobby Associate Jacqueline Clark will facilitate a conversation on political activism, sponsored by the Africa Faith and Justice Network at University of Notre Dame.

November 17, Columbus GA
NETWORK will have a table on the road to Ft. Benning at the SOA Watch annual vigil. Stop by and meet this year's NETWORK Associates!

December 11, Vienna VA
Simone Campbell, SSS, NETWORK's Executive Director, will lead a "fireside chat" about good government and the priority for people who are poor, with members of the Tabor House community.

NETWORK recommends



Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom by Albert Nolan, Orbis Books. www.maryknollmall.org/description.cfm?ISBN=978-1-57075-672-6.



Justice Education: From Service to Solidarity by Suzanne C. Toton, Marquette University Press. Available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble and other Web sites



Getting A Grip: Clarity, Creativity and Courage In a World Gone Mad by Frances Moore Lappé, www.gettingagrip.net

*Looking for the perfect gift?
Give the gift of justice!*

Are you looking for socially responsible and meaningful gifts for loved ones this holiday season? Consider giving a NETWORK membership. Your recipient will receive a gift card as well as a full year of membership benefits (including six bimonthly issues of *Connection*). You'll receive the satisfaction of knowing that you're building the movement for social justice. Act before December 12 and receive a special introductory rate of \$35 for each gift membership.

You can order gift memberships by filling out the enclosed envelope, calling Ann Dunn at 202-347-9797 ext. 200, or going online at www.networklobby.org.



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