

An Ethical Imperative for People of Faith and Practice

A circle ceremony with burning herbs opened *One Voice in Faith*, an interfaith conference in the basement of St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco last month. Chanting and prayers honored the racial and religious diversity of nearly 300 social justice advocates from dozens of backgrounds, more than a third of them young adults.

An opening panel distilled the scriptural, theological wisdom regarding the issue at hand from Buddhist, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Protestant points of view. Their injunctions turned out to be remarkably similar. At issue? Alleviating the poverty of the billion plus people who go to bed hungry every night in the midst of the vastest accumulation of wealth in human history.

The keynote and panels that followed were crisp and detailed, describing a jarring local/global dance between mind-boggling suffering, here at home and far away, set against amazing, life-saving achievements.

Statistics are a crude measure but help wake comfortable people from our cocoons.

- More than 300,000 women each year die unnecessarily in complications from pregnancy and childbirth.
- Seventeen children under five die every minute of the day from largely preventable causes.
- The richest 500 people in the world earn about the same as the 416 million poorest.

It goes on and on. One speaker after another detailed mind-numbing numbers about potable water and sanitation, hunger, access to education, gender injustice, healthcare and HIV-AIDS, and a degraded environment, altogether grinding up the lives of hundreds of millions of human beings in the process.

As the day progressed I felt confused. Foggy. I couldn't square a universal religious mandate to care for the poor and the reality that poverty *can* be significantly reduced, with the harsh fact that one out of every six people is in serious pain and dire need right now. Four of those same six live with very little. What is wrong with this picture? Why so terribly out of kilter?

The answer came back clearly – It is a matter of *will*, human will. Committed people who decide to make a difference prove over and over that they can change things. Bread for the World is making an art form out of visiting Democratic and Republican legislators over and over and over and over till they see the light and support foreign development and food aid. Persistence pays with politicians.

We heard about (and I've joined) www.ONE.org, the 2-million member anti-poverty network started by Bono, a group focused on empowering the will of caring people to convince leaders that global poverty must be addressed.

The good news is that dozens of agencies here and abroad have joined the cause constructively. We heard representatives from American Jewish World Service, Catholic Relief Services, Episcopalians for Global Reconciliation, the Faith Acts Program, Project Muso (empowering women in Mali), the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and the UN Millennium Campaign. Had we the time dozens more could have been summoned. Against the ghastly backdrop of world poverty they told story after story of success, some small, some huge, each one transforming in human terms. Their witness burned away my fog.

Most conferees came well educated about the **Millennium Development Goals** (MDG), and newcomers were brought up to speed about this global survival agenda for the human family. The MDGs were adopted by 189 nations, including the United States, ten years ago at the United Nations, with a global commitment to significantly reduce poverty by 2015. In brief, the eight Goals seek to ...

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger,
- Achieve universal primary education,
- Promote gender equality and empower women,
- Reduce child mortality,
- Improve maternal health,
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases,
- Ensure environmental sustainability, and
- Develop a global partnership for development.

Religious communities in dozens of traditions and denominations have affirmed the MDGs, started study groups and taskforces, and begun creative new projects. (Seasoned activists suggested projects with a specific, narrow focus and measurable goals. No one can do everything).

Today most countries have *not* had the will to live up to earlier promises; specifically, to budget 0.7 percent of GNP to achieve the Goals. Thank you Scandinavia and Holland for bucking the trend! Contributions from the United States hover at about 0.2 percent, a far cry from what we promised and a tangible challenge to take to Congress and the administration.

Slowly, mid-morning on the second day, the conference began morphing into a group of networked individuals committed to developing the public will to address the basic needs of the neediest. In an open conversation people made acquaintance across the room, strategic plans emerged, and we exchanged phone numbers and e-mail addresses. Young adults (who had their own conference caucus) and their older colleagues worked seamlessly to focus issues at the concluding big-room family conversation. A college student from Portland pointed out, "We have congregations full

of people who really care about this stuff, but they don't know what to do. Which is why I'm so appreciative, why the young adults here appreciate seeing all of you at this conference doing what you do."

Notes were taken for a report. The Bay Area Interfaith Coalition organizing this conference will continue its work. You can join by going to www.imdgc.org and signing in. At the bottom of the website's MDG page you'll find links to five of the most important agencies for anyone interested in getting engaged. You can visit the Coalition's Facebook presence as well as learn about similar MDG hubs being formed in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., with more hoped for.

One more critical resource: The United Nations Millennium Campaign's www.endpoverty2015.org is a good place to keep up-to-date about the big picture. President Obama will be addressing American commitment to the MDGs in New York, September 20-22, and this site keeps you apprised of everything happening in preparation.

Joining the cause has become relatively easy – the issues clarified, background information and stories available, multiple strategies clearly outlined, and your creative energy anticipated. For people of faith and practice an imperative has been set, a wonderful opportunity to live into our deepest intuitions and teachings regarding the whole human family, each one of us.

- Paul Chaffee, Interfaith Center at the Presidio, May 1, 2010