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“Northwest Cry”

COALITION OF FAITH-BASED INVESTORS works for social justice

Some revolutions begin with words – when a moral voice advocating justice gains the ear of the powerful with the advantage of enough leverage to truly be heard. That is what happened in South Africa, when apartheid collapsed in part under the weight of worldwide economic sanctions. The involvement of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR) did not go unnoticed by faith-based communities that resolved in 1994 to bring a similar ministry to the Pacific Northwest.

The Sisters of Providence, Mother Joseph Province, Providence Health System and Providence Services are members of the coalition that resulted, the Northwest Coalition for Responsible Investment (NWCRI). Judy Byron, OP, the coalition’s coordinator since 1998, says what makes it effective is collaboration – the more groups involved, the bigger the voice – and the fact that it speaks with a moral voice. “We view socially responsible investing as a ministry,” she explains. “We have and need investments to provide for our ministries and our members, but we also need social and environmental returns on our investments. What the companies are doing is done in our name, but is not always in keeping with our beliefs, values and philosophies.”

What do you do when those values conflict? NWCRI’s answer is dialogue to work for change. Today, NWCRI is made up of 17 member groups, many of them religious communities. (See list at left.) It is engaged in shareholder activities involving 20 companies on 14 justice issues. The coalition’s goal is to dialogue with these companies and to work with them. “We send a letter expressing concern with the hope that they will talk with us,” Sister Judy says. “If not, the shareholder resolution is another form of leverage for dialogue and for change.”

“We are creating small ripples of hope. We are moving mountains a pebble at a time,” Sister Judy explains. “Without the power that comes with having a coalition, many of the religious communities could not be involved.”

NWCRI members meet three times a year to share information on justice issues, consider the priorities of the members and determine which issues to address. Members decide whether to act and how based on the companies that they hold in their portfolios and the priorities of their communities. The coalition, a program of the Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center in Seattle, does its shareholder work in collaboration with members of ICCR, which is a coalition of 275 faith-based institutional investors. Workplace issues are prominent, including child labor, forced labor, the right to organize, environmental safety, human rights and dignity.

For example, in the case of the Sisters of Providence, Mother Joseph Province’s missions serving the poor in El Salvador give it strong interest in sweatshops and the free trade issue. The sisters are participating in a series of dialogues with Sears Roebuck on the conditions of workers in sweatshops. “Sears invited us to look at its buying policy and suggest how International Labor Organization Standards can be incorporated,” Sister Judy says. Similarly, the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary moved a shareholder resolution at the Cisco Systems, Inc. annual meeting in November, requesting that the pay scales for executives and production workers be brought into closer alignment. The shareholder resolution received a favorable vote of 9 percent of the shares voted, exceeding the 3 percent required to bring the issue back again next year.

How do coalition members measure success? A key moment came when Dow Chemical asked for NWCRI’s input on the issue of genetically engineered seed. “We were able to bring four people

to the table – from Peru, Kenya, Mexico, Senegal – who work with farmers,” Sister Judy recalls. “They shared their concerns about the impact of genetically engineered seed on their indigenous way of life. They never would have been there to speak with Dow without our invitation.”

Another success was bringing representatives of the six major drug companies together to discuss creating common criteria and application forms for their programs that provide free drugs to needy patients. Still another was when the CEO of Abbott Laboratories visited Africa to see firsthand what he had been told by coalition members about the inability of the people to afford drugs for HIV/AIDS. He returned with an announcement of drug price reductions and donations, Sister Judy says.

Other issues NWCRI is engaged in dialogue on include:

- ✗ insurance investments in tobacco,
- ✗ renewable energy resources,
- ✗ PCB contamination,
- ✗ reduction of greenhouse gas emissions,
- ✗ fair trade coffee
- ✗ global human rights standards, and
- ✗ use of chlorine-bleached pulp and paper.

One of the new initiatives NWCRI is getting involved in is violence in video games, particularly their sale and rent to minors. “It is part of our effort to address the issue of violence in our world, particularly gun violence and the portrayal of violence in media,” Sister Judy explains. Past efforts have been successful in ending handgun and ammunition sales in stores like Target, Wal-Mart, and Kmart. Still another new area is access to water, which is becoming a crisis, especially in some developing countries where corporations encourage privatization of the water system as a way to make money to pay the country’s debt.

In a global economy which impacts people and our environment, NWCRI members are committed to using their power as investors to shape a more just world. Sister Judy, a member of the leadership of the Edmonds Dominicans (now Adrian Dominicans) in the 1990s, has always been involved in justice issues. She was eager to take on the role of NWCRI coordinator.

“People listen to us,” Sister Judy says. She relates that an acquaintance of one of the coalition members said she used to throw away her proxies. But after reading about the sisters’ work with Cisco Systems, she will vote them now.

“We cannot do this work alone,” Sister Judy says. “We encourage everyone who owns stock or mutual funds, or who participates in a 401K plan, to be an informed investor and to bring their religious values to the marketplace.” The coalition’s annual report and other information can be read on the NWCRI website at www.ipjc.org. Also, parishes, churches and other groups may request a presentation on socially responsible investing. NWCRI does not offer investment advice, but it does highlight the issues and ways to get involved. Contact Sister Judy at jbyron@ipjc.org. ●



The Oregonian honors Sister Rita Ferschweiler

Rita Ferschweiler, SP, was awarded the 2003 Hero's Award by The Oregonian newspaper in November for changing Oregon's "health-care horizon." As administrator of St. Vincent Hospital, she led efforts to buy 35 acres of rural farmland as the new location for the hospital's move from northwest Portland. She was responsible for many details involved in moving nearly 100 patients to the new location in 1971, completing the actual transition in less than four hours.



Rita Ferschweiler, SP

"Sister Rita's faith, her love of fellow human beings, and her consistent thoughtfulness have made her one of the most popular living 'saints' in the Portland community, the newspaper reported. She was given the award "for being a role model to so many people." ●

Sister Alice St. Hilaire honored for formation ministry



Alice St. Hilaire, SP

The Religious Formation Conference will honor Alice St. Hilaire, SP, for her lifelong commitment to the ministry of formation when it meets at Seattle University in April. RFC is celebrating its 50th Jubilee in the Northwest.

Sister Alice says the religious community sent her to St. Louis in the fall of 1956 to begin studies for a Ph.D. in philosophy. She taught for about 10 years in the College of Sister Formation of Seattle University. "When we decided to close the college we stopped offering classes, but we didn't actually close it then," she recalls. "Those who were within a year or two of graduation completed their classes at the Seattle University campus but graduated from the College of Sister Formation. Then we officially closed it."

She was named to the first Formation Team in 1968, finishing that term in 1975. In the interim she also spent a year in the Institute of Religious Formation at St. Louis University. While serving on the Provincial Council, she had oversight responsibilities for formation, and she has served off and on through the years as an "off-the-team" mentor or director as needed. In 1996 Sister Alice began a six-year stint on the team again as candidate director.

"One of the key realities of the time at Providence Heights was the inter-religious dimension of the program... new and exciting with long-lasting effects," Sister Alice explains. "I taught all the students of all the communities involved — Sisters of Providence, the Dominicans of Tacoma, the Dominicans of Edmonds, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, Bellevue, and the Ugandan Daughters of Mary. The recognition that is being given really honors all those who served in formation in all the communities." ●

Tri-Council meets

The Tri-Council, representing the leadership of Mother Joseph Province (MJP), Holy Angels Province (HAP) and the Philippine Sector (PS), met in Spokane in November. Pictured standing from left are Sisters Barbara Schamber, Team Leader/Provincial of MJP; Lynn Chappell, MJP; Carla Montante, Province Leader of HAP; Deling Fernando, PS Leader; Roberta Rorke, MJP; Germaine Chalifoux, HAP; Donna Burkhart, MJP; and Julia Macasieb, PS. Shown seated from left are Linda Jo Reynolds, PS; Jacqueline Fernandes, MJP; Margaret Botch, MJP; and Margaret Bischoff, PS. Mary Lei Gordon, HAP, was not present.

