



## *Doing God's work at the UN*

### **Congregations share office**

**I**t was a rainy Thursday in Manhattan in mid-May when Cecile Meijer, RSCJ, and Evanne Hunter, IBVM, boarded a bus for the United Nations, where they would be attending, as they nearly always do on Thursdays, a briefing for representatives of NGOs. The letters stand for “non-governmental organizations” and, at the UN, refer specifically to hundreds of not-for-profit voluntary citizens’ groups that share its humanitarian goals and have established official ties.

Arriving at their destination, the two nuns passed through security and headed for the assembly room where the morning-long briefing by the UN’s Department of Information would take place. Today’s topic would be “HIV/AIDS and the Family.” Like many of the Thursday briefings, the topic relates to one of the UN’s “Millennium Development Goals,” concrete social and environmental objectives that all one hundred and ninety-one of the UN’s member nations have agreed to meet by 2015.

After the morning briefing, Sisters Meijer and Hunter joined several other women who represent religious orders at the UN for a working lunch. In the afternoon, they attended a second briefing, this one sponsored by the Human Rights Committee, to hear from victims of civil conflicts, including a woman from Rwanda, a Tutsi, who had lost friends and family members in the 1994 genocide in her country.

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*Cecile Meijer, RSCJ, left, and Evanne Hunter, IBVM, stand in the United Nations Plaza after a long day of meetings at the UN.*



*Sister Hunter and Sister Ann Scholz, who represents School Sisters of Notre Dame at the UN, review upcoming events.*

Sisters Meijer and Hunter have been working in concert now for nearly two years as representatives of their religious orders in an NGO office established in 2003. Though each of their congregations, the Society of the Sacred Heart and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, has been individually accepted as an NGO affiliated with the UN's Department of Public Information, the women work together as a single office under a plan conceived by international leaders of the two congregations in Rome. It is a decision both are grateful for. It doubles their presence, allows them to attend different meetings and bring back the fruit of their different experiences at the end of the day.

"It makes sense to do it together," Sister Meijer said, "not only because it's more economical, but because our two congregations are very similar in spirituality, in educational mission and in our areas of current focus – women, children, the poor, migrants and refugees, integrity of creation. One of the main benefits of the partnership is that you can do twice as much work." And, added Sister Hunter, "we can reach twice as far."

Although Sisters Hunter and Meijer had never met before their respective appointments, they have found their talents and experience mesh well. "It's been serendipitous," Sister Meijer said. At the same time, she said, they are at the beginning of a long journey. "We are defining it as we do it," Sister Hunter observed – "both the job and the partnership."

Each morning, working in a room at the 80th Street community where they live with five other RSCJ, the women look over a list of available meetings and decide which each will attend. "The possibilities are overwhelming," Sister Meijer said. "After we look at what's on the plate, we do a lot of negotiating and juggling to decide who goes to what."

Sister Meijer generally attends meetings related to social development, human rights, international law and conflicts in northern Uganda. Sister Hunter follows issues related to HIV/AIDS, eradication of poverty and financing for development. In the evening they compare notes, write reports, respond to e-mails, prepare presentations and perform a variety of other duties aimed at making the work of the UN better known to members of their congregations and their extended families – students, families, alumnae and alumni of their congregations' schools; partners in ministry; associates, family members and friends.

They encourage visitors with ties to their congregations and so far have welcomed about thirty individuals from countries on every continent. They have also received three U.S. school groups and arranged private tours. Articles on the sisters' work are available to the public in English, French and Spanish at [www.rscjinternational.org](http://www.rscjinternational.org).

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Before coming to the UN, Sister Hunter, a Canadian, had worked as a teacher and administrator in her order's schools, primarily Loretto Abbey in Toronto, Ontario. (Like the Society, the IBVM has schools around the world.) Then, in 2000, she was named Canadian regional superior for her religious order. She had just returned from El Salvador, where she had served as an election observer, when she was invited by leaders of her order to take the UN post.

Sister Meijer's work had been in international law. A native of Holland, she was trained and worked as a lawyer there before coming to the United States in 1985 for an in-depth look at several religious orders and ultimately becoming an RSCJ. In recent years, she had served as legal coordinator for the War Crimes Research Office at American University's law school in Washington, D.C., where she had worked on cases related to international war crimes, including genocides in the Balkans and Rwanda during the 1990s. Such different backgrounds give the sisters an edge in working with the UN's Department of

Information, where an important part of their role is to educate others about the work of the UN. They note that many people think of the UN as the General Assembly and the Security Council, without realizing how much humanitarian work the UN does through the Economic and Social Council with its programs and agencies, such as UNICEF, the World Health Organization and the UN Development Programme, and with the help of its affiliated NGOs.

Sister Hunter credits her partner with a reader understanding of the UN's complexities, while she, as a former high school teacher, instinctively translates those complexities into the jargon-free language that makes it easier for outsiders to understand.

A channel for UN involvement for NGOs is affiliation with ECOSOC, the Economic and Social Council, which offers opportunities for influencing policy-makers. At that level, Sisters Meijer and Hunter work with others to prepare such interventions, but for now, as NGOs in association with the Department of Information, they cannot officially attach their names to the work. ECOSOC status for the Society and IBVM may come later, Sister Meijer observed.

At present, their main focus is to carry out their educational role, increasing awareness of the UN and encouraging activism on the local level. All of their communication carries the hope that their congregations' members, constituents and friends will come to realize that they, too, have a role to play in making the two NGOs – the Society and the IBVM – effective. Already, the sisters see it happening. “More and more people are getting involved in the issues,” Sister Meijer said. “That’s when it gets exciting.”

Sister Hunter noted that students at Convent of the Sacred Heart (91st Street) in New York City, and a retired IBVM in Toronto are making and distributing white wristbands that signify support for the Millennium Development Goals and the Make Poverty History campaign, an international action against poverty.

Ultimately, the women stressed, their own influence will be only as strong as the involvement of the people they represent. “Sometimes people refer to us as “the NGO” and that is not right,” Sister Meijer said. “The NGOs are our congregations, and the big extended families of the Society and the IBVM are a part of this. The topics we focus on at the UN cannot be imposed from above. They have to evolve organically from the vision at the grassroots. If we want our UN office to be effective, we have to be



*Sisters Hunter and Meijer, first and second from right, listen intently as victims of civil conflicts describe experiences.*

actively lobbying our own governments for change.”

For Sister Meijer, working for systemic changes that result in justice – a more humane world in which everyone’s basic needs are met – is at the core of the Society’s mission. “Madeleine Sophie established schools because she wanted not only justice for women, who lacked access to education, but she also wanted to educate children of well-off families because those would be the people with access to power to bring about change,” she said. “Having at the same time free schools for those who could not pay speaks to me of her strong sense of justice for all.”

For Sister Hunter, the work of the two congregations at the UN is as basic as the Gospel of Jesus. “It’s the Sermon on the Mount in a global context,” she said. ✦

## MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

- Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty
- Provide 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
- Develop a global partnership for development

Each country must report this year on progress toward the goals.

For more information on requirements for meeting each of the goals, see:

<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>