

Under the UN Umbrella

By Cecile Meijer, RSCJ and Joan Kirby, RSCJ

Developing new respect for the intersection of religion and politics inspires Joan Kirby, RSCJ, to do what she does as a representative of the Temple of Understanding at the United Nations. Each summer, Sister Kirby secures passes to allow high school interns to attend meetings of the General Assembly and UN committees to observe the workings of the UN firsthand and report on programs ranging from climate change to HIV/AIDS prevention.

Cecile Meijer, RSCJ, who has managed the Society of the Sacred Heart's NGO designation at the UN for the past six years – and serves on social development and other humanitarian committees – is in the process of applying for ECOSOC status for the Society. Here, in their own words, is an update on Society activities at the UN.



Attaining ECOSOC Status

By Cecile Meijer, RSCJ

Living in forty-three countries on six continents, we, RSCJ, witness what is happening in these countries from the ground up through our different ministries, many with people who live in poverty. Consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) opens for us the possibility to influence UN discussions by contributing what life for ordinary people really looks like and lobbying for change based on people's hopes and sufferings – in other words, we have a chance to bring the human face of life on the ground to the international policy table. That too, we feel, is part of our vocation as educators.

ECOSOC is one of the main organs of the United Nations. It is responsible for international economic, social, cultural, educational, health and related matters as well as human rights. The Charter of the United Nations mentions Non Government Organizations (NGOs) explicitly – and only – in relation to ECOSOC, stating that the ECOSOC “may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence.” (Article 71, UN Charter).

An organization, such as the Society of the Sacred Heart, seeking a closer UN-NGO relationship needs to apply for “consultative status” with ECOSOC. Once granted, such status allows an NGO to contribute to and influence decision-making processes by UN Member States, for example by interacting with Member States, monitoring agreements, briefing governments on citizens' concerns, and

advocating positions based on actual information from the ground. Depending on the type of consultative status, NGOs can make oral interventions or circulate written ones during ECOSOC meetings. In addition, they can attend formal meetings and are often invited to attend international conferences and General Assembly special sessions.

Obtaining consultative status involves numerous steps – and requires patience. First, the organization's application, which takes a while to complete, is reviewed by a special committee of ECOSOC. This committee then recommends which organizations should be granted one of three categories of consultative status: general, special, or roster. Recommendations then go to a full ECOSOC meeting for a final decision. To find out more about the RSCJ and the United Nations, log on to www.internationalrscg.org and click on “Our Presence at the UN.”



Jerry Naunheim, Jr.

Cecile Meijer, RSCJ, (left) and Joan Kirby, RSCJ, in front of the United Nations building in New York City.



Left: Summer interns from 91st Street, left to right: Kate Mullin, Miranda Barbot, Cristina Lastres, Ana Cristina Guimaraes, Victoria De Freitas, Rebecca Spellissy.

Summer Interns at Work

By Joan Kirby, RSCJ

The goal of my work at both the Temple of Understanding and the UN is to bring all of us closer to “other” cultures and religions. *Please Call Me By My True Names*, a verse by Thich Nhat Hanh, speaks of considering others supremely precious and not separating the sacred from the secular. We all seek the face of the living God; and when I see the faces of our students at the UN responding to what they are hearing – and talking it over with people from around the world – I know that we can learn to transcend our differences.

In 2008, sixteen young people participated in the program, and this summer we expect at least twenty, probably more. Most have come from Sacred Heart schools and are recommended by faculty members or encouraged by their friends; but this year we are expanding the program to invite students from inner city public schools.

The UN interns work on serious presentations about serious subjects: for example, in 2008 Celine Marino researched violence against women in time of war; and Maggie Lalley chose Jordan refugees as her point of focus. Ms. Marino heard an address by then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and said: “Hearing a powerful woman speak opened our eyes. Now that I know about the violence, I can spread the word...it’s not something talked about, that female violence is a tool of war.” After Ms. Lalley attended a meeting of the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, she said it was hard not to come out being fatalistic, but she also said: “I learned not to give up hope, that even a small difference makes a difference.”

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) have been a recent focus of the UN, and all of them relate to reducing poverty worldwide. In fact, several girls from Woodlands Academy in Chicago came to New York as interns because of their desire to help achieve those goals. And this year, a decade of interreligious dialogue has been proposed to encourage religious institutions around the world to collaborate in achieving them. I look forward to assembling this summer’s interns within that framework. ✦



Top: Maggie Lalley
Bottom: Celine Marino