

Mercy Justice Conference

an initiative of the
**Institute of Sisters of
Mercy of Australia**

6th, 7th & 8th November 2009

Artwork: Sally Bradley RSM

Responses from Conference Delegates

Once upon a time, the story goes, a teacher travelled with great difficulty to a far away monastery because there was an old monastic there who had a reputation for asking very piercing spiritual questions. ‘Holy One,’ the seeker said, ‘Give me a question that will renew my soul.’ ‘Ah, yes, then,’ the old monastic said, ‘Your question is ‘What do they need?’’

The Mercy Justice Conference which held a ‘banquet’ of experiences, broke open new horizons for me on justice issues of local, national and global import and prompted my memory of the old monastic’s response to the seeker: “*Your question is ‘What do they need?’*”.

A truly beautiful opening ritual invited us all into a reflective mode on urgent social justice issues. Riding on the spirit of this ritual were the stories told and challenges raised by outstanding keynote speakers who ‘re-lit the flame for justice’ within me. The flame was further enkindled by participation in group discussions which drove me into an even deeper passionate stance on the question ‘*What do they need?*’. In turn, I was drawn into commitment to act immediately upon the issue of asylum seekers. The words of a well-known song rang out for me: “Don’t talk at all: show me!”

The powerfully moving closing ritual was a perfect encapsulation of an unforgettable conference.

Sister Margaret Sheppard RSM, NSW

I knew my knowledge of social justice was lacking so this conference came at a time that was too convenient to ignore. The speakers were inspiring, their stories real, their desires and hopes genuine. They were all zealous in their convictions towards those labelled marginalised, poor, homeless, displaced etc., and we were encouraged to seek the inner label, to look into the person and not at them. I listened to the problems facing Indigenous people and I heard stories from those who visit our gaols and detention centres. The real concern of climate change was addressed and the problems that presents for all. Most of the people present were already confronting relevant issues through their work, advocacy and in voluntary ways. The open space forums provided a situation whereby participants chose the group/s that suited their concerns. Many topics were raised and lots of suggestions were presented. The levels of awareness and understanding were broad and people were keen to share their concerns. It was great to be surrounded by such enthusiastic and like-minded people who were willing to recognise Jesus in the other. For me the challenge continues of just how to encourage family and friends to take a conscious interest now, become aware of the issues, acknowledge the problems and seek the solutions.

Maureen Babler, ACT

Like many others, I arrived Friday full of apprehension. I did not have a question and thought I’d be exposed in the open space forum. The ‘open space’ was a task that called us all to stand up and be counted. My apprehension was quickly turned into admiration for those who had passion and drive, and those who were truly Christ’s hands and feet in the community and world. We listened, we shared, we drew strength from each other, and then we came up with action plans and strategies. No one anywhere in the room asked for money or donations. This was about giving of self and your gifts.

I have come away empowered and within the space of a week have already written three letters and signed three petitions. Now I am organising a little group to join the ‘Walk Against Warming’ on December 12 inspired by Tim Flannery.

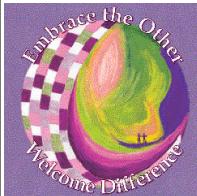
I thank the organisers, the inspirational speakers and most importantly, the delegates who may have appeared on first sight just ordinary people...but they turned out to be the most extraordinary. People who are truly filled with the Holy Spirit ready to lower the crippled from the roof tops into the crowd, so that could be seen by all.

Christine Bitar-Claxton, NSW

We came away from the Mercy Justice Conference with optimism and a sense of reality. Being in the midst of so many people of substance and wisdom gathered together in the cause of social justice was inspirational. Driving in from Braidwood to Queanbeyan we wondered how relevant the conference would be for our small church group. Would we find practical ways of engaging the parish more broadly in social justice issues? Would we feel overwhelmed by complexity?

In fact, we were overwhelmed by the clarity and integrity of the speakers; the ease and effectiveness of the process; the generosity, energy and commitment of the participants; and the speed with which actions were taken on urgent issues such as the Oceanic Viking stalemate, the lack of access to Christmas Island, the inequity of the Native Title Amendment Bill and the inadequacy of carbon emission reduction targets. Thank you, Sisters of Mercy, for that remarkable weekend and its unfolding ripple effects.

Laura Murray Cree, NSW



"The conference was a most animating and encouraging event for me!"

The joy of old friendships renewed was a personal blessing. Major blessings were the diversity and inclusivity of participants: each voice was heard as a wide range of issues were raised, then discerned into practical/possible resolutions directed to swift action. The strong emphasis on the four mercy/justice issues of our Institute lifted my mind beyond local concerns and anxieties, and further renewed my belief in the Mercy-benefits of reconfiguring. The conference and its process enabled us to speak with a loud and merciful voice, as I believe will a reconfigured Institute.

Sister Kathleen Cudmore RSM, NSW

'Embrace the Other ... Welcome Difference'

With over 250 participants from around Australia, the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia Conference 'Embrace the other Welcome Difference' was an exciting event that was well planned and delivered.

The conference was particularly enriched by a number of high profile speakers, who not only were expert in their fields, but were also able to demonstrate an understanding of complex issues and the way people are affected by these.

Tim Flannery impressed me with his ability to treat an issue as complex as climate change in a way that was comprehensible. He also managed to stay optimistic in the face of enormous obstacles. Mick Dodson demonstrated once again his life-time commitment to improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Margot O'Neill took us on an engaging journey into the lives of boat people, asylum seekers and refugees in one of the darkest periods of Australian history. In so doing she demonstrated a deep care for, and interest in, the people affected.

Artwork: Sally Bradley rsm

Denise Coughlan RSM shared her knowledge of, and commitment to, to the people of Cambodia where she has spent many years living and working among them. Madge McGuire inspired us with her energy and passion to work with women affected by homelessness, in unleashing their great abilities and gifts that have sometimes been restrained by past experiences. Madge acknowledged the great talent, skills and creativity that these women possess. Maryanne Loughry RSM made us aware of the stress that climate change is placing on Australia's developing neighbours such as the sinking Pacific Islands. She explained among other things that the people of Tuvalu and Kiribati do not like the term 'climate refugees'.

Janette Gray RSM led us skilfully to reflect on the issues from a theological/scriptural perspective. The Gospel story of the four friends letting the paralysed man down through the roof to be received in the middle of the crowd by Jesus, served as a powerful image of the resourcefulness, ingenuity and commitment that is needed in the work for justice in our world today. The open space technology allowed for fruitful discussions on many issues that had emerged throughout the earlier sessions.

However the 'pleasant surprise' aspect of this conference for me was not the great speakers – I expected them to be brilliant – and they were – nor the fruitful discussions leading to action – I knew that could happen – rather it was the number of excellent clear concrete and well planned actions for justice, that the various groups presented, and are committed to.

This was a very engaging conference that has furthered justice awareness, reflection and action throughout the Institute and beyond. Great thanks and praise to the planning committee and others involved.

Sister Helen Owens RSM, SA

"How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the Gospel of Peace..."

From the moment I walked into the conference centre I experienced the warmth of welcome and sense of purpose as 250 delegates filled the centre and settled to listen to the outline of events for the next two days.

The keynote speakers were excellent as was the facilitator for the Open Space Technology with which we encompassed the social justice issues of '**Eco-Justice; Displaced Peoples; Women and Poverty and Indigenous Concerns**'. This technology enabled specific justice issues to be discussed, reviewed, and acted upon by Sunday afternoon. The theme and connections that Sr Jan Gray spoke of, and linked to the Gospel story of the paralytic man being lowered through an 'open space' (in the roof) to be healed by Jesus in the 'sacred space' (of the room), resonated in the conference arena, and as I left the conference I felt I was part of a tapestry - woven in stories shared by women with a passion to be advocates and protectors of our humanity and creation.

I felt I had a voice that could join with the Sisters of Mercy and their colleagues in making a difference in our own community here in Perth. I hope I can now continue participating in this dialogue and networking, especially with the Sisters of Mercy throughout Australia.

Leila Coffey, WA

