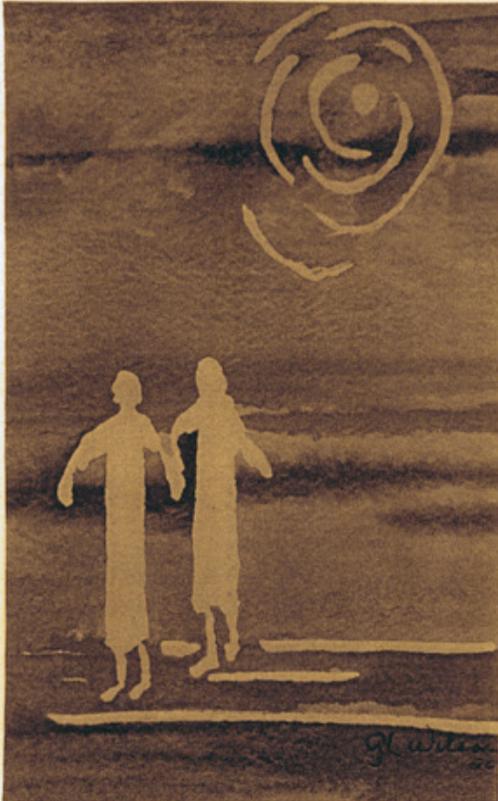


Women's Work

BARBARA BEACH



Women's Work; original art, Geogene Wilson

BACKGROUND

The International Women's Convocation is young, born at its first convocation in 2009, when over six hundred women came to Houston, Texas, for talks, glorious music and art, panel discussions, and small group meetings to define our priorities for action – soon to be known as the Global Sisters Process. The goal was to build a global network of Unitarian Universalist women and woman of progressive religious faiths of whatever tradition. We set out to build upon a grassroots network to develop resources by and for women. Looking back, we were fortunate to raise over \$100,000 in scholarships for internationals, ministers, and young adults. *Inclusivity cannot be an exception; it must be a rule.*

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Seemingly obvious truisms pose the most difficult challenges. We know that an organization's focus on its mission is essential. Being focused enables it to tell its story to the world. We know that, as children of a digital age, we must learn to use electronic resources to reach the greatest number of people, hurling our message across oceans and continents. And we remember what has been bred in the bone: only by speaking to one another eye to eye in small and large groups do we cleave to one another and build bonds of affiliation and trust. The difficulty is finding new ways to meet these challenges.

Here I want to address the question: How did the International Women's Convocation (IWC) meld digital resources and in-person communication to build an organization with the skills and energy to produce measurable change for women?

The Global Sisters Process has stayed with the IWC persuasively and pervasively. It is a “slimmed down” version of Community Capacity Building, as conveyed by Professor Richard Ford. It speaks directly to participants at a convocation, as democratic decision-makers, asking them to identify priorities for ongoing work in their communities. It is pervasive because so many of our sister organizations, inspired by what they see and hear at a convocation, bring its passionate message back home. The Process inspires a magnetic outcome: women address themes and take ownership of the issues. Most important, they follow through, often learning as they go.

The IWC has developed an operational system: (1) large idea-generating convocations; (2) smaller group gatherings to engage women around the globe; and (3) digital media to connect the dots among women between convocations and gatherings. I will speak to all three in the following paragraphs.

Smaller group face-to-face gatherings bring local issues to the fore. Internet access can be difficult. It is almost unknown among the mountain villages of the Philippines, Northeast India, and often, our home in rural Madison County, Virginia. Although the planning for gatherings is accomplished collaboratively between individuals in the US and in the country where a gathering or convocation will be held (such as the Philippines, and in fall 2015, in Bolivia), getting in touch with women at the grass roots is often possible only through their churches, com-

munity groups or “snail mail”. Leaders tend to have access to the internet.

Digital communication helps. The IWC has sponsored Global Sisters conversations, featuring slides and commentary about current projects. And web sites offer the ability to house documents, old newsletters, previous webinars, and a chat through Facebook and Twitter. In Transylvania, SKYPE calls have become common; Yahoo Messenger offers the ability to have an on-line conversation; and occasionally we hear a voice on the telephone. Email is increasingly available.

In my current experience as a board member of International Association of Liberal Religious Women, I have come to appreciate again the power of the email stream – the conversation about an important issue begins, and no matter who adds to it, the subject line remains the same. Reading bottom to top provides a history of discussion, thinking, and revisions. Decisions are made.

TRANSFORMING WOMEN'S LIVES THROUGH LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES

The face-to-face gathering in the Philippines used all three means of communication. This was the first time women on Negros Oriental had been invited to gathering *for* women only, with a focus on their needs and ideas. Two women from each of the Unitarian congregations attended. They wanted to learn more about livelihood opportunities that could help them make a financial contribution to their families. They

chose “Transforming Women’s Lives through Livelihood Opportunities” as their theme.

We were meeting at Silliman University in Dumaguete when an earthquake struck. Warned of a possible tsunami (which thankfully never occurred), we sought higher ground. Hailing tuctucs, we piled into them, and continued the gathering in the back yard of conference speaker Celia Hofman. “Adapt, adapt”, is a lesson women have practiced for hundreds of years – learned, perhaps, from millennia-lived cockroach!

KEEPING YOUR BALANCE IN A CHANGING WORLD

Our second Convocation in Marosvasarhely, Transylvania, Romania in 2012 rivaled the size of the Houston Convocation. Ferenc Balint Benczedi, Unitarian Bishop of Hungary, welcomed the group in person, and UUA president Peter Morales followed in a recorded video. The theme, “Keeping Your Balance in a Changing World”, came from the women themselves. The women were caught between their experience in the communist era, and their country’s emerging culture in the twenty-first century. They looked for ways to balance responsibilities of home and family with work and career. Some sought ways to re-capture the skills never learned at their mother’s knee; while others looked for ways to develop the skills they would need to thrive in the 21st century workplace. They also wanted more effective ways to become leaders in business, church, and community.

Projects emerged spanning a range of concerns, from “Preservation of Women’s Traditions and Engaging Women of the Next Generation” to “Empowerment and Leadership”. The latter resulted in a Leadership School, of which four sessions have been conducted. This was the first time, observed Program Coordinator Gisella Nagy, that complex leadership training program had been offered to Unitarian Women in Hungarian history.

LEADERSHIP SCHOOL FOR TRANSYLVANIAN WOMEN

After several months of preparation, the Leadership School pilot session was conducted in Marosvasarhely from February 28 to March 2, 2014. Thirty women representing different generations and a variety of educational and professional backgrounds took part in classes and learned from each other. The Leadership School curriculum consisted of Leadership Skills, Personal Skills, Community Capacity Building and the Global Sisters Process, Team Building, Entrepreneurship and Micro-entrepreneur Planning, and Basic Grant Writing.

The pilot session began with greetings from Bishop Benczedi and from Reverend Carol Huston, president of the International Women’s Convocation. It continued with a discussion of macro and micro finance, delivered by economist Professor Dr. Agnes Nagy. She demonstrated the similarities between financial issues of the macro-economy and those faced by a household.

The next day was full. Professor Dr. Arpad Szabo, who teaches management at the University of Arts in Târgu-Mureș/Marosvásárhely, conducted a team-building session, presented the basics of self-management, and showed why having a vision for the future was important for women.

The concluding day began with a worship service, followed by a session on leadership skills. Later, Dr. Szabo led the group again with additional work in motivation and leadership skills and a discussion of a project management case study. The final presentation concerned women's life roles and the importance of "being a woman". It dealt with conflict management in everyday life and the power of faith in achieving goals.

Meanwhile, different programs were being conducted in North East India and Uganda. Like the Transylvanian program, these programs asked fundamental questions: What really matters to us; why is this an issue; what are we going to do about it? The IWC collaborated with the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council (UUPCC) to deliver a Community Capacity Building workshop in Padu, Northeast India.

COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING IN NORTHEAST INDIA

In India, three priority areas and four target villages were established by SKUUNEI, the Women's Wing of the Unitarian Union of Northeast India: education and awareness; healthcare and reproductive rights; prevention of vio-

lence against women and children; and economic empowerment. Four committees, one for each of the four target villages, each with ten members and a team leader or area coordinator were chosen. Overall coordinator was Elgiva Shullai, an active Unitarian who served as an Officer with the prestigious Armed Forces Medical and Nursing Services until 2011. She was appointed Global Sisters Coordinator in 2013 for the Seng Kynthei.

The International Women's Convocation was also fortunate to work with the UUPCC, the Union to develop tools for community leaders to create their own action agenda. Community Capacity Building followed seven steps:

- Preparing the community.
Overall coordinator Ms. Shullai held several meetings prior to project launch to win community support. She issued formal invitations to the Headman of the village, asking him to notify the general public.
- Organizing information.
This step helps people draw on what is already known among them to create their own action plan.
- Mobilizing resources.
Exercises helped participants review previous accomplishments, such as building schools and churches and ensuring clean water and regular electricity.
- Analyzing needs.
Other exercises focused on the spatial and social distribution of needs, and how their analysis

could lead to priorities that met the community's requirements.

- Building consensus.
The participants used "pairwise ranking", a statistical tool, to identify highest priority needs by consensus, a creative alternative to the winners/losers approach of voting.
- Creating an action plan.
Detailed discussion led to the creation of action plans for the three highest priority needs, with the expectation that communities could use these tools in the future for additional projects.
- Finding resources inside and outside the community.
The local leadership, hand-in-hand with Seng Kynthei, worked to identify foundations, government resources, and other sources of local, regional, and national funds.

The group selected "Violence against Women and Children and their Legal Rights" as their theme. It was a sensitive issue for many to discuss openly, but the local facilitators were able to involve individuals such that they became more comfortable, and the groups moved forward.

With the aid of an excellent facilitator, the group identified priorities within the theme. The top three were (1) immediate arrest of the perpetrator by the law; (2) family guidance and counseling; and (3) awareness of legal procedures and women's rights. Facilitators also made clear that the Community

Capacity Building process is not about offering outside money to support a village's dreams and wish lists; rather, it is about helping communities set priorities that they will define and implement themselves. The community members accomplishments are detailed in a written report, published on the IWC and UUPCC websites. The report forms the beginning of a contractual relationship in which the community pledges to do certain things or contribute certain resources to meet their goals.

MICRO-LENDING IN UGANDA

Another example comes from Africa. The IWC had been planning a microfinance project in Uganda, Africa, for some time. The decision to focus on Africa was made at the Houston Convocation, when a group of women from Uganda was denied visas because they did not have bank accounts. Participants in Houston collected \$10,000 on the spot to address needs of their African sisters. They were determined to involve and serve this group of women by finding a program to teach entrepreneurial business skills and offer small business loans, from \$50 to \$300.

We were often asked why IWC did not work within the structure of a "ready-made" micro-lending program. The Board opted for a program with a UU bias, and identified The Africa Rural Schools Foundation (ARSF) started by Rene Waun, a UU Minister serving churches in the Pittsburgh and Ohio. ARSF had already developed schools in rural Uganda and knew the community well.

Ugandan women were offered a curriculum tailored to the kinds of businesses they wanted to start. Following business management training appropriate to the level of their enterprise, women were asked to participate in a Lending Circle, open a bank account and establish a Guarantee Fund for women unable to repay their loan. These requirements cannot be looked at with “western” eyes. Each project poses challenges relative to the culture of women-in-community. And they are all different.

After eight weeks of training, women from Mutundwe Village, Uganda, began to meet in their Lending Circles, which determined who would receive a loan, and to continue business training with staff guidance. The Circles were specific to the enterprise aspirations of their members: Start-Up A, Start-Up B, Poultry, Farming, Retail and Clothing, House Renting, and Salons and Restaurants. Nineteen of the 54 women planned to open a new micro business; the others were already operating businesses.

When loans are granted, the Lending Circle women collaborate; a member in trouble is usually known immediately by other members of her group, who restructure her loan or create another intervention. Such flexibility had been unheard of from banks or other money lenders.

WHAT THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S CONVOCATION HAS LEARNED

I have asked myself many times how do these programs around the globe get started? What makes them work?” What

do they mean in the larger scheme of liberal religious women and women of progressive faith engaged in justice work? Will the Indian program confronting violence against women, the Philippines program of sustainable livelihood, the Leadership School in Transylvania, Romania, the micro-lending project in Uganda endure? If I am able to say YES with confidence – and I do – I identify these factors.

- Calling together women from around the world lights a spark: *At a convocation women meet hundreds of women they may never have known; or, they knew the name but not the “brain” – the thinking, passion, personal quest that each woman represents. When that “coming together” moves with us back to our respective homes, we carry a part of that Convocation with us. Engagement begins, is nurtured, women become more competent. We start having fun.*
- Planning: *This has to do with mission focus, task focus, incredible work by a dedicated Board of Directors and Executive Director, Zsofia Sztranyiczki and her predecessor, a volunteer, Laura Nagel. This sounds simple: we have a mission, we deliberate, we decide, we do. But any of you who have been involved in non-profit management know how complicated it is. Deliberations take longer than we think they will. There is*

always more to do. Time is never on your side. We try for consensus decision-making. When the pieces finally fall into place, the program moves ahead quickly.

- Culture counts:
International gatherings of women, small and large, are not what they used to be. We are learning, learning, learning what we do not know, even if we thought ourselves to be inter-culturally savvy. Eventually, engagement in cross-cultural work improves, even in the face of new challenges. Dialogue builds trust and opportunity. We take advantage of both; we cherish both.
- Community ownership makes sustainability possible.
Community Capacity Building and the Global Sisters Process seem to work because they place responsibility in the hands of those who originate, develop, and assess a project – start to finish. If we own something, we want to take care of it. If somebody else tells us what problem to solve and how to solve it; it's their solution, not ours.
- Memoranda of Agreements and acknowledged relationships strengthen all of us.
The IWC has memoranda of agreements with the Women's Organization of Hungary, the NE India Women's Organization, the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists, and we are working on others. We believe they strengthen all of us.

- Nothing is free.

I suspect that all volunteer organizations would put this differently. If they can get funding from a parent or sustaining organization, they have a cushion. If they cannot, memberships may help, foundations may help, sustaining friends may help. Electronic communication is less costly, as members tend to bear the cost of their own equipment. We acknowledge that individuals in other countries cannot bear these costs. All organizations have costs. To ignore real needs and expenses – even if acknowledging them means taking a risk – may be more perilous than false thrift.

Preparing these comments caused me to draw together a great variety of documents, newsletters, and my own vivid memories – in short, hundreds, perhaps thousands of communications. I can see that to make our little engines go is a huge undertaking. It takes enormous work by many of us. To that end, the IWC has developed a system whereby women can come together, communicate, deliberate, decide, strengthen one another, and take action for change. We do this because we know and believe it is important.

We do too little; we have not completed our work; we will continue. Standing firmly together, we will carry on.