

## CHARITY CONNECTIONS Number 48, Spring 2014

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Exploring Contemporary Implications of our Vincentian-Setonian Heritage

### **MARITIME PROJECT ADDRESSES OUR COMMON CALL TO ADVOCACY**

For many individuals and families on Canada's east coast, mere survival is a challenge. In an Atlantic region once focused on farming, forestry, fishing and coal mining, unemployment rates tend to be high. Desperation grows for many today in both rural and urban areas of the Canadian Maritime provinces. Risks to overall health, education and well-being often prevail for generations.

Working together, many groups and agencies partner with those most affected to seek poverty reduction and elimination. This issue of *Charity Connections* explores the advocacy role of the Sisters of Charity Federation Maritime Project.



"The least esteemed by [humanity] are perhaps the best loved by God."

~ Louise de Marillac

"Charity is not charity, if not accompanied by justice." ~ Vincent de Paul

### **CALLED TO ADVOCATE**

As Sisters of Charity and Associates, we have long cherished and expressed our Charity charism near and far to learn from and accompany those suffering on the margins of society. Intrinsic to our central vocation of receiving and seeding God's kin-dom, advocacy flows from the same Latin root word for "call". Addressing today's realities, the ministry of advocacy incorporates Scripture, tradition - including Catholic social teaching -- and centuries of faithful and fruitful experience.

Sometimes the transformation to which we are committed locally and globally is known as "systemic change". This is an ongoing focus for some leadership conferences of religious in North America, as well as for the SC Federation and worldwide Vincentian Family. The latter defines systemic change as an approach to transforming unjust structures that oppress persons living in poverty. "It enables people themselves to engage in the identification of the root causes of their poverty and to create strategies, including advocacy, to change those structures which keep them in poverty. Systemic change requires transforming attitudes." (See [www.famvin.org](http://www.famvin.org))



Many individuals and groups beyond religious circles are also committed to systemic change. They, too, seek peace arising from social justice and commitment to environmental sustainability. New scientific insights about the expanding universe story also illuminate the interconnected, interdependent web of relationships of which we are a part. Within these many webs or systems, we are attentive to ways we are called to partner with others to co-create ever greater health and wholeness.

Amid widespread poverty and social unrest, our ancestors in faith risked advocating for social and ecclesial transformation. Love, integrity and faithful passion for God's kin-dom sometimes led them to suffer rejection and humiliation within their families and communities, as well as among those entrusted with authority.

Listening attentively, often amid chaos, their inspired and grounded commitment flowered from deep engagement with those who were suffering and seeking justice, hope and fuller life for themselves, their children and future generations.

## **COMMITTED TO COLLABORATION**

The SC Federation Maritime Project was conceived by the four Canadian-based leadership teams during the 2007 Federation gathering in Nazareth, KY. Leadership team members were called to gather in regional groups to focus on possible collaborative initiatives. Canadian-based congregations meeting together were Sisters of Charity (SC), Halifax, Nova Scotia; Sisters of St. Martha (CSM), Antigonish, N.S.; Religieuses de Notre-Dame-du-Sacré-Coeur (NDSC), Moncton, New Brunswick and Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception (SCIC), Saint John, N.B.

During two facilitated processes in Canada to further develop their initiative, leaders of the four congregations defined collaboration as, "Coming together to share our charism, gifts and resources for others, especially the most vulnerable of society." As identified by the leaders then and now, one main desired outcome continues to be effective advocacy for women, children and working persons living in poverty, especially in areas of housing and social assistance. A second key goal is effective collaboration and growth in unity among participating Federation members.

The first meeting of the Maritime Project was held in October 2008 at the NDSC motherhouse in Moncton. There, leadership team liaisons from the four congregations met with committee members representing the participating communities. Committee members

agreed to collaborate in order to explore and carry out the mandate of the Federation Maritime Project.

Committed to advocate for poverty reduction and elimination, they also agreed to grow in and raise awareness about concerns and policies related to their mandate. Together and individually, committee members have addressed Sisters and Associates in and beyond their four different geographic areas to heighten awareness and encourage advocacy and collaboration. In some cases, their partners have included members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

## **SPEAKING WITH ONE VOICE**

The Maritime Project has written joint letters to provincial and federal legislators in Canada in the name of the total membership of the four participating congregations. Sometimes, they also indicate combined numbers of their Associates. With other groups, the committee succeeded in calling on the New Brunswick government to forego implementation of a misguided proposal to lower the minimum wage for those who work as servers in the hospitality industry.

The New Brunswick provincial government had suggested these persons could be paid less because they receive tips or gratuities. At issue was a proposal for a two-tiered minimum wage in the province. The Maritime Project noted that most of the hard-working servers are women living at or near the poverty line who need and deserve the same minimum wage as many other working persons.

The Maritime Project has advocated for increased federal funding for safe, affordable, mixed income housing in the provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. It has also called for a national housing policy to be developed in widespread consultation with individuals and groups most affected by a shortage of safe, affordable housing. The committee noted that such a national strategy would help strengthen families and communities and ensure that Canada meets its national and international commitments to end homelessness. To date, Canada has not implemented a comprehensive national housing policy.

Early in its mandate, the Maritime Project wrote to legislators raising concerns about changes to heating and social assistance policy in a region where cold winters increase hardship. It also highlighted the need to increase social assistance rates. When governments take sound steps toward poverty reduction, the committee also sends letters affirming and expressing thanks for these positive initiatives.



Some committee members minister directly with persons living in poverty and partner with others engaged in systemic change initiatives in their regions. Two examples are the Cape Breton Systemic Group Project in Nova Scotia (contact Franklyn Ferguson ~ [franklynr@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:franklynr@ns.sympatico.ca) ) and the Enviro Plus Southeast Group in New Brunswick (contact Auréa Cormier ~ [aureacormier@rogers.com](mailto:aureacormier@rogers.com)).

The Maritime Project Committee is accountable to the leadership teams of the four sponsoring congregations. In 2012, it received a generous donation from the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. Shared equally among the four congregations, the gift was dispersed to agencies and groups with which committee members and congregations partner in connection with the Maritime Project mandate.

The committee reports annually to the Federation leadership gathering. For the 2013 meeting, it developed a comprehensive PowerPoint presentation about its history, mandate and initiatives. In fall 2010, a committee member offered a PowerPoint presentation during the North American Vincentian Family gathering on systemic change in Belleville, Ill. Four of the six committee members also participated in the Vincentian Family gathering on systemic change in October 2013 in Indianapolis, IN.

Awareness about committee activities is also raised through congregational websites and newsletters, as well as websites of the Federation, Vincentian Family and Canadian Religious Conference. The Maritime Project is included in Seeds of Hope in North America: Projects of the Vincentian Family -- a resource highlighting initiatives to promote systemic change.

Original members of the committee were Helen Danahy, SC; Franklyn Ferguson, CSM; Auréa Cormier, NDSC and Roma De Robertis, SCIC. The committee later expanded to also include Cecilia MacNeil, SC and Claudette Gallant, CSM. Those seeking more information may consult websites noted above and/or email Helen Danahy at [hdanahy@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:hdanahy@ns.sympatico.ca)

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How are we consulting and learning from those most affected by unjust social and economic policies and systems?

For what and with whom do we feel called to advocate?

What are the costs and fruits of advocacy, personally and communally?

How do Earth and universe inform and inspire our commitment to systemic change?



This issue was prepared by  
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<http://sisters-of-charity-federation.org/>