Blog
Social Justice



Student leaders from Ireland and the United States gather at Gwynedd Mercy University for an annual four-day Mercy Girl Effect conference held each year in Philadelphia. (Courtesy of Deirdre Mullan)



by Chris Herlinger

View Author Profile
cherlinger@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

March 21, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

This year marks a decade since the United Nations initiated its sustainable development goals, an ambitious effort to end global poverty and other social ills and create a blueprint for "a better and more sustainable future for all."

I have written about the sustainable development goals for 10 years. But as a journalist who covers the work of Catholic sisters at the United Nations, I have often wondered if anyone outside of the "U.N. world" cares about the goals.

Luckily, there are — and, no surprise, a sister is helping see to that.

The sister is Irish Mercy Sr. Deirdre Mullan, whose ministry is now based in New York and Pennsylvania.

Back in 2005, she and Mercy Sr. Maureen Christi and Eileen Killeen, a laywoman, formed a nongovernmental organization — the "Mercy Girl Effect." Mullan calls it a "mercying" movement in which students at all-girls Mercy-affiliated high schools formed a coalition, "bringing together schools from across the country to share ideas and educate the young women in our midst about the plight of girls worldwide."

It grew out of Mullan's work with the U.N.-based Working Group on Girls, and its work is informed by data and research from the U.N. children's organization, UNICEF.



A Mercy student from Rhode Island models the shirt she designed highlighting the Mercy Girl Effect. (Courtesy of Deirdre Mullan)

The working group is a UNICEF subcommittee and focuses mainly on the situation of the "girl child." Mullan became a member of the group very early in her time representing the Sisters of Mercy at the U.N.

This "Mercy outreach to girls" has now spread to Ireland, as well, with students now from 17 American and Irish schools participating. Schools in 10 U.S. states are represented. In 2024, more than 4,000 girls were involved in the movement.

Mullan calls the Mercy Girl Effect "a collaborative effort to deliver the effects of our value-centered education to those in other parts of the globe who struggle to attain even a basic educational experience."

From the outset, "we wanted to be clear on our message and, at the same time, remain faithful to the vision and aspirations of Catherine McAuley and the countless Mercy educators who have made — and continue to make — a difference in the lives of girls," Mullan said of the Irish Catholic foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, who lived from 1778 to 1841 and who founded the congregation in 1831.

Mullan told me the movement is about "developing and empowering young female leaders to understand our world and their role as young women to become agents of change."

This is consistent with the Mercy congregation's "call to service." Service, Mullan said, rests "in a profound reverence of persons." In doing that, she said, there must be a recognition that the relationship between those in service and those being served is complex, as the late Jamaican Mercy Sr. Marie Chin said: "Those who we think we are liberating are in fact our liberators; we cannot be liberated without them."

How the movement works

Once a school partners with the Mercy Girl Effect, Mullan said, the institution sends up to five girls to the annual four-day conference held in Philadelphia and to be trained as "ambassador-leaders."

Training consists of learning the charism of the Sisters of Mercy, taking a Myers-Briggs assessment test, and acquiring knowledge on the plight of girls worldwide using UNICEF data.

The student leaders, or ambassadors, are tasked with bringing the project back to school leadership and then the entire school. Mullan is then invited to schools to launch whatever the focus is for that academic year.

Advertisement

The focus of all schools this year is in helping reintroduce young mothers, ages 14-17, back to school to complete their secondary education.

How do the sustainable development goals figure into this? Mullan said that the U.N. goals "recognized that the world needs ways of sensing emerging disruptions that encourage cooperation, rather than division."

Cooperation, she noted, is increasingly needed because "we are part of the web of life and engaging in what is happening, anywhere in the world, means that human pain, wherever it occurs, and the distress of the planet must concern us all."

What happens in one part of the globe affects other parts of the world. As the Rev. Martin Luther King famously put it in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail": We all live in an "inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

We are all the poorer when huge numbers of our fellow humans are continuously struggling and living lives of hardship.



Members of a community in Nigeria assisted by the Mercy Girl Effect gather to collect water. (Courtesy of Deirdre Mullan)

For example, a 2023 report by UNICEF and the World Health Organization noted, "Globally, 1.8 billion people live in households without water supplies on the premises. Women and girls aged 15 and older are primarily responsible for water collection in 7 out of 10 such households, compared with 3 in 10 households for their male peers." Such a role often prevents them from attending school.

With this in mind, the girls active in the Mercy movement have focused on empowering the girl who "remains the most vulnerable group, especially in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and war-torn countries," Mullan said.

From the outset, "we were very clear that the conference was about 'functional leadership,' the charism of Mercy and the worldwide, global reality of girls," Mullan said

"We also pledged to be more than recipients of information and together committed to an action project to become compassionate actors for change," she said.

The "action-based aspect" of work includes the following:

- Providing assistance for wells in places where there were none, such as in Kenya and Nigeria;
- Scholarships for girls to attend school and receive a basic education;
- Building several small schools in Cambodia;
- Responding to humanitarian needs in the war-torn area of South Sudan's Nuba mountains by providing both scholarships and uniforms for several hundred children;
- Assisting the Great Green Wall Initiative by providing funds to its work planting trees to combat desertification in the Sahel region of Africa.

Reflecting on their experiences, several of the participants said the movement had instilled "Mercy core values" and allowed them to live out the values they were acquiring.

One participant is 15-year-old Sophia from Mount St. Mary Academy in Watchung, New Jersey. She said the "Women at the Well" initiative — focusing on developing wells in Africa so that girls would not miss school for obtaining clean water for their families — captured her imagination.

"I knew I wanted to act," Sophia said. "I wanted to help these girls in need."

With a passion for sustainability, especially in fashion, Sophia began a campaign to collect donations of gently worn formal and semiformal dresses. The dresses are then sold and the money goes to the "Women at the Well" campaign.

Sophia's efforts have paid off: She has raised enough money for the construction of more than six wells in Nigeria.



Student leaders from Ireland and the United States gather at Gwynedd Mercy University for an annual four-day Mercy Girl Effect conference held each year in Philadelphia. (Courtesy of Deirdre Mullan)

Aoife, an Irish student, said her focus as a young Mercy leader has been raising awareness of the pressing issue of access to clean water through an all-school assembly. "We highlighted that it is our responsibility to care for each other and our common home," she said.

At that assembly, the team leaders highlighted the plight of girls who live in rural areas with no access to clean water.

Aoife and others raised money to help build wells in places that need them most and also ensure "that young people like ourselves do not take water for granted." Students found the exercise extremely rewarding, knowing that they had made a difference, Aoife said.

The effect of these young people is gratifying and encouraging. Sr. Rebecca Odu, of Dawaki, Nigeria, who spoke at a Mercy Girl conference, said that she and others felt "so blessed" in learning that the Mercy Girl Effect was providing the resources for three wells in her rural communities.

"We cannot thank you enough for thinking of us," Odu said. "Lack of clean water is one of the biggest problems the villagers here face and too often they share the muddy water with animals, and so often the small children get sick. Giving them clean water will mean giving them life."

Mullan said the work of the Mercy Girl Effect has echoed Pope Francis' call to "encourage the generosity which is typical of the young and help them to work actively in building a better world."