

PRESIDENT COLUMN

WHAT A SOCIETY DOES TO ITS CHILDREN

“What a society does to its children, its children will do to society,” a Roman sage wrote. I read this quote in an inspiring book, *A Monk in the Inner City* (2008) by Mary Lou Kownacki, a Benedictine nun in Erie, Pennsylvania. In this book Sister Kownacki asks what her readers see as they look at what societies in our time are doing to our children: what are we offering them, teaching them, passing on to them? Her conclusion is that in so many cases, we are exposing children to pervasive cultures of violence — in wars half way around the world, and in wars within many of our inner city neighborhoods here in North America. She goes on to explain that a violence-saturated media has no difficulty finding examples of children shooting children, parents hurting their own children in a moment of rage, or neighbors killing neighbors without remorse.

Sister Kownacki goes on to share that when such violence becomes commonplace in a community, it inevitably has a pervasive effect on the children who grow up under its shadow. She tells a story of a Buddhist monk, Maha Ghosananda, a champion for the poor from Cambodia:

When a writer asked him what he was currently doing, Ghosandananda said that he was working to get an international ban against land mines because in Cambodia so many people were getting killed or maimed by them. When the writer asked how she could help, Ghosananda replied, ‘You must ask everyone you meet to sign a petition against land mines.’ Then he reached into the sleeve of his long orange robe, withdrew a petition, and handed it to her.

The writer reflected on this simple gesture and concluded, ‘May we all be not more than on sleeve-length away from connecting our commitment to a peaceful heart to our commitment to a peaceful world.’

During this past summer in my work with an organization called Touching Miami with Love, I had the burden as well as the opportunity to help our neighbors cope with a senseless shooting in our inner-city Miami neighborhood called Overtown. It started innocently enough. A mom had a birthday party for her 19-year-old son. The party got a little out of hand and at 12:45 a.m. several men entered the street party and started shooting. In the end, the police found several hundred rounds of casings

from an A-K47 and five different pistols. Fourteen people, mostly teenagers, were shot and two died within a couple days.

Since I live and work in one of the most dangerous communities in the US, shootings are not uncommon. But this shooting was different. It wasn’t gang or drug related and its impact on the community was overwhelming. In addition, this seemingly senseless incident happened within a block of the organization I work for, Touching Miami with Love. The next day, we scrambled to cobble together services and supports for the 120+ children, youth, interns and volunteers that were involved with our summer camp. Yet how does one work to undo the damage done to our children in the face of such a blatant example of violence?

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In the days following the incident, we had the privilege of being able to bring our neighbors together in several community meetings, giving them an opportunity to share what was on their minds and hearts. We struggled with the awesome responsibility of trying to live out our “commitment to a peaceful heart” during a time of such difficult community trauma. I can’t think of an instance in my professional career when I leaned so heavily on my training in social work and my faith to guide me in my work.

I know that many of my fellow NACSW members deal with situations not that unlike my community’s experience this summer. This is part of the reason we study, read, meet with one another, and go to workshops and conferences to prepare our hearts and minds for the work to which we are called. In my experience, social workers who are people of faith are often among the first to respond to situations like this that arise in our communities to do what we are trained and equipped to do as a vital way of living out our faith.

This is one of the reasons I have thoroughly enjoyed my time on NACSW’s



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Board of Directors, most recently as the Board President (which, sadly, is coming to an end at the close of this year). It truly has been a great experience and honor to serve NACSW in this capacity. I am very proud of the work the Board has done during my tenure. I believe these past couple of years we have made great strides in developing capacity on the Board and creating a healthy and productive group. As an organization, NACSW is blessed to have such a wonderful Board of committed Christians who are so passionate about social work as well as about their faith. These folks are not only making a difference in the communities where they serve, they also give of their time and resources to ensure that NACSW maintains its focus on “equipping our members to integrate Christian faith and professional social work practice.” It has been a pleasure to serve alongside such fine individuals. I want to say thank you to my fellow board members and thank you to all the NACSW members to allow me this opportunity to serve.

I am also grateful that I will have some new free time to be more involved in working directly with an area for which I have great passion, Christian Community Development. I look forward to getting to know more of our members interested in this area of practice through the Community Development and Organizing Member Interest Group we will be forming next year. You’ll be hearing more about that soon. I can’t wait!

Reference

Kownacki, M. L. (2008). *A Monk in the City*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.