NETWORK: Faithful to the Gospel - Then and Now
Simone Campbell, SSS

[NETWORK is a Catholic Social Justice lobby with a rich history of advocating for the poor and marginalized. CMSM asked Sister Simone Campbell, SSS, NETWORK’s Executive Director, to reflect on that history on the occasion of its 40th anniversary. What follows is her articulation of that reflection.]

NETWORK marks its 40th anniversary this year. It has been forty years of living through turbulent times, always striving to keep the needs of people living at the margins of our society at the heart of our advocacy. We were created in the shadow of the anti-Vietnam war movement and the feminist movement. We were grounded in nourishing women’s leadership in a time of really radical feminism. We opened our doors a few weeks before the Watergate break-ins that ultimately ended in President Nixon’s resignation.

NETWORK was also formed in the context of Pope Paul VI’s letter The Call to Action and the Synod of Bishops’ response with Justice in the World. Both documents challenged Church members to participate in transforming the world as a constitutive element of preaching the Gospel. We women religious, long involved in direct service, were particularly receptive to these calls. Through our work in poverty-stricken parts of the world, we knew first-hand the legacies of unjust institutional structures and systems. As we entered into these new fields of advocacy we became a trusted faith voice in the secular movements both of then and now.

Feminist Roots

We began in the center of the women’s movement. At the formation meeting there was tension around some key men leading the women’s discussion about how to respond to the identified signs of the times. Through wisdom and grace (and probably some ruffled feelings), the men stepped back from the leadership role and NETWORK’s feminist model of a shared management style was born.

From this formative moment, the shape and spirit of NETWORK were clear. Women-led, NETWORK embodied a model of organization that starkly contrasted with those of the competitive political arena and traditional Church hierarchy. A shared management style meant that the entire staff was involved in decision-making and NETWORK members had a direct voice in determining the organization’s issue agenda. NETWORK intentionally embodied that which it sought for the wider world: recognition of the dignity and worth of every person, shared leadership and justice.

While this participative form continues, in the 2006 strategic planning process, the NETWORK Board grappled with this concept for this time. We asked the question if we were a “nest to nourish women’s leadership” or were we “a microcosm of the world as we want it to be.” We realized that there were strong values to both goals. After much conversation and discernment, we agreed that
we would maintain the participative style and strive to be an organization that models the world as we want it to be.

For us, this choice meant being more clearly inclusive of all people within our staff and structures. We work to this day on developing ourselves as anti-racist as well as welcoming of men onto our Board and staff. We are an organization that treasures women’s leadership, but we are expanding our model to be inclusive of all leadership. We see this as important as we move into the future. We value the gifts of all and find ways of collaborating in order to build up the realm of God in our midst.

**Political Education**

At the first meeting, it was determined that NETWORK was not to be just another organization. The decision was made that it was to be a vibrant network of relationships that fostered political action. It was not to replace any organization or get too mired in bylaws and operational procedures. Rather, it was supposed to be a movement that trained advocates and worked for the common good.

In August of 1972, four months after opening, NETWORK held its first Legislative Seminar. The goal of the seminar was to apply Catholic Social Teaching to the issues of the day and then to make a plan of action. This first Seminar drew 150 Sisters from 31 states. Presenters included Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, Common Cause founder John Gardner, Eleanor McGovern and columnist Michael Novak (in his progressive days). During the seminar, regional and state coordinators were selected with a goal of establishing a nationwide telephone network of citizen activists and local educators.

This early education and activism became the model for future work. The Legislative Seminars continued for many years as a way to train activists. NETWORK’s educational model is always grounded in the lived reality of the people involved. We know that the best policy decisions are made when real-life experience is at the heart of the decision. So our educational efforts are always an effort to lift up local experience and apply the learning to policy choices.

This is most recently seen in the *Mind the Gap!* campaign that was launched in May of 2011. We as staff had been reflecting on the growing wealth gap and how all of us were doing worse in our nation as the wealth gap grew. We then worked to break down the problem so that people can relate it to their everyday lives and add their perspectives. This becomes then an effort at deeper analysis about what is going on in our lives and ways that we can respond. This summer, we are launching our *Mend the Gap* campaign as part of our election work. We know that economic policies are key in this election and, true to our tradition, we are working to lift up the needs of the people who are most vulnerable in this economy.

**Political Effectiveness**

Over the years, NETWORK has experienced the shifting tide of political sentiment. For those of us who have lived through the various presidencies, just the names can evoke a sense of struggle. Nixon conjures up war and scandal, but ironically a strong foreign policy by reaching out to China. Carter evokes an effort to build up domestic policy, but he was hobbled by the Iranian hostage crisis. Reagan brings up “trickle-down economics” that has never worked while it was coupled with one of the largest tax hikes in our nation’s history. George H.W. Bush brings to mind the first Iraq war and a domestic recession. Clinton presided over a dot-com boom and bust, welfare reform and
the beginning of a polarized Congress. George Bush misled the American people about Iraq’s intentions, and failed to pay for two wars while cutting taxes for the wealthy.

Through all of this history, NETWORK has taken a political position that looks for a way to move policy forward. We are grateful for those who take a more extreme stance because it helps pull the conversation in a more progressive direction. But we are noted for our political pragmatism in our mission to get something actually accomplished.

Recent examples of this political pragmatism include the 2007 effort for comprehensive immigration reform. While the compromise that Senator Ted Kennedy worked out with Senator McCain was far from perfect, we advocated for its passage and some adjustment along the way. We learned from Senator Kennedy that in any legislative struggle you have to decide what your top priority is and then work hard to achieve it. Other items can be traded in order to achieve the top priority.

Senator Kennedy also taught us that for the provisions you do not like, get a long lead-in time with the hope that you can change them before they take full effect. This strategy was certainly evident in the unsuccessful effort to pass comprehensive reform. Senator Kennedy’s top priority was getting a path to citizenship for the 12 million undocumented people in our country. To get that, he was willing to accept, among other things, a guest worker program that both NETWORK and Walmart opposed! But the compromise was unable to hold, and the bill failed in the Senate.

Another example of pragmatic political effectiveness occurred during the 2010 struggle for healthcare reform. NETWORK has worked on healthcare reform since we were founded. It was one of the top issues named at the first legislative seminar in 1972. Since that day we have worked tirelessly to get quality, affordable healthcare for all.

In 2009, the stars began to align to make a step toward this goal a significant possibility. NETWORK addressed the issues of affordability by working with Congress to ensure cost containment and premium subsidies for low wage workers and their families. We collaborated with the Catholic Hospital Association, which was working on the issues of abortion and conscience protections. While the story of healthcare reform is a long and twisted tale, suffice it to say here that there were many politically pragmatic choices that were made.

We supported the House bill, which was better for low-income workers in that it had higher premium subsidies, bigger Medicaid expansion, and stiffer competition in the market place. We worked in the Senate to get provisions that more closely matched the House version. But, with the election of Scott Brown as Senator from Massachusetts in Ted Kennedy’s seat, it was immediately apparent that if healthcare was to pass it would not be through a conference committee resolution of the differences between the House and Senate. The only way forward was to have the House pass the Senate bill. We chose to get a less-than-perfect bill for the American people rather than lose it all. We see this as being realistic and politically effective.

Politics Rooted in Lived Experience

Since the beginning, NETWORK has utilized the lived experience of its members to inform our advocacy. Two examples leap out from our history.

The first is our national study about the effects of the 1996 welfare reform legislation. NETWORK opposed the bill because it changed the safety net from being a guaranteed net, to being available
only for five years for any individual. We launched a study to see the impact on real families. The findings are chilling. We found that in an expanding economy it is possible to find low-wage entry level work. Yet the early findings indicated that people did not get out of poverty, education became a for-profit business focused on profit not students, and work supports (transportation and childcare) were not sufficient for recipients. When we repeated the study in 2009 in advance of the bill’s reauthorization, we found that while cash assistance had declined significantly, people were living in more and more desperate situations. There was no realistic safety net other than food stamps.

It was out of this lived experience that we advocated for changes in the authorization of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). But politics, being politics, reauthorizations were slipped into a variety of large bills so that there is no real policy discussion about the underlying issues. We keep trying to “raise a noise” about the problems people are facing, but in this political climate sometimes maintaining the status quo can be seen as a victory when the alternative looks like it could be a lot worse.

The second example I want to use is our work on the Iraq war. In 2002, NETWORK was a leader in trying to prevent the war. Kathy Thornton, RSM, our Executive Director went on a delegation to Iraq in December to bring back the stories of the people and what was actually happening in that country. I was lucky enough to be invited along on that delegation. We met many religious and were hosted by Iraqi Dominican Sisters and Priests.

In Baghdad and Basra we met with the government officials, imams, bishops, medical staff, ordinary families, school teachers, and many others. We learned that no one wanted war and it appeared to us that everyone was working to prevent it. We came back from this two-week pilgrimage with the Iraqi people etched in our heart. We failed in our effort to prevent the invasion, but we were bonded with the people.

After the invasion, our policy work took a different tack from those who were focused on the US military and were demanding that the US leave Iraq NOW! Rather, we were in relationship with the Iraqi people who were terrified that if the US left precipitously there would be chaos. Therefore, our work became trying to develop strategies that would build local stability and community development. We advocated for funding of various community-action programs as the real way forward. We sponsored a delegation of Iraqi women to speak on Capitol Hill about the needs of women and children in Iraq and worked with the Iraqi Dominican Sisters to strive to get them assistance as they seek to build a teaching hospital. It has surprised many at times that we have not been the extreme peace activists that many of our friends are. Rather, our relationships with Iraqis shaped our worry and our advocacy, causing us to have a much more nuanced policy.

**Politics and the Way Forward**

At our glorious 40th anniversary celebration at Trinity University we rejoiced in all of our accomplishments and all of the challenges we face. A recurring theme was that we need to let people know about NETWORK and our mission. We need to invite more folks to partner with us to promote Catholic Social Teaching in our time. We brainstormed some small ways that could happen and we, well at least I, prayed to the Holy Spirit that it might be possible.

Four days after our “birthday party,” the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a stinging criticism of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and specifically included LCWR’s relationship with NETWORK as suspect because we worked too much for the needs of people who live in poverty and are silent on other issues such as gay marriage. This rebuke has
stirred up Catholics and non-Catholics alike. It has lifted our work out of the shadows and placed a media spotlight upon it.

It may end up being a “joke of the Holy Spirit” that this is what was needed to spread our mission to others. However, I find it a bit of a painful joke to be so criticized from such a lofty place. But now my question is “How can we use this moment to lift up our concerns for our polarized country?” Some plans are coming together; new partners are joining us in our mission; there is a bright opportunity in the midst of the challenge. But isn’t this the Gospel message for our time?

This leads me to recognize that our spirituality has been shaped by our experiences in this ministry. The Gospel comes alive for us with stories of Jesus’s interaction with civil society. The healing of the centurion’s child, engaging tax collectors, speaking with the Samaritan woman, etc., all take on new meaning when our ministry is walking the halls of Congress. This spiritual treasure is deepened in the rarely popular struggle for those who live at the margins of our society. Personally, I have come to call this ministry a contemplative practice of “walking willing” to use my gifts and talents for the needs of others. So at NETWORK we strive to listen deeply to the needs of the time, see deeply into the firmament of possibilities and boldly trust in the Spirit while we strive to act for justice. This is the vibrant life in the Spirit that Jesus calls us to.

I invite you to join us in this seminal time. Join us in the struggle for justice in federal policy. Join us in the effort to ground our politics in real experience, not sound bites. Join us in the contemplative action of walking willing into challenging circumstances to struggle for the dignity of all by caring for the least among us. This ministry is not for sissies. It takes fidelity and fortitude as well as a good sense of humor.