

Putting Principles into Practice

Catholic college and university presidents take a prominent role in pledging to end global poverty.

By Paula Moore

When John Hurley accompanied a group of students to El Salvador on an immersion trip in May 2012, he never expected it would affect him as deeply as it did. Following a civil war that consumed the country in the 1980s, El Salvador did see some economic growth and increased spending in the social sector in the 1990s. But those gains have weakened in the last decade and, according to the World Bank, a number of key social indicators in El Salvador—especially education and access to safe water—remain far below the average for Central America.

Hurley, president of Canisius College, says, “While I had seen poverty in my hometown of Buffalo and elsewhere in the United States, I had never had an experience like this before. When I returned home, I could not simply ignore what I had seen and heard.”

Confronted with injustice and oppression that appeared to result most often from systemic failures of government, Hurley says the trip left him convinced that privately funded initiatives were the best chance for breaking the cycle of poverty that afflicts millions of people around the world. Together with his wife and daughter, Hurley returned to Central America this summer with Agros International, an organization that works to help rural families in Central America and Mexico achieve land ownership and economic stability.

Agros is also the primary beneficiary of Hurley’s participation in The Presidents’ Pledge Against Global Poverty, an initiative of current and former university presidents who annually pledge 5 percent or more of their personal income to organizations that address poverty in their communities and in countries across the globe. Hurley is one of 11 Catholic college and university presidents to sign the pledge, representing fully 40 percent of all signers.

Says Ann M. Svennungsen, director of the initiative, the linkage between Catholic values and The Presidents’ Pledge is natural. “Catholic social teaching has been a consistent voice for justice and the alleviation of poverty—raising the issue in our communities, on campuses, and with policy makers,” she notes. “We see elements of this commitment powerfully magnified in the [Vision Statement for Catholic higher education and Catholic social teaching](#). I’ve been honored,” she adds, “by the commitment from ACCU presidents, including those who are members of religious orders. Their voices and their leadership are important to this movement—particularly because their orders are

deeply engaged in healing the effects of poverty. That commitment represents their pledge.”

The Bully Pulpit and Beyond

Svennungsen points out that higher education’s most prominent leaders sit at a unique nexus: First, their position gives them civic standing which they can use to call attention to society’s most pressing problems. “College and university presidents are respected public leaders. They have a distinctive platform that can help focus attention and action on this issue,” she says. “Many experts agree that humanity is now capable of significantly reducing or ending extreme poverty worldwide. But that takes resources and collective will, which presidents can help galvanize.”

But campus officials also engage with tomorrow’s leaders and can leverage that role to effect even greater change. “As leaders of institutions that prepare the next generation of global citizens, college presidents can model generosity and engagement in a compelling way,” Svennungsen adds. “Presidents who sign the pledge demonstrate that personal philanthropy is both a moral responsibility and an example of the public responsibility of leadership.”

Many of the college leaders with whom Svennungsen speaks are like Mary Meehan, president of Alverno College. Meehan says her impulse to sign the pledge was instantly strong. “When I was asked to sign the pledge, I felt compelled to do so. I didn’t even have to think about what it would take, I just knew I had to make this commitment. While I hope by doing so I can inspire someone else to sign on, I know my motivation was to do something concrete that might make a difference.”

For his part, Hurley says he himself was inspired to sign when he saw the names of peers who had already committed to the effort. “I decided to sign on to The Presidents’ Pledge when I saw that the preliminary list of signatories included several presidents of the Catholic colleges and universities for whom I had great respect,” he explains. “It caused me to reexamine my personal philanthropy and see what percentage of my giving was directed toward poverty issues and whether I could increase that. So, this really was a case of peer pressure causing a reevaluation on my part.”

Some presidents have parleyed their signing of The Presidents’ Pledge into greater awareness of global poverty among the campus community. Hurley

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College Presidents Sign Pledge to End Poverty

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notes that his signing received some attention on the Canisius campus, prompting encouraging feedback from faculty, staff, and students. “They see this as a visible sign of commitment to our Catholic and Jesuit mission,” he asserts. “I wanted them to see that it was possible and even necessary to take [an] experience and turn it into concrete change.”

A Natural Fit

Colleges and universities may sit as an obvious home to social justice issues because the essential activities of any campus can be directly applied to addressing social ills. “Higher education—through research, teaching, and public service—is at the forefront of alleviating poverty at home and around the world,” Svennungsen points out. “It’s the right place to help raise awareness and to create greater collective impact than each one of us might have individually.”

Father Dennis Holtschneider—who, as president of DePaul University, also signed The Presidents’ Pledge—agrees that institutions like his can play a significant role in reversing the effects of poverty.

“Universities do three things brilliantly when it comes to social change,” he says. “First, they are a source of new invention. Whether that is disease-resistant seeds or any other advancement, universities make powerful contributions to [lessening] world hunger. Second, they educate the next generation of citizens and world leaders. [When] they effectively show students the extent of human suffering and teach them effective ways to contribute to positive social change, universities can powerfully shape the ways that this generation will respond. Third, universities can choose to educate the poor and thereby break the cycle of poverty in their families. How a university directs its financial aid can have powerful and lasting social effects.”

That cycle of poverty is as evident in the United States (where more than 46 million people live in poverty, according to a 2011 report from the Census Bureau) as it is in other countries. Svennungsen notes that up to half of giving by presidents who sign the pledge can be targeted to poverty relief in the United

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Universities Build Ties to Campaign for Human Development

Catholic colleges and universities are finding that building relationships with the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) can help them magnify their own efforts to fighting poverty by connecting their resources and expertise to groups around the country, expanding their capacity to involve the next generation of leaders in the work, and presenting students with new means to learn about poverty, social justice, and more.

- Thanks to the collaborative efforts of students and faculty at [Xavier University in Ohio](#), along with the CCHD-funded group Interfaith Business Builders (IBB), Cincinnati is preparing to welcome Community Blend, its first worker-owned cooperative coffee shop. IBB develops and promotes co-ops in low-income Cincinnati neighborhoods, including the town in which Xavier is located. Students from the university helped develop portions of the business plan as part of coursework, while Xavier’s [Community Building Institute](#) promoted community participation in the project. Community Blend will serve neighborhood residents and the Xavier

community, selling fair-trade and locally made products, and ensuring a living wage for workers, artisans, and farmers.

- When parishioners donate to the annual CCHD Collection during Sunday Mass, they are connecting to the Campaign’s mission to “feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18). One student and former intern for the Archdiocese of Portland wanted to expand that connection and, thanks to her efforts, the [University of Portland](#) now participates in the annual CCHD Collection through its campus Mass on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. The university has discovered that promoting the collection at its chapel enhances its bond with the Church’s mission of fostering life and dignity, justice and peace.
- Faculty members at [The Catholic University of America](#) joined Dr. Linda Plitt-Donaldson of the National Catholic School of Social Service and Rev. Anthony Pogorelc, S.S., of Theological

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Fight Against Poverty an ‘Uphill Climb’

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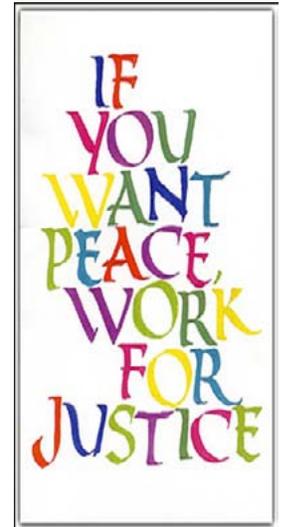
States. “For some presidents,” she says, “the need is very close to home, in the local communities where their campuses engage a range of issues—including health care, nutrition, education, employment, and economic development.”

Meehan explains that more than 60 percent of Alverno students live at or below the federal poverty level—and yet repeatedly demonstrate their own commitment to helping others. “Since Milwaukee is one of the poorest large cities in America, our students are well aware of extreme poverty on a local level,” she says. “Despite their own situation, our students [support] an extensive array of initiatives, from scholarships for students in Africa, to supporting a school there. Since January, the Alverno community has provided more than 195,000 hours of community service.” Meehan adds that service is the foundation of a Franciscan education. “By my small gesture in signing this pledge, I hope I am practicing what we teach, and what we believe.”

In the end, Svennungsen and the signers of the pledge know that the fight against global poverty is an uphill climb, but that some measure of progress

is possible. “Our goal is to inspire a national conversation about extreme poverty and take unified action that can significantly reduce poverty in our lifetimes,” she concludes.

“Universities will never have the capacity to fully end poverty,” Holtschneider adds. “That will take a larger social consensus and commitment, but they can be powerful actors in the larger process. And I’m proud of my own university’s commitments in this regard.” □



For more information about The Presidents’ Pledge Against Global Poverty, current and past presidents of Catholic colleges are encouraged to visit the organization’s website or e-mail Ann Svennungsen at asvennungsen@presidentspledge.org.

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College to host an event aimed at connecting students and faculty with the community-organizing work of CCHD. The event featured an overview of CCHD history, a panel of local community organizers from CCHD-funded groups, and an address on the current challenges to community organizing. It also enabled participants and community groups to network and discuss possibilities for collaboration.

- The [St. Thomas University \(FL\) Center for Justice and Peace](#) leverages the university’s teaching and research resources for a number of community-led social justice projects in the region. For instance, through creation of a partnership with People Acting for Community Together (PACT), South Florida’s largest faith-based community organizing coalition, the university has offered for-credit internships in faith-based community organizing, integrated the coalition’s work into introductory ethics and theology courses, and recently begun to apply its social science research capabilities to assist PACT’s

policy advocacy efforts. And, in Central Florida, the Center has partnered with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a long-time CCHD-funded group and one of the leading grassroots farm worker organizations in the United States. The Center has supported immersion courses focused on the intersection of Catholic social thought, immigration, and farm labor, as well as integrative course units in which faculty address farm labor issues. In fall 2012, students from two communications courses partnered with the CIW to produce radio and video public service announcements that will help further farm workers advocacy campaigns.

Through projects such as these, Catholic colleges and universities can forge strong relationships with CCHD and their surrounding communities, educate students on their ability to initiate social change, and advance social justice initiatives. By integrating classroom learning with community needs, campuses have been able to enhance learning while putting Catholic social thought into action.