

Katherine Wojtan



Svitlana lukhymovych



Nadine Sehnert



Women's Rights Are Human Rights

Mary's Pence celebrates 30 years of women-focused philanthropy.

❧ **IN LATE-'80S CHICAGO**, a nun named Maureen Gallagher had an epiphany while vacuuming. Days before, she had gone to her prayer group, full of other Catholic women. Two sisters voiced frustration: The diocese had rejected their request for more funding to support their successful prison ministry.

Vacuuming, Gallagher imagined meeting God. "What did you do to help women?" God asked. She replied, "I'm a woman; I couldn't do anything." Again, God asked: "What did you do?"

Moved, Gallagher founded Mary's Pence, a nonprofit that awards grants to small, community-based and women-led organizations across Canada and the U.S. Based today in Saint Paul, Mary's Pence, which turns 30 this year, has stuck to its original mission: to aid women by following Catholic social teaching.

That doesn't mean the mission is still all that Catholic,

though. One of Mary's Pence's recent grantees is RISE—Reviving the Islamic Sisterhood for Empowerment. Of more than 60 Muslim organizations in the Twin Cities, only a few employ women leaders. So RISE holds workshops teaching Muslim women how to get politically active, how to manage finances and how to network.

Another recent grantee, Isuroon, provides a space in Minneapolis where Somali women can connect to reduce "cultural loneliness." Together with RISE, Isuroon prepared Muslim and Somali women to vote in last year's presidential election.

These groups fill the Mary's Pence grant requirements: led by women, responsive to local voices and looking for long-term solutions. And although Muslim-centered, the two organizations in fact showcase the same values as Catholic social teaching.

"It's a universal set of values that I think most

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people really share,” says bookkeeper Nadine Sehnert. In her Catholic upbringing, Sehnert never learned about Catholic social teaching. Mary’s Pence interprets its broad, altruistic principles as including the right to economic security and dignified work, as well as a focus on subsidiary decision making, meaning decision making at the most local level possible.

Svitlana Iukhymovych, a full-time Mary’s Pence volunteer in communications, identifies with the values even though she does not practice any religion. “This kind of work matters to me on the human level,” she says. A St. Joseph Worker volunteer, Iukhymovych recently visited the U.S.-Mexico border with Mary’s Pence to participate in Encuentro at the Border, a conference and protest. Among topics discussed at the conference were the efforts of women farmers in Central American communities.

Mary’s Pence reaches those Central American communities through its ESPERA lending program. Standing for Economic Systems Providing Equitable Resources for All, ESPERA funds over 1,000 women south of the border. A board member working in El Salvador reports back about neighborhood violence and women extorted by gangs. “We have a lot of sympathy for the difficulty of immigration, of people trying to escape when there is clear fear and danger,” says Katherine Wojtan, executive director of Mary’s Pence.

The nonprofit awards approximately eight grants per two annual cycles, says Grace Garvey-Hall, a development and communications liaison. Mary’s Pence’s broad reach and subsidiary focus appealed to her. She says, “You’re supposed to think globally and act locally.”

Mary’s Pence bends Catholicism to fit local cultures, but its feminism has stayed the same. Wojtan defines it, really, as a type of humanism. “It’s not specifically saying that women have rights or don’t have rights,” she says. “It’s about people having value, and dignity, and worth.” SPM



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