

“20/20 Vision”
by Amy Johnson

**President’s Address to
2007 WNCC UMW Annual Meeting
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When the Program Committee was discussing themes for our Annual Meeting and we chose “Through the Eyes of a Child,” I had a flashback to my childhood to an experience I had forgotten about.

I can remember sitting out on the back door step of my parents’ home and I could look over several hills and hollers and see the home of my great-grandmother. I remember sitting there that evening and wondering if my great-grandmother was sitting on her porch, looking over toward our house. And then I imagined that I was sitting on her porch and I tried to visualize what she would see if she were doing so. And I can remember trying to look through someone else’s eyes at different times in my childhood. Did any of you ever do that?

I’m sure that, as adults, we have wondered how other people “see” us...especially when they have that look that makes you wonder if there is something in our teeth or if our hair is out of place. You know the looks!

For those of you who do not know, I’m a new grandmother. Dylan Ryan Koppenheffer was born on May 16 and I don’t think we’ve stopped smiling since! We wonder at times what he’s thinking...maybe, “Do I have to get my picture made again?”

We’re not sure what he saw in this shot...but whatever it was, he looked a little scared or shocked. It’s the same look he had when two little girls were trying to play with him. He gave our daughter a look that said, “HELP!”

Dylan’s nursery has a safari theme. He has wall hangings of monkeys, giraffes, tigers, and elephants. He also has a silk tree in the corner of his room with a monkey hanging out of it. When he gets fussy, you can walk him to his nursery, and it quiets him...it’s soothing to him to look at his animals. One day when we were at the fire station, he noticed the silk tree in the day room and he did a double take...like “that’s like my tree.” I was sharing this story with Linda Baity a few weeks ago and she said he probably was wondering, “What happened to my monkey?”

20/20 Vision is considered normal vision. Some of us need glasses and contacts in order to have 20/20 vision. There may be some of us who are exceptional and have 20/15 vision! I’m at that age when I can see better at times with my glasses off! A few years ago in the Sunday School class I was teaching, I pulled my glasses off to help a little girl with an activity. She gave me a peculiar look, something like, “Why are you taking your glasses off?” I told her that I was at the age when I couldn’t see with my glasses on and I

couldn't see with my glasses off! I then asked her if she thought I was old. (Don't you just love to find out what children really think...after all, they are so honest with their opinions.) She didn't miss a beat. She said, "I think you're just right!"

When it comes to children in this world and the environment and life circumstances they live in and the things their little eyes see...what is considered "normal" vision for them?

I think of myself to be a "normal" person and who had a "normal" childhood. I consider myself the luckiest person on the earth in that I have two fine parents who raised me in a Christian home. I had food to eat and clothes to wear. I was able to go to the doctor when I was sick. I went to school and had the encouragement and support from my parents in all of my activities. I had the four best grandparents in the world. I knew that I was loved and that I was special in their eyes.

But there are children in the world whose life experiences are very much different from mine or yours. Their experiences are considered "normal" to them. Let's look at a few of them.

Does a child see "love" or do they see "abuse?"

- Every 35 seconds, a child is abused or neglected.
- Every day in America, 4 children are killed due to abuse or neglect.
- Every day in America, 2,482 children are confirmed as being abused or neglected.

Poverty is the single best predictor of child abuse and neglect. Children who live in families with annual incomes of less than \$15,000 are 22 times more likely to be abused or neglected than those with annual incomes of \$30,000 or more. Too many children, despite promising efforts from state governments, still go without the service and supports they need due to cuts in health care, education, specialized treatment services, and, in some cases, foster care and adoption assistance services.

Does a child see a table of food when they are hungry or bare cabinets?

Food security is a new term to me. It does not mean that our food is safe to consume. Food security means that families have enough food to eat. A household is defined as being "food secure" if all of its members consistently have access to enough food to allow for active and healthy living.

There are over 36 million Americans who are food "insecure" – meaning that they do not have enough food to eat. 13 million are children.

In 3.9 million families, someone had to skip a meal because they were unable to purchase food.

The majority of food insecure households have incomes that are near or below the poverty line.

Every day, 30,000 people die of starvation. That's 1,250 people every hour, 20 people every minute, and 1 person every 3 seconds.

Whether in the United States or in a foreign country, children are entitled to an education. Education should prepare the child for life in a spirit of understanding, peace and tolerance.

- Yet, every 10 seconds, a high school student drops out of school.
- Every day in America, 16,964 public school students are suspended.

Children should have time to rest and play and do things that children like to do. Yet there are many children around the world who must go to work every day and are not afforded the luxury of just being a child.

Children are entitled to a home to live in, yet many children around the world find themselves homeless and living on the streets, often alone in the world without their parents or else finding themselves living as refugees due to the effects of war.

Children should be able to walk outside and enjoy fresh air and sunshine, yet there are children in the world who must wear masks to protect themselves from air pollution.

Many children around the world are unable to realize their potential because of poverty, malnutrition, trafficking, inadequate shelter, incarceration, capital punishment, as well as serving as child soldiers in their country's military.

In the United States, children suffer because they face poverty, inadequate education, they lack quality health care, or live in unhealthy situations.

Many children are called upon to support their families as adults do, yet they do not have the protection of adult rights.

The Social Principles of *The United Methodist Book of Discipline* addresses children's rights in paragraph 162. It reads:

Once considered the property of their parents, children are now acknowledged to be full human beings in their own right, but beings to whom adults and society in general have special obligations...

Moreover, children have the rights to food, shelter, clothing, health care and emotional well-being as do adults, and these rights we affirm as theirs regardless of actions or inactions of their parents or guardians.

In particular, children must be protected from economic, physical, emotional, and sexual exploitation and abuse.

As United Methodist Women, we were organized almost 140 years ago to make a difference in the lives of women, children, and youth. Is the world a better place to live

than it was 140 years ago? I would hope so. However, conditions still exist that need to be addressed. What are we doing today to enrich the lives of the world's children?

The top three answers to that question would be:

1. We pray for the children. Prayer is probably the easiest thing we can do. It doesn't require us to go anywhere or do anything except to take a few moments of our time to talk to our God.
2. We give our money to help fund mission projects...projects that help with education, medical treatment, day care facilities, etc.
3. We participate in hands-on mission projects...whether it be school kits for UMCOR that you brought this weekend OR the almost 1500 school kits provided for our Bethlehem Centers at the School of Christian Mission or a variety of other things.

While these three things are very worthwhile and I dare say that every United Methodist Woman participates in these areas, there is one area of our PURPOSE that I feel is not as utilized as the others and that is the area of SOCIAL ACTION.

Social Action will make you squirm. Social Action makes us uncomfortable and we would rather someone else stand up and speak out on issues. But ladies, who must speak for the children? Who must work to change the social injustices that are in our society today in order to make this world a better place for our children to live?

Sometimes I think that as long as the children in our families are doing okay and perhaps the children in our immediate church family are okay, then we look at the world through rose colored glasses and think all is right with the world.

But ladies, we need to take our rose-colored glasses off and set about righting the wrongs in this world. We need to do so for the sake of all God's children.

While we, as a Conference, select some issues to focus on each year, I feel that we need to be doing more. We need to be doing more than just throwing out three issues and just ask everyone to get on board and do something about them. The three priorities for 2007 are:

- **Campaign for Children with emphasis on Public Education**
- **Violence – It Affects Us All**
- **Quality Health Care for All**

We, as a Conference, need to get involved and do more in-depth study of the issues and work for change in our communities.

Last month, Sherry Sink and Tonya Lanier represented our conference at the National Seminar. Representatives from every conference were there to talk about and study social issues. Awareness was raised on issues that dealt with health care, public education, food security, immigration, and the environment. The theme for the weekend was “For Christ’s Sake, Turn the World Upside Down.” Frankly, I don’t know of two better ladies to represent our Conference...ladies who have so much enthusiasm...and who can get us pumped up as a Conference to work for change. Sherry and Tonya did return with a fervent commitment that we, as United Methodist Women of the Western North Carolina Conference, will band together and work for change in our communities. They had a display over in the Program Resource Room this weekend and I hope you had a chance to visit it. You will be hearing more about these issues and the call to action resulting from their participation in the National Seminar in the coming months.

As Sherry mentioned this morning, Mission Today criteria will also be changing beginning in January. At the present time, in order to be a Mission Today unit, you need to complete at least four of the asterisked items and four of the non-asterisked items listed in the criteria. After studying some of the reports that have been submitted by the local units, there are some local units who complete eight of the items and become a Mission Today Unit without completing the item of “making and meeting their pledge.” The Mission Today Committee feels that this is wrong.

If you are committed to the organization of United Methodist Women, you should, at the very least, make and meet your pledge to mission. Without our pledge dollars, how can mission be funded? Beginning in January, the number one criteria that you must complete in order to become a Mission Today Unit will be that you must make and meet your pledge. You can complete all of the other items, but if you do not make and meet your pledge, your unit will be not be a Mission Today unit.

There will also be other changes to the Mission Today criteria. Criteria to be added will include more action oriented items, items that will require us to perhaps move out of our comfort zones. And don’t think that your unit is too small to make a difference in the world. Remember that only six women back in 1869 began our journey as women organized for mission. And look at us today! Perhaps you can partner with another unit...work together in your community for change. Let’s dream a little...what if a district...all the units in a district...banded together to work for change! I can already feel “our world” beginning to tilt. Can you?

Another area that is alive and well is racism. Racism is not just a black and white issue. Racism covers all races...Hispanic, persons from the Middle East...all races. For the most part, I think children value each other, regardless of the color of one’s skin.

I can remember as a little girl asking my mother why one bus came by our house and picked up my aunt who lived across the street and why another bus came by the house and picked up the black kids out the street. She explained that there were two high schools, one for whites and one for blacks. I was only four or five years old, and I really didn’t understand why there was this separation

I was in the 8th grade of school when the schools in Forsyth County were integrated. I remember that day so well. My mother told me that morning before I left for school that I had better not mistreat the black children that would be in school with me. Her words were, "They cannot help the color of their skin is black no more than you can help the color of your skin is white. And I had better not hear of you being ugly to anyone." I can still see her standing there in the middle of the living room floor.

First period class, Mr. McLeod's English class down in the "dungeon" or basement of Northwest Jr. High School in Winston-Salem...there were probably 25 or so white kids in the class and two black girls...Brenda Brown and Yvonne Dobson. They sat in the row next to me in class and they had a frightened look on their face. I looked over at them, smiled, and told them "Hey." They smiled back...they still looked frightened...but they also relaxed a little bit. You know, four years later as seniors at North Forsyth High School, we were still friends...not the kind of friends who hung out together at each other's homes, but who would speak to each other and showed respect for each other.

Fast forward to 1989. I thought that period of the '50's and '60's was behind me. But much to my dismay, racism reared its ugly head when my daughter was in the fifth grade of school.

In order to prepare the fifth graders for middle school, someone came up with the idea that the students would change classes each day. They would have one teacher in the morning for math and science and then they would switch, being with other kids...not the same classmates, for their afternoon class of language and social studies.

Jill had always liked school and she seemed to enjoy her morning class. But oh how she complained about the afternoon class, especially her teacher. Jill said that her teacher yelled at her all the time. I asked Jill what she was doing in order for the teacher to fuss at her. Her reply was, "Why do you always think I've done something wrong?" Her complaints got worse, and it was a hassle to get her out of bed in the mornings to go to school.

I was hopeful that I would learn something about the matter when progress reports were sent home, but Jill had all good marks...no item was marked as needing improvement. I wrote the teacher a note, told her that Jill thought the teacher's goal was to find something wrong with Jill, and if we needed to talk, please let me know. That afternoon, I received a phone call.

She told me that Jill liked to play with a little girl named "Susie." "Oh Mama, if you could just see Jill and Susie walking across the playground, holding hands. Susie is rude and crude, and I have to yell at Susie all the time. I'm sure Jill thinks I'm yelling at her as well, but I'm not. Now Mama, I can't tell Jill not to play with Susie, but you can." It didn't take me long to figure out that Susie was a little black girl. I have to tell you I was shocked!

I asked Jill to tell me about Susie. Her reply was, "Oh Mama, Susie is my friend." I found out that Susie lived downtown and was being bussed out to our country school. Jill was having a birthday in a week or so, and she asked if Susie, along with two other little girls, could come for a slumber party. I agreed and the night of the party, Susie was such an adorable child. They all ate around the kitchen table. When they finished, Jill and the other two little girls scampered into the living room to play. Susie brought her plate and glass to the sink and thanked me for the meal. I looked at my husband and asked, "Is that rude and crude?"

Today I would probably tell that teacher exactly what I thought of her. But at that time, while shocked and dismayed at the teacher's behavior, I talked with Jill and tried to explain the problem. And I prayed. Oh how I prayed for God's intervention in this area. And, at the end of the grading period, the "powers that be" decided that this experiment was not working and the children would stay with their morning teacher all day. Our problem was solved. Jill was with Mrs. Monroe all day, and "Susie" remained with Mrs. Joyce's class, and neither one of them had to deal with the racist teacher any longer.

(As a side note...Today Jill teaches second grade at that same elementary school and Mrs. Monroe, her "morning" fifth grade teacher, is still teaching fifth grade.)

Implementing the Charter for Racial Justice is another area of Social Action that we need to work on. As Conference President, I chair the Charter for Racial Justice Committee. Our Committee has approved the formation of Charter Clubs beginning in 2008.

This is a new way in which your local unit can implement the Charter for Racial Justice. You have received a copy of the form in your packet. There are different levels of participation, whether it is in programming, an enrichment event, or something that goes beyond the local unit. All of the criteria for the Charter Club is attainable...and you can have some fun in some of the activities.

And don't think that we're going to throw these changes and new programs out there and expect you, the women of the local units, to just do it. No, there will be ideas and resources shared with you. Watch the Conference Gram and the website, as well as your district newsletters for information.

And, here again, partner with another unit and work on these items together. Have some fun...and in the process you may have an "extreme makeover" of your local unit. Your unit may get a new focus...a new "look", maybe even gain some younger members. The younger generation wants to be doing something...not just sitting around reading a program from the program book each month. What better way to get them involved than to work for change...change that can affect the lives of their children...whether we are talking about racism, the environment, health care, poverty, or public education. And, when researching areas of need in your local communities, you will also find ways in which you can be in mission...whether it's volunteering at your school or soup kitchen, purchasing school supplies or preparing kits for the homeless.

I think the main thing to remember about social action is that we must educate ourselves on the issues before we can work for change. There are so many issues that need our attention, but I encourage you to focus on one issue at a time. Don't spread yourself or your unit so thin that you try to do too much and end up accomplishing very little.

The song that Gail sang so beautifully, "Whose Child Is This?", talks about children we've never known as well as the children we've always known. It talks about children who live in the street as well as children who live in wealth and ease. But the bottom line is this: Jesus said, "Let all the children come to me"...and if you heed his call, then like Jesus you will be. May all the children – not just your children or grandchildren or the children in your church or who live on your street – but may ALL children come to each of you...Our Savior bids that you love them, too.

Yes, All God's Children...they come in many shapes and sizes, and different colors, too.

The languages are many, and their cultures quite a few. They are molded in His image and protected in His care.

God is a Father to all children...His arms are open wide...To welcome every one of them...He is always by their side.

And when troubles daunt them, His loving grace they call. For whatever color, race, or creed, Our Lord God loves them all.

So what is our "vision" as United Methodist Women for the children of this world?

Our vision should be that every child will have a place to live, food to eat, clothes to wear...that their basic needs are met.

Our vision should be that every child will have access to medical care and an education.

Our vision should be that, irregardless of race, color, or creed, all children are treated with respect and love.

Our vision should be that one day, perhaps in a year in the not too distant future, the day will arrive when Christmas will come for everyone...everyone alive, especially the children.