

## CATHOLIC BUSINESS PROFILE:

“Our faith calls us to feel this compassion for everybody. By loving someone up close and in a very practical way, my faith is strengthened in the very act of practicing it. “

Mary Cunningham Agee



### A Practical Idealist: Turning Loss into Gain for Others

Mary Cunningham Agee took a roundabout route to the nonprofit world. A student of Logic and Philosophy at Wellesley College and Trinity College in Dublin, she went on to earn a Master’s degree in Finance and International Business at the Harvard Business School and to work in the top management of two Fortune 100 companies as the Vice President of Strategic Planning.

After a divorce and an annulment in her 20s, Agee married in her early 30s. She conceived her first child, Angela Grace, and then suffered a third-trimester miscarriage. It was devastating. This loss redirected her life both personally and professionally.

Applying the principles of both her corporate business savvy and her Catholic faith, Agee turned her devastating loss to create a unique alternative for women considering abortion. The same year that Agee gave birth to a daughter (now a senior at the University of Notre Dame), she also founded the Nurturing Network. “It was like giving birth to two children in the same month,” quips the Napa Valley, California resident.

Since its inception in 1985, the Nurturing Network has connected more than 19,000 mothers in crisis with more than 48,000 TNN member resources. Nearly 6,000 donors have donated \$5.4 million, and 425,000 volunteer hours (valued at an estimated \$12.5 million) have supported the work of this grassroots organization which responds to the comprehensive needs of any woman facing the crisis of an unplanned pregnancy.

Agee, 56, lives with her husband of 25 years. They are the parents of a daughter and a son, both college students.

Q. How did your miscarriage inspire you to start an organization to help women considering aborting their children?

A. I believe that there are only two responses to suffering in life: either you stay focused on yourself and your own loss, or you try to help others not to have the pain that you are experiencing. I believe that’s what we’re called to do with suffering of any kind: To bring some good out of it, to try to discover the positive meaning from the experience.

Losing a child was the deepest loss I could imagine. I listened in my prayer life, trying to discern the gift that might be hidden within this anguish. I realized that if I could help other women in danger of losing their children to abortion that this could elevate my suffering to something positive.

Q. Are the for-profit and the nonprofit worlds more similar than they are different?

A. They are quite different, particularly as they relate to the employee base. In the for-profit realm, people are often motivated by perks, money, and other material benefits. Employees in the for-profit world care about the location and size of their office, the amount of vacation time they are offered, the size of their

paycheck. In the nonprofit realm, a manager is dealing with a much higher form of motivation. Volunteers are not looking for perks, financial gain, and other monetary benefits. Employees are motivated by the cause, by the mission, by how well you're able to offer assignments that speak directly to their need to make a meaningful difference.

The workforce is quite different, but the actual skills required to set up an organization and make it operate effectively are much the same in both worlds. I did not find the transition difficult. The same tasks that I was performing as a Strategic planner for Seagram's and Bendix are essentially the same as those that I do now. Having a business background has been very helpful in establishing and managing a growing international nonprofit organization.

Q. Is there a difference in your ability to integrate your faith into your work now, as opposed to when you worked in the for-profit world?

A. I find this to be much easier on a day-to-day basis. When you're serving a wounded individuals whose life has become too much to handle alone, it is a natural process to draw upon one's faith for insight and direction. My faith provides the motivation that makes working 15-hour days worth it. That energy began to wane for me in the for-profit world -- but it never does as I work one-on-one helping pregnant women whose own support network has let them down.

When a person in crisis is willing to trust and share her life with me, it is not difficult to see the suffering face of our Lord. When a wounded individual turns to me for help at the most vulnerable time in her life, my faith brings compassion to the forefront almost immediately. Our faith calls us to feel this compassion for everybody. By loving someone up close and in a very practical way, my faith is strengthened in the very act of practicing it.

Q. It must have been incredibly challenging to balance raising your children with running the Nurturing Network.

A. I had three key advantages that made a big difference between frustration and success. The first was having a husband who believed in what I was doing. He was my partner in every sense of the word. At those moments when my work required full attention, I could be confident that he would be there to help with our children.

As the children grew older, I had the joy of home-schooling Mary Alana and Will for several years. These were especially meaningful years for me as a parent. At no time did I find that this commitment was in conflict with managing the Nurturing Network. This is probably because of a second advantage: I was able to operate TNN from my own home. Doing so removed the inefficiencies and abrupt departures that often occur when work and home are in separate locations. It surely helped that both of our children were self-motivated and excellent students. I can remember many occasions when they would be working in one room on their assignments and I'd be in the next room counseling a client of the Nurturing Network.

Q. Given your career path, it's somewhat surprising that your undergraduate degree is in philosophy. How did you transition from that to studying finance?

A. I came very close to pursuing a PhD in Philosophy immediately after graduating from Wellesley. However, I consulted with the priest who had been a father-figure for me since I was a small child, and his advice was to consider bringing more balance to my life. I can still recall him defining success in life as becoming a "practical idealist." His concern was that studying more Philosophy could lead me to become only a thinker or idealist. His hope for me was that my faith would lead me to do something that would benefit others in the world. It was clear to me that some form of graduate education would be important. After working for a few years on Wall Street, I decided to go to Harvard to pursue an MBA. This introduced the balance that Father Bill had encouraged me to find. It also showed me a way to live the practical idealism that he had encouraged me to hold as my standard for success.

Q. Is there a resource for people who would like to learn more about the Nurturing Network?

A. They can visit our website, [www.nurturingnetwork.org](http://www.nurturingnetwork.org), or call our toll-free number: 1-800-TNN-4MOM.