

The Conference for Mercy Higher Education: One Congregation's Choice for Preserving Its Charism

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Abstract

In the past eighteen years, the Sisters of Mercy have undergone two major transitions in the structure of the congregation in the United States. In 1991, seventeen independent congregations formed the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, a single canonical entity with twenty-five regional communities. Between 2006 and 2009, another reorganization gradually reshaped the Institute into six communities. While the first transition did not affect the sponsorship of institutions, the most recent re-configuration dramatically altered the sponsorship "landscape." This paper describes how the congregation chose to reimagine the manner in which it relates to the sixteen Mercy colleges and universities to preserve and strengthen its charism in its ministry of higher education as well as on individual campuses.

Introduction

The *Constitutions* of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas contains these words in Paragraph 5:

"As Sisters of Mercy, we sponsor institutions to address our enduring concerns and to witness to Christ's mission."^{1a}

In this document, in which we describe our life and mission as a congregation, we recognize the institutions we have founded and continue to sponsor as integral to our identity. For this reason, the health and viability of these institutions is of primary concern to us and is the focus of much good energy. Regardless of the number of sisters in any institution, especially now as that number grows ever smaller, we seek ways to

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^{1a} Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, *Constitutions* (Silver Spring, 1992), 6.

ensure that the spirit and vision of the Sisters of Mercy will not only be preserved but will be a vibrant experience on each of our campuses. One can appreciate the journey that we, the Sisters of Mercy, have taken, with regard to sponsored ministries, by looking at the way we have organized ourselves and our ministries throughout our history.

Soon after the founding of the congregation in 1831, Catherine McAuley began receiving invitations to establish communities in Ireland and England. As she went about creating these foundations, she made each one independent. She wanted each new convent to reflect its local circumstances and respond to local needs, which, if decisions were being made at a distance, might not have been possible. In those days, neither communication nor transportation were quick and easy; and thus, Catherine did not want local superiors to be hindered in their efforts to lead with grace, authority, and efficiency while they waited for a response to arrive from Dublin by stage coach or canal barge. Her concern in organizing the congregation in this way, one that has been before us in the ensuing years, was as follows: how, in each setting, do we organize ourselves to be more available for ministry?

The pattern of independent communities was replicated when the Sisters of Mercy came to the United States. By the early twentieth century, there were more than 100 different groups of Mercy sisters in this country with varying degrees of relationship among them. The effort to redirect this profusion began in 1929, when a number of Mercy communities joined together in an Amalgamation to form the Sisters of Mercy of the Union. Eventually, there were nine provinces within the Union and sixteen independent congregations. In 1991, those twenty-five groups united to form the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

With the twenty-five regional communities and the Institute office, there were twenty-six leadership teams, twenty-six finance offices, twenty-six communications staffs, twenty-six archives, twenty-six human resource functions, and so on. This redundancy had significant implications in terms of finances and personnel. With so many sisters involved in various dimensions of leadership and internal community service, we were called back to the primary question: “How do we organize ourselves to be more available for ministry?”

In 2002, we began to entertain the possibility of another reorganization, moving from twenty-five groups to six: five groups in the United States and one group encompassing eight countries in Central and South America and the Caribbean. As we imagined and moved through this reorganization, other questions emerged: How will we assure stability

for our sponsored ministries in the midst of our internal changes? As we move through this and subsequent changes in our congregational life and structure, how will we ensure that our institutions are not negatively impacted? One response, with respect to our colleges and universities, was to create the Conference for Mercy Higher Education (CMHE).

The movement toward the creation of CMHE was preceded by decades of mutual support, communication, and networking between and among the institutions. In 1948, Mercy superiors called for conversations among presidents and deans.¹ In 1952, at the behest of the superior of the Sisters of Mercy of the Union, the Mercy Educational Conference was established to gather Sisters working in all levels of education. Following two highly successful meetings, the decision was made to invite Sisters from the independent congregations to participate.² In an ongoing evolution, the next step was the creation, in 1973, of the Mercy Higher Education Colloquium, a forum, open to Sisters of Mercy working in the ministry of higher education, whose purpose was to enhance this ministry, to evaluate the quality of Christian presence in the institutions, and to facilitate the sharing of resources.³ Two related networks were created in the following decade: the Association of Mercy Colleges, designed to gather institutional presidents, was founded in 1982, and the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology was created in 1986. In 1993, the Mercy Higher Education Colloquium opened its membership to lay colleagues.⁴ These networking experiences not only provided opportunities for professional exchange but also created relationships and solidarity for educators in the Mercy tradition. Building on the strengths and benefits of these exchanges, the members of the Institute Leadership Conference, which comprised the Institute Leadership Team and the presidents of the twenty-five Regional Communities created by the foundation of the Institute in 1991, entered into conversation about the possibility of further strengthening the ties already in existence. To this end, a committee composed of institutional and regional community presidents was appointed to investigate future possibilities. Though the committee deemed a structure that would formally unite the college and universities to be premature, the presidents adopted a statement calling for regional communities, institutions, and sisters in higher education to collaborate in mission and programmatic areas, to engage in

¹ Mary Jeremy Daigler, *Through the Windows: A History of the Work of Higher Education Among the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 95.

² *Ibid.*, 97.

³ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

the sharing of best practices, and to work toward a nationwide vision for Mercy higher education.⁵ During the ensuing years, these efforts were carried out mainly through the Mercy Higher Education Colloquium and the Association of Mercy Colleges.

Meanwhile, the Institute Leadership Conference continued to pursue the question of how best to sponsor our institutions of higher learning. A document by Linda Werthman, R.S.M. entitled “A Decade of Studies: Mercy Higher Education”^{5a} outlines the ongoing conversation and the attendant decisions. Even this snapshot version reveals the extent of the time, energy, and commitment that supported this conversation and process.

1991 The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas was founded.

1992-93 The Task Force on Higher Education, which created a mission statement for higher education within the Institute, was formed.

1994 The Institute Conference on Sponsorship, which gathered representatives from all sponsored ministries to discuss issues related to institutional sponsorship, was held.

1995-98 A study, which investigated the possibility of a national office for higher education focusing on fundraising and economies of scale, was undertaken. This project was ultimately deemed to be too expensive. The Institute Congress: Educating for Action was attended by 900 Sisters of Mercy, associates, and partners in ministry. A meeting of Institute Leadership Conference members whose Regional Communities sponsored colleges or universities and the presidents of those institutions was held. Preparation for this event was through a Delphi Panel comprised of five institutional presidents and six Regional Community Presidents who, together, explored the defining values of Mercy higher education, the distinctive contribution by Mercy colleges and universities to the ministry of the Sisters of Mercy, and the means by which regional communities and their institutions of higher education could enhance their mutual service and foster collaborative projects to embody our defining values. Distillation of this experience resulted in a two-fold focus for the leadership meeting: to come to know our mission in Mercy higher education together, and to decide upon two or three specific experiences of collaboration across Regional Community boundaries.

⁵ Institute Leadership Conference, Salve Regina University, Newport, RI, 1993.

^{5a} Private distribution.

1999-2000 A series of meetings and studies to further and refine the conversation and to arrive at strategic directions for the future of Mercy-sponsored institutions of higher education was designed.⁶

In July 2000, Mercy Higher Education Futures Conference recommended that the Institute Leadership Conference appoint a task force on Mercy Higher Education Sponsorship and Structure charged with initiating and implementing a process to explore options for alternative sponsorship structures that would strengthen and support Mercy higher education. This recommendation was accepted and a task force was established by the Institute Leadership Conference in October 2000.⁷

The journey had been a long one, involving Institute leaders, leaders of Mercy colleges and universities, congregation members, and a number of consultants, all of whom came at the issue from diverse directions and positions. From 1999 until 2001, the conversation gradually grew more focused, and the possibility of a positive, practical outcome began to emerge. Finally, in July 2001, the presidents of the regional communities that sponsored institutions of higher learning and the presidents of those institutions approved the creation of the Conference for Mercy Higher Education (CMHE), establishing an organization to assure the future viability of Mercy institutions. They did this through a sponsorship model that both assures fidelity to the Catholic/Mercy mission and values and strengthens the institutions individually and collectively. The goal of CMHE was described as “the preservation and development of the core Catholic identity and mission of Mercy higher education members in accord with the spirit, mission and heritage of the Sisters of Mercy through a variety of activities, programs and initiatives engaged in collaboratively.”⁸

CMHE members hired an executive director, appointed an interim board, and determined two goals for the first three years of operation. The first goal was to develop potential sponsorship models. The second

⁶ Linda Werthman, “A Decade of Studies: Mercy Higher Education” (paper presented at the 25th annual meeting of the Mercy Higher Education Colloquium, June 9, 2000).

⁷ Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Minutes of the Meeting of the Institute Leadership Conference, Omaha, NE, September 27–October 1, 2000.

⁸ “Report of Mercy Higher Education Sponsorship and Governance Task Force” (presented at a meeting of Regional Community presidents whose communities sponsor institutions of higher education, the presidents of those institutions and the Executive Committee of the Mercy Higher Education Colloquium, July 25–27, 2001).

was to create vehicles for collaboration. CMHE appointed work groups to assume these tasks. The first review of sponsorship models took place at a September 2003 meeting during which the board of CMHE reviewed and refined the models. Sponsoring regional community presidents and presidents of the institutions repeated this process in October and November, respectively. Meanwhile, CMHE conducted studies dealing with canonical realities, property ownership, and civil and regulatory issues. Finally, at a combined meeting in April 2004, the regional community and institutional presidents, along with representatives of the boards of directors of the institutions, reviewed the models and offered further comments. Following an extensive consultation with community and institutional presidents, the chosen model was accepted in July 2004.⁹

In addition to addressing the concerns of future viability and fidelity to mission, this model met further criteria, including simplifying organizational design and implementation, supporting existing relationships, strengthening local governance, and enhancing cohesiveness among member institutions. Figure 1 illustrates the various groupings within the governance structure and their relationships to one another.

Leading CMHE is the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas—the leadership team acting as the canonical sponsor. This was a change from the historical sponsorship relationship in which the local, founding regional community had been the canonical sponsor. In the new structure, the historically sponsoring regional community continues to invest support and energy in the governance of the institution through service on the board of trustees and other vehicles of involvement, but the Institute Leadership Team holds canonical authority. This authority is delegated to the Canonical Sponsors Council. Originally, the Sponsors Council was composed of a member of the Institute Leadership Team and one member from each regional community which historically sponsored a participating institution. As the reconfiguration and merger of regional communities has gone forward, that number has gradually been reduced to one representative from each of the newly formed Communities which sponsors higher education and the representative of the Institute Leadership Team—a reduction in number from sixteen to five. This body appoints the CMHE board, approves changes to CMHE bylaws and articles, and exercises canonically reserved powers.

⁹ “Mercy Higher Education Sponsorship Model”, Summer, 2004.

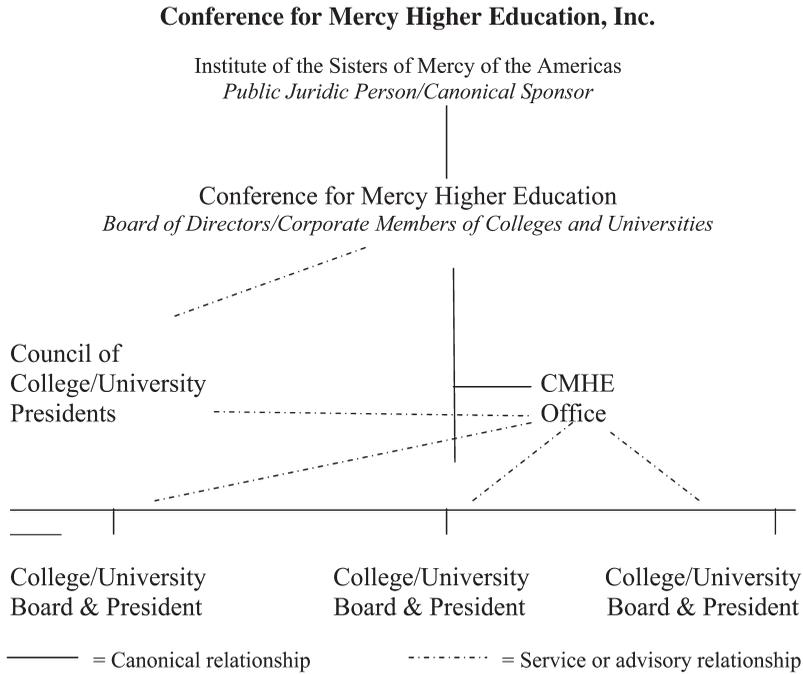


Figure 1. Sponsorship Model for Mercy Colleges and Universities¹⁰

The CMHE board operates as the governing body of CMHE by: defining policies, goals, and objectives; approving the budget; and overseeing CMHE operations. CMHE serves as the corporate member of each of the participating institutions, and the board exercises whatever reserved powers were ceded to CMHE in the various affiliation agreements. A member of the board acts as a liaison to each of the participating institutions to be a channel of communication between each institution and the governing body of CMHE.

The presidents of the colleges and universities comprise the Council of Presidents, which holds an advisory position within CMHE. This group provides input and advice on major issues such as visioning and strategic planning, and the ongoing operations of CMHE. Developing a clearer and more substantive role for the presidents within CMHE continues to be a topic of conversation.

¹⁰ This model represents a unified, national organization of Mercy colleges and universities. One membership group and one board oversee the Mercy Mission in education, Catholic identity, fidelity to Church teachings, and Mercy values.

Having accomplished the task of creating and accepting the sponsorship model, we expected development of CMHE to move forward apace. That expectation proved unfounded. Each college and university had the option to design an affiliation agreement describing its particular relationship to CMHE; however, the time necessary to complete the legal documents was underestimated, as each agreement had to be separately crafted. While this reflected our founding custom of honoring local circumstances, it protracted the process. CMHE's first executive director suffered a serious illness and was called home to God before this portion of the work was completed, and the final legal work fell to an interim executive director. These setbacks slowed CMHE's development, especially in the design of vehicles for collaboration, one of the articulated goals for the first three years.

These beginning years have not been without fruit or progress, however. CMHE has sponsored three major symposia: one reflecting on our Mercy heritage in higher education, a second examining service learning as a constitutive characteristic of a Mercy institution and the third focusing on becoming a global citizen in Mercy. These symposia, held on the campuses of member institutions, provide opportunities for members to come together in ways that allow us to experience one another's realities and to forge the relationships which will result in a strong and interactive Conference.

Students from each of the Mercy colleges and universities gathered in the summer of 2008 for the Power of One conference planned by Vice Presidents for Student Life/Development. This experience, the first to bring together students from Mercy institutions, introduced attendees to the critical concerns of the Sisters of Mercy through presentations by faculty and staff of member institutions, and through discussions of how these concerns might be addressed in particular settings. Each group was charged to choose one of the concerns for action at home, thus extending the energy of the week to every campus. A second opportunity occurred in the summer of 2009, when forty-two students, faculty, and staff met at the United Nations where they were introduced to the work of this organization and to Mercy Global Concern, an NGO sponsored by the Mercy International Association. Participants learned how the Sisters of Mercy strive to bring our values to bear on the work of the UN and were charged once again with replicating some portion of this experience on their campuses.

While the distinct groupings within the CMHE governance structure meet on their own schedules and with their own agenda, joint meetings have proven helpful in these beginning years, since

they facilitate the collaborative work needed to create the best future for CMHE. In February 2006, members of the Canonical Sponsors Council, the Board, and the Presidents Council met for the first time to set CMHE in motion. A visioning session designed to articulate an action plan for the next five years brought this same group together in July 2007.

The 2007 visioning session was a significant step forward for CMHE, as it represented the first time that all the key constituents (sponsors, board, institutional presidents) worked together to imagine and name a clear vision for how CMHE would develop over the next five years. Eight elements of a preferred future were enumerated: (1) becoming a nationally recognized leader in higher education; (2) creating a recognizable Mercy brand; (3) contributing to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition; (4) serving as a “think tank” on issues of concern to the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas; (5) responding to the values and goals of the sponsors; (6) operating cohesively and collaboratively; (7) facilitating leadership development and formation for faculty, Board, administration, and staff of the member institutions; and (8) playing an advocacy role, especially in terms of Catholic Social Teaching and the needs of persons who are poor.

To actualize this vision, four strategic priorities were named. The first was to continue refining the structure of CMHE, to create processes that promote its vision and work in accord with canonical obligations, and to provide appropriate voice and interaction among all constituencies. Program development, which had been second to the need to complete the legal documentation in CMHE’s beginning years, was given priority within the vision. With the desire for program development came the need for a realistic fiscal plan. The vision called for a fully staffed and financially sustainable organization by 2012. The third strategic priority focused on consistently and clearly communicating the distinctive characteristics of Mercy higher education through the development of a recognized and understood Mercy “brand.” Finally, the plan called for the development of formation programs for administration, boards, faculty, and staff that address both the Catholic and Mercy identity of our organizations, and the responsibilities that flow from these identities.

In June 2009, the members of the CMHE board, the institutional presidents, and the members of the Canonical Sponsors Council gathered once again to take stock of progress toward the vision. This work resulted in the creation of four task forces charged with moving specific portions of the design forward:

Communications Flow, whose responsibility is to articulate communications needs within CMHE and facilitate the proper flow of information;

Catholic Identity and Mercy Mission, whose charge is to define a Mercy/Catholic institution and identify strategies used by institutions to enhance that identity within the broader world of higher education;

Internal Branding, whose task is to respond to the questions “What do the Sisters of Mercy stand for in higher education?” and “Why attend a Mercy college or university?”;

Leadership Development, whose role is to develop education programs for senior executives and board members.

With the deadline of summer 2010 for these groups’ work, the energy they have generated has kept the Conference focused on the fulfillment of the vision.

Within CMHE, cohorts are beginning to form and to take on some of the tasks that accompany this forward movement. Chief academic officers, for instance, are one of the first groups to begin sharing across institutions. Space on the CMHE website is being created for list-serves which will allow groups to communicate easily as we work together to achieve the elements of the strategic vision.

Another cohort which has begun to operate within CMHE is the group of Mission Integration personnel. These persons met first in the spring of 2007 to discuss a philosophy of mission integration for Mercy institutions, to share best practices, to consider ways in which the Mercy charism and values can be more effectively implemented on campuses, and to design a plan for moving forward as a group. Supported by an anonymous grant, the first project undertaken was the creation of a common orientation program for faculty. A committee worked on designing the process, which was successfully piloted in October 2008. For the pilot, faculty members from three institutions gathered to experience and evaluate the program. The positive response led to the scheduling of a second program in spring 2009. Designed for maximum flexibility, the program may be presented in one session or broken down into several shorter sessions. It may also be presented on an individual campus or may be an occasion for bringing together faculty from a number of settings. Versions of this experience for board members and staff will also be developed.

As CMHE continues to pursue its vision for itself and as relationships strengthen, new and creative possibilities continue to emerge. Faculty

and student exchanges across our campuses are a natural development so that teaching or studying at any Mercy campus opens the opportunity of spending a semester or longer on another campus. One initiative, which has been dubbed “Virtual Mercy,” looks forward to the use of technology to strengthen our ties and our possibilities, with on-line classes shared across all campuses serving as an example of how we might operate “virtually” in the future. Common study abroad and alternative spring break programs might bring students, faculty, and staff together to explore other lands and cultures as well as to share the experience of service beyond campus boundaries. Some initiatives, which began on individual campuses, have become means of meeting and reflecting with colleagues from other Mercy institutions. Carlow University, for instance, has hosted three academic roundtables in Ireland that not only take us back to our roots but also allow us to explore how the Mercy vision is implemented on each of our campuses, in each of our disciplines. As additional possibilities for collaboration emerge, the hope of a single, strong, vibrant vehicle for Mercy higher education continues to be realized.

Meanwhile, the Sisters of Mercy continue to grapple with the sense of disorientation and dispossession that accompanies such a major shift in relationships and modes of operation. For Community leadership teams there is a significant shift in their relationships to long treasured and carefully nurtured ministries. The intense involvement of board membership, and the responsibilities of sole corporate membership and of canonical sponsorship have been ceded to CMHE. The emotional commitment remains, but the experience of intimate involvement and of the local ability to influence the direction of the institution has waned.

We are also keenly aware of the effect of this shift in relationships and authorities on the institutions and, particularly, on their leaders. The role of liaison, which was intended to provide a link between the CMHE board and each local setting, has not fulfilled that expectation on every campus. The presidents seek a place within CMHE where they can have a stronger voice and a more significant influence.

In this relatively new CMHE, the board continues to explore its own responsibilities and potential while collaborating with the Canonical Sponsors Council in defining their joint and individual roles.

For the Sisters of Mercy, these years of change are demanding and invigorating. While moving us relentlessly into a future that is not always clear, they invite us to claim the elements of our heritage that have served us well and that continue to give meaning to our lives and our ministries. Relying on the example of Catherine McAuley, who

encouraged her early companions to respond generously and courageously to the needs of each era and each circumstance, we choose at this moment in our history to transform our traditional sponsorship relationships to provide the best possible future for our institutions of higher education, and to ensure that the charism and values of the Sisters of Mercy will continue to be a lively source of meaning and motivation on our campuses. The Conference for Mercy Higher Education represents our best hopes for the strengthening and the vibrancy of this ministry.