



MERCY
Associates

Institute of Sisters of Mercy
of Australia & Papua New Guinea

One Charism, Many Paths

Chapter 7

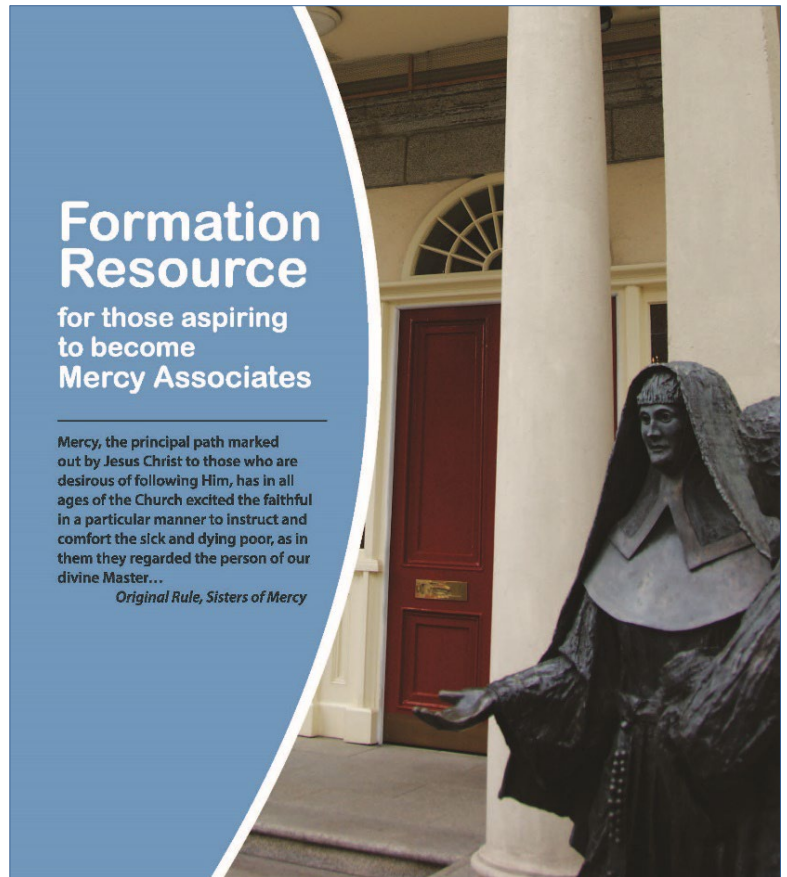
Mercy Associates and ISMAPNG

Formation Resource

for those aspiring
to become
Mercy Associates

Mercy, the principal path marked out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following Him, has in all ages of the Church excited the faithful in a particular manner to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them they regarded the person of our divine Master...

Original Rule, Sisters of Mercy



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Notes for users:

The Formation Resource is designed for use by candidates aspiring to become Mercy Associates. This entails proceeding steadily through the resource, guided by a sponsor or other Mercy Associates, with time for reflection, discussion and prayer to discern if Mercy Associates is a suitable pathway for candidates.

The resource has a number of chapters, each available separately on the Mercy Associates screen of the ISMAPNG website: <https://institute.mercy.org.au/become-involved/become-a-mercy-associate/>

Web edition v 1.2: current @ February 21

7.0 Mercy Associates and ISMAPNG

From what we know of Catherine's story, it could be said the first Mercy associates were those women and men of Dublin who supported her in ways that led to setting up the original House of Mercy in Baggot Street. When the Order of Mercy was founded in 1831, they continued to give freely and generously of their time, prayer and skills, sometimes ministering alongside the Sisters. Some used their influence within the Church and society to promote wider appreciation for the critically important work in which Catherine and her first Sisters had totally, unconditionally invested themselves. This pattern of lay women and men working alongside the Sisters in so many ways was manifest in the many other foundations established over time, and continues to this day.



Graffiti painted on former bomb shelter, Brentwood Cathedral, UK, by 17 year old Joe Rose.

One of the most important aspects of being a Mercy Associate is to understand the relationship between the Sisters of Mercy, who are vowed members of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea, and Mercy Associates. Mercy Associates are lay women and men, and as such as not members of ISMAPNG – they choose on a voluntary basis to associate with each other and with the Sisters of Mercy, but are separate from the Sisters. The information below will help to clarify this. *(In Church law, vowed religious women are lay too, in that this word is used to describe all people in the Church who are not in Holy Orders. To avoid cumbersome wording however, the word 'lay' as used in this resource does not include Sisters of Mercy or other vowed religious).*

7.1 Background: Membership of Religious Congregations

Every religious congregation is a gift to the Church. Its primary purpose is to nurture and demonstrate the charism of its founder whose life and ministry reflected a particular expression of the life and ministry of Jesus. Membership of a congregation comes with a candidate's first profession of vows.

For religious women and men, these vows are at the heart of their life-long commitment to God, to the tradition of mission entrusted to them by their founder, and to each other.

All members of a congregation are responsible for its integrity. That is to say, a congregation's authenticity depends on its members' fidelity to God and the vows they have professed, their regular prayer and worship, their readiness for ministry and their constant care for true communion of life.

Likewise, throughout their religious life, members depend on their congregation to provide for their temporal needs (for example a living allowance, housing, health care) as well as for their ongoing professional and personal formation.

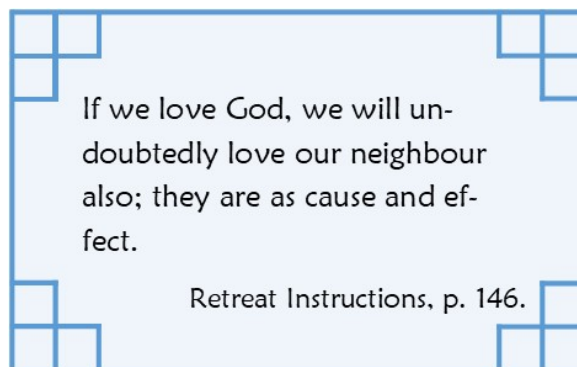
7.2 Associates of Mercy Congregations

One of the blessings for the Church over the past few decades is that countless numbers of lay people have claimed their baptismal right to work explicitly for the coming of God's reign within the context of their commitments to family, friends, career, and so on. Significantly, some of these women and men find affirmation in their lay vocation through association with a religious congregation whose charism resonates with their own deep desires and values. This is so with congregations of Sisters of Mercy.

For the past few decades, groups of lay people around the globe who are inspired by Catherine McAuley in their own lives of faith and service, and who cherish a spirituality animated by God's mercy, have been forming groups that are closely connected to particular Mercy congregations. Essentially, through this connection they wish to participate more intentionally, although informally, in the prayer and ministries of the Sisters of Mercy, contributing from the richness of their own primary vocations and life experience.

This movement, welcomed by ISMAPNG, is immediately reminiscent of Catherine McAuley. She commenced her enterprise for the poor, bereft people of Dublin as a lay woman with lay companions.

Typically, the structures for Mercy Associates groups, their 'programme' and the way they are named differ from congregation to congregation within the 'Mercy world'. And while the relationship between associates and congregations is mutually beneficial, it is always mutually free. In that sense, individual associates may disassociate at any time. Likewise, for good and just reason, disassociation can be initiated by the congregation.



It is important to understand that between the congregations and their associates there are no canonical (legal), fiduciary or financial obligations or expectations – the Sisters are not responsible for providing financial or other support for individual Mercy Associates, nor are Mercy Associates responsible for providing such support for Sisters. It is equally important for Mercy Associates to appreciate that their words and conduct must be of such integrity that they cause no damage to the reputation of the Institute, e.g., when involved in advocacy.

(This section prepared by a Sister of Mercy and approved by the Institute Leadership Team)

7.3 History of Mercy Associates in Australia

Mercy Associates is an international movement operating under the auspices of Mercy congregations in their location. In The Americas, there are over 3,000 Mercy Associates, located in the United States of America, Latin America, Jamaica, Guam and the Philippines. In the United

Kingdom, two Mercy congregations have Mercy Associates: the Sisters of Mercy of the Union of Great Britain, and the Institute of Our Lady of Mercy. Elsewhere, Mercy Associates are found in Ireland, Newfoundland (Canada), and New Zealand. From the perspective of ISMAPNG, it is important to note that at this time Mercy Associates is not in operation in Papua New Guinea, however possible beginnings of the movement are emerging, and in time this may lead to the establishment of Mercy Associates groups in Papua New Guinea.

In Australia, Mercy Associates groups have formed across the country and a group has formed in Timor Leste. Generally groups were set up in places where the Sisters of Mercy lived and conducted a ministry such as a school, hospital, aged care facility or community services. Usually the groups were established by one or more Sisters from that location, who invited women and men with a strong commitment to furthering the Mercy charism to attend meetings from time to time to nurture their faith and support their commitment to ministry. The spirit of these groups is well captured in a comment made by a long-standing Mercy Associate: *When I became a Mercy Associate ... along with other Associates we joined with the Sisters of Mercy in their work through prayer and supportive presence thus becoming an extension of the Mercy Ministry and a mutual support. It enabled us to continue the Mercy ethos of ministries centred on the charism of Catherine McAuley.*

Where Mercy Associates groups were set up, for many groups formal records of their establishment have not been kept, so the memories of those involved must be relied on to provide an estimate of the date they commenced. The longest standing groups are those operating in the Diocese of Townsville, which include Townsville, Home Hill, Winton, Proserpine, Bowen and Collinsville, and these were established from 1980 onwards. Some others followed in the later 1980's, including Cairns in 1986, Tuart Hill (WA) in 1987, Ballarat in 1988, Rockhampton and Grafton in 1989. Further groups formed in the 1990's, including Gladstone, Goulburn and Bathurst in 1992, plus Gunnedah and Apollo Bay (Vic) in 1997. In the 21st century, groups were formed in Toronto (NSW) in 2000, Mackay, Newcastle and Caringbah in 2002, Wickham/Tighes Hill in 2003 and most recently in Young in 2011. The Ballarat group has published their history as an e-book, which can be accessed on the ISMAPNG website.



Above are the founders of the Mercy Associates group in Gladstone, at the time the group formed in 1992.

It is important to note some of the former congregations (prior to ISMAPNG in 2011) chose to support lay women and men in other ways and did not establish Mercy Associates (Melbourne and Adelaide are two of these) in their region. Equally, there are very many women and men who have faithfully lived the mercy charism in their personal lives and exercised ministries alongside the Sisters yet have not been part of any formal structure.

The above is not an exhaustive list. Some groups that formed in earlier times have since closed, and information about their commencement and winding up is not available. As with the groups operating now, these have all comprised women and men of faith who have journeyed with the Sisters of Mercy in their region as loyal supporters.

It must also be noted that there are groups operating in various locations that bear a close similarity to Mercy Associates, yet which are not known by that name.

7.4 Associates of ISMAPNG

Many of the fifteen entities that united in 2011 to establish ISMAPNG had been enlivened by groups of associates and one of the tasks of the Institute has been to assist them to relate to the radical change 'from fifteen to one'. Working with a number of Mercy Associates and others keen to support the movement, ISMAPNG has developed a model for associates that reflects the new reality.

In the renewed model for associates of ISMAPNG, emphasis is on strengthening 'the local' because normally that is where relationships of association – associates with each other, associates with Sisters of Mercy – are best expressed and can become most fruitful. At the same time, it is desirable that associates of ISMAPNG have a keen sense of belonging to a vibrant network throughout Australia and Papua New Guinea.

ISMAPNG respects the primary vocation of every associate, for example career, marriage and family life, and her or his priorities in that regard, knowing there are multiple pathways to bring mercy into individual lives. And always, it will be the role of ISMAPNG to encourage all associates in their public desire to live according to the beliefs and deep values which are foundational to the Mercy tradition inherited from Venerable Catherine McAuley.



This section prepared by a Sister of Mercy and approved by the Institute Leadership Team

7.5 Renewal of the Mercy Associates Movement

As noted previously, Mercy Associates groups were usually founded and supported by individual Sisters of Mercy in the various former congregations around Australia, and the involvement of local Sisters has always been much appreciated.

In 2013, the Institute Leadership Team appointed a Working Party to consider future options. After much deliberation, they developed a draft vision statement and framework. In 2014, a consultation process was undertaken throughout the Institute, inviting Mercy Associates, Sisters of Mercy, staff of Mercy ministries, and others with an interest in the Mercy Associates movement to provide input on the draft materials. As well, some preliminary discussions took place with Sisters in Papua New Guinea. The objective was to review the draft Vision Statement and Framework, so that it could be further refined to suit the current needs and interests of lay women and men drawn to the Mercy charism.



The consultation process gathered rich data including how current Mercy Associates and Mercy Associates groups operate. The positive nature of responses led the Institute Leadership Team to adopt the recommendations and provide further resourcing, with the aim of developing new Mercy Associates groups and providing renewal support for existing groups. In 2015, the Mercy Associates Implementation Committee (MAIC) was established, with the brief of guiding the further development of the new framework so that existing and new groups would have an inspiring yet practical guide to the operation of their groups. An Executive Officer has enabled further developmental work to

be undertaken to bring the new Vision and Framework to life and Network Facilitators located around Australia support new and existing groups. In 2016, Mercy Associates of ISMAPNG was launched, and the Mercy Associates Leadership Group was formed. It will be the ongoing mechanism that will enable monitoring of progress and further development of the Mercy Associates movement.

The gathering in Sydney in June 2016 to launch Mercy Associates of ISMAPNG and their Vision Statement.



Existing Mercy Associates groups have often been based in a parish or a regional location. These groups will continue and will be a source of support and encouragement for their Associates.

In the future, new Mercy Associates groups will form. For example, at a Mercy workplace such as a hospital, school, community service facility, aged care facility, Mercy administration office and other Mercy workplaces, women and men who share a keen interest in the charism of Mercy might choose to start a Mercy Associates group. Other possibilities include groups of young mothers, or others with a special interest in an area related to the charism of mercy. In 2020, the first online Mercy Associates group was formed, completing both their formation period and their commitment ceremony online, guided by a Network Facilitator. It is anticipated that more online groups will develop in future years, especially where the candidates do not live within a practical travelling distance of an existing group.

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