

THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU

*History of the
Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia
1981 - 2011*

*Now the Lord said to Abram,
"Go from your country and your kindred
and your father's house to the land that
I will show you"*

Dr Berenice M Kerr RSM

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DR BERENICE M KERR

*Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and
your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will
show you".¹*

To

Our Founding Mothers
on whose shoulders we stand

*We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.²*

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FOREWORD

Recently I read a book review in which the author noted that history 'is an ongoing narrative which defies easy attempts to come to conclusion or find a definitive endpoint'.³ This history of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia illustrates well that particular observation. No historical event occurs in a vacuum and the events of the last thirty years of mercy history as well as the decisions which shaped them are the products of many, many years of lived experience. It is, however, difficult to reach conclusions or find endpoints when the events which are being interpreted are close to one's own vantage point. Achieving historical perspective is an elusive goal, and the closer one is to the events in question the more elusive the goal becomes.

Any author approaches his/her material from a personal bias: the simple choice of what to include in or exclude from the narrative is an illustration of this. That my bias is evident in this work is unavoidable. Furthermore, interpreting the influence of one or other of the *dramatis personae* or assessing the importance or otherwise of a decision and the factors which contributed to it demands an objectivity on the part of the author which, though desirable, is not readily achievable. Here too, my bias will, no doubt, manifest itself. Not everyone will agree with my interpretation of events. I would like, however, to assure the reader that I have made every effort to let the source documents speak for themselves.

The fact that many of those who figure in this history are or have been known to me personally is significant. For this reason I ask the pardon of anyone who is hurt in any way by anything I have written or, for that matter, omitted. That this may have occurred is something I have to face; it has not, however, been my intention. I have tried at all costs to be impartial; I fear that at times I did not succeed.

This is not the story of a structure. This is a story of a group of women striving to live their baptismal commitment in religious life according to the charism of Catherine McAuley. They are women of flesh and blood, flawed perhaps, but motivated, as Catherine was, by the desire to serve God and God's people. It is also the story of their coming to a consciousness of identity as a community

which transcends the boundaries of congregation or geography. They have come to an awareness that in solidarity with their sisters throughout Australia and Papua New Guinea they are journeying in faith to place where there is room for all.

Just as it takes a village to rear a child it takes a number of people to produce a book. There are many people whom I must thank. First on the list are the members of the Institute Plenary Council who, at their meeting in Yamba in April 2007, expressed their confidence in my ability to write this history. Next is Caroline Ryan, for her assistance, encouragement and gentle prodding. Other sisters generously gave their time to be interviewed and their insightful wisdom in interview; their names are listed after the bibliography. My friends read chapters, offered suggestions for improvements, corrected grammar or obscure expression: Jan Gray, Maryanne Loughry, Sophie McGrath, Bev Noonan, Margaret Scroope, and Annette Schneider. John Mullins corrected typos and grammar infringements and suggested ways of getting rid of some of the semi colons. As well, viewing the script from the perspective of one external to the mercy culture, he provided some helpful advise. Yvonne Channells and Jackie Thorpe helped with the selection and placing of photographs. Robin Harbidge fixed the double spaces, inserted commas and much, much more! Congregation Archivists in Bathurst (Carole), Brisbane (Kay), Grafton (Judith), Gunnedah (Judith), Melbourne (Olivia), and Parramatta (Veronica) sent documents, answered queries, found photographs and checked references. At the Institute Archives in Lewisham, Jane went beyond the call of duty to find, to fax, to scan, to provide access to documents and to find their reference numbers. Audette spent long hours copying documents and Anne scoured the countryside for information. She and Kathy and Jane scanned numerous photographs. My thanks to each! Special thanks are due to Matt whose skills in graphic design are evident in the lay out, organisation and cover. Without him there would not have been a book. It is clear that the credit for much that is valuable in this work belongs to others. However, despite all the care that has been taken, there are, no doubt, misinterpretations and inaccuracies. These I must claim as my own.

Berenice M Kerr, RSM
Grafton, 2011

Note on Nomenclature:

Depending on the date of composition of some documents quoted, what is now referred to throughout the Institute as the ILT (Institute Leadership Team) is sometimes termed the NEC (National Executive Council). Similarly what is now known as the IPC (Institute Plenary Council) is in some cases, referred to by its former title of NPC (National Plenary Council). The change was effected following the Fourth National Chapter to reflect a more inclusive vision of leadership. ⁴ Throughout this work the terms have been kept, in so far as possible, in their historical context.

The composition of these two groups has changed slightly since the inauguration of the Institute. At present they comprise:

IPC The Institute Leadership Team plus the leaders of each Australian congregation, plus the leader of the autonomous region of Papua New Guinea.

From 2005 until 2008 the leader of Sisters of Mercy, Pakistan was a member of the IPC.

ILT The Institute Leadership Team consisting of the Institute President and her council, elected by the Institute Chapter.⁵

Unless otherwise indicated, all persons referred to as Sister (Sr) can be assumed to be Sisters of Mercy.

ABBREVIATIONS:

Throughout this work the following abbreviations have been used:

AISMA	Archives of Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia.
Brief History	<i>A Brief History of the Movement for Unification among Sisters of Mercy of Australia (1952-1979)</i> author unknown, n.d., (AISMA U805.3).
Dissertation HD:	Delaney H.M., <i>The Evolution of Governance Structures of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia</i> (Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Canon Law, St Paul University, Ottawa, Canada, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Canon Law, Ottawa, Canada, 1991).
Essay JOT	O'Toole, J.C., <i>A History of Government in the Australian Union of the Sisters of Mercy: 1954-1979, What Led to its Formation and its Effects</i> (A Major Essay submitted to Monash University in the Degree of Master of Educational Studies, 1979).
Report DC	Report to Second National Chapter (1987), by the President of the Institute (1981-87), Dorothy Campion, RSM.
Report JG	Report to Fourth National Chapter (1998), by the President of the Institute (1993-98), Janice Geason, RSM.
Report KB	Report to Third National Chapter (1993), by the President of the Institute (1988-1992), Kathleen Burke, RSM.
Report NT	Report to Sixth National Chapter (2010), by the President of the Institute (2005-2010), Nerida Tinkler, RSM.
Report PF	Report to Fifth National Chapter (2004) by the President of the Institute (1999-2004), Patricia Fox, RSM.
Sullivan	<i>The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818-1841</i> , Mary C Sullivan, (ed.), Dublin, 2004. Numbered references are to letters.
Thesis MT:	Tinney, M.M., <i>Managing Transition in a Religious Institute: an Action Research Project</i> (Thesis submitted for the degree of Masters of Business (thesis) University of Technology, Sydney, 1997).
Thesis VW:	Ward, V.M., <i>The Relationship Between Selected Organisational Characteristics and the Process of Change Leading to a New Structure of Governance for the Sisters of Mercy (Australia) in 1981</i> (Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New England, Armidale, NSW, April 1986).

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¹ Genesis XII:I, RSV <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/genesis-rsv.asp>

² Eliot, T. S., East Coker, (No 2 of 'Four Quartets'). <http://www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets/coker.html>

³ Herborn, D., review of 'Exorcising Hitler', Sun Herald, 28/08/1.

⁴ See Report PF, p.3.

Taking our cue from the chapter directive to explore collaborative processes of leadership, the newly elected leaders of the Institute in 1998 changed the name from 'National Executive Council' to 'Institute Leadership Team'. Reasons: our constitutions spell out very clearly that the primary role of the president and her council is that of leadership ... secondly in response to developing understandings of power, authority and collaboration within the Institute [those elected] assessed that [their] primary way of working would normally be as a team rather than in the more formal meeting mode as a council.

⁵ See Appendix 1, pp. 195,196 for a diagrammatical representation of the composition of these bodies and the manner in which they interact in governance.

CHAPTER 1: BEGINNING



Catherine McAuley,
Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy.

Any history of the Sisters of Mercy anywhere in the world must perforce begin with Catherine McAuley, the woman who, in 1831, vowed to serve the 'poor, sick and ignorant' of Dublin. Thus was formalised a work which Catherine and a few associates had been carrying out for several years, without any intention of forming a religious congregation which would spread far beyond the confines of Dublin, Ireland and the northern hemisphere.

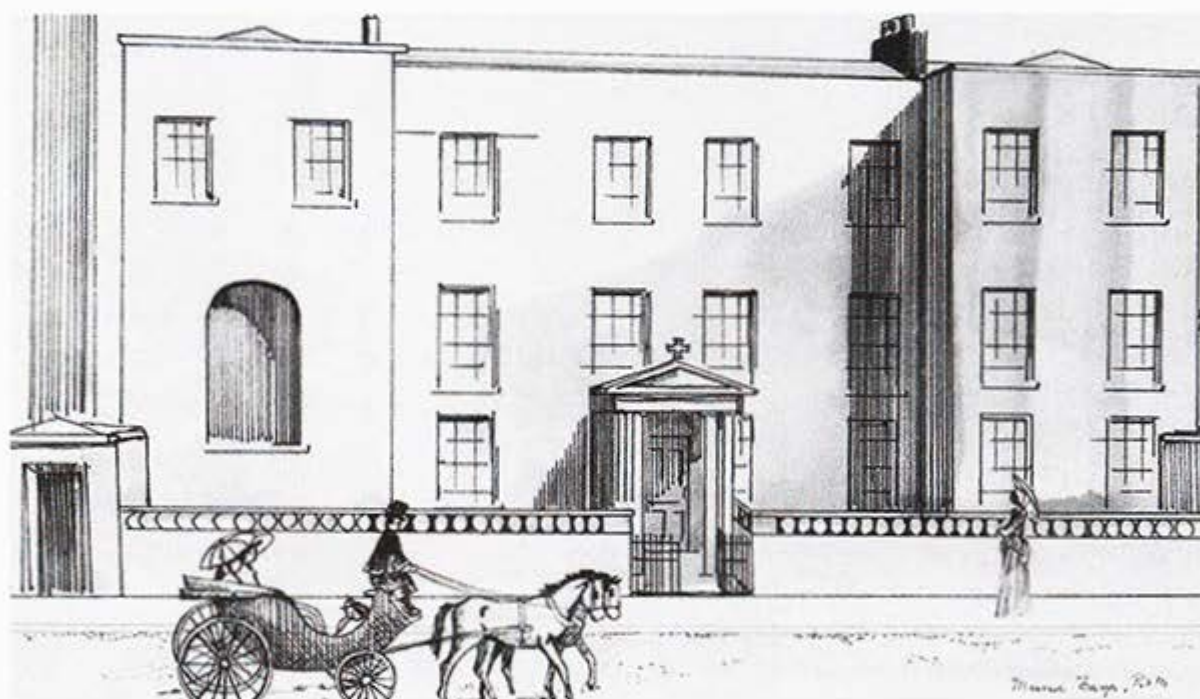
The story of the heiress who dedicated her fortune to establishing a House of Mercy in Lower Baggot Street, Dublin is well known as is her personal devotion to those who suffered any form of hardship. Her dictum:

*God knows I would rather be cold and hungry than the poor ...
should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford,*⁶

was learned during her childhood, from the example of her father. It has been the touchstone for the ministry of Sisters of Mercy since the first sisters opened their doors to alleviate the extreme poverty occasioned by the social and political upheaval of early nineteenth century Ireland. This was a violent period of Irish history with some tens of thousands dying in the rebellion of 1798.⁷ At the same time it was a period of intense population growth; it has been claimed that between 1800 and 1845 the population of Ireland increased by 172%.⁸

Several religious congregations were founded during this time, providing women with opportunities, hitherto generally denied them, to engage in socially useful work such as care of the sick or education, the repeal of the Penal Laws having given official sanction to the latter.⁹ Sisters of Mercy took as their special work the instruction of poor girls, visitation of the sick and

the protection of distressed women of good character. While the work at the House of Mercy had officially commenced on September 24 1827, the religious institute founded by Catherine dates its foundation from December 1831, when Catherine and two companions professed their vows at the Presentation Convent, Georges Hill, Dublin. This was quite a radical step for a woman already aged in her fifties. Besides, despite the foundation of several religious orders for women, nuns were still somewhat of a rarity and it was an innovation for them to be living without enclosure as did the 'walking nuns' of Catherine McAuley. In fact, in some circles it was tantamount to scandal.¹⁰ Yet, under the guidance of Archbishop Murray, Catherine wrote a Rule of Life for her followers, gaining papal confirmation from Pope Gregory XVI in 1841, the year of her death.



¹¹ Sketch of the original House of the Mercy as it would as it would have appeared in 1827.



Catherine McAuley.

Spread of the Congregation

When requested in 1839 to give a brief history of the congregation, Catherine with seeming indifference remarked that 'it began with two'.¹² Such was the influence of her actions, however, that from this small beginning it rapidly expanded. During the ten years of her religious life, ten foundations were made, eight in Ireland, and two, Bermondsey and Birmingham, in

England. Within two years of her death the institute had spread to the new world; Ursula Frayne led a group to St John's, Newfoundland in 1842 and in 1843 the first foundation of the sisters in the United States of America was made at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania under the leadership of Frances Warde. Governance structures in all foundations followed a quasi-monastic pattern: autonomous houses observing the same constitutions – a model not uncommon at that time. This form of governance encouraged immediate response to local needs and avoided the problems inherent in a more centralised system when mail services, the most common means of communication, were inefficient and unreliable and travel was strenuous. New foundations usually included novices and postulants in their number so that ceremonies of reception and profession would inspire vocations from the local areas, thus enhancing numbers and ultimately making the foundations self-sufficient.¹³

Governance



Painting of Catherine McAuley, held at Mary Immaculate Academy, Fitzroy.

A major factor responsible for the unity of the new institute was the personal connection of each house with Catherine. Often it was she who negotiated a foundation with the local priest or bishop; frequently she chose the sisters for the new house; invariably she stayed with the new community during the 'settling down' period and she guided each house through its formative years, visiting, advising, and writing numerous letters. These, as well as providing counsel in a particular situation, communicated clearly her vision for the institute. The letters which remain have enshrined that vision and become hallowed sources of inspiration.

Catherine did not try to manage every convent herself. Nevertheless, she provided such strong leadership that a definite 'mercy spirit' developed in communities so that sisters could feel at home in any convent they visited. During her lifetime, in terms of overseeing the institute, her position was

somewhat ambiguous. Having been appointed lifelong superior in 1831, at times she exercised what could be termed 'centralised' authority. At other times she encouraged her followers to seize their autonomy and act as the local situation demanded.¹⁴ Finding the point of equilibrium between these two ideals has been a source of creative tension for Sisters of Mercy throughout their subsequent history.



Convent of Mercy, Baggot Street, Dublin, prior to its being developed as an international site.

With Catherine's death in 1841, the tangible link which had united the separate houses in Ireland and England vanished. Nevertheless, her foundations remained true to her vision and all followed the Rule approved in 1841. Sources show that a handwritten copy of the Rule was taken on each of the early foundations and, once papal approval had been granted, printed copies went with each group of pioneers.¹⁵ The autonomy of each foundation protected by that Rule allowed for an immediate response to local needs and enabled rapid expansion of the group so that, within the years immediately following her death, houses were established far beyond the world which Catherine McAuley knew. Each foundation, irrespective of its autonomous status, was linked to Catherine through adherence to her Rule and fidelity to her spirit. Even so, during those early days the custom of establishing autonomous foundations was not always the most practicable. As early as 1853 Mother Vincent Whitty, the superior of Baggot Street, observed that poorer localities which could not support an independent house would be well served by a more centralised system.¹⁶

¹ Genesis XII:1, RSV <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/genesis-rsv.asp>

² Eliot, T. S., *East Coker*, (No 2 of 'Four Quartets').
<http://www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets/coker.html>

³ Herborn, D., review of 'Exorcising Hitler', *Sun Herald*, 28/08/1.

⁴ See Report PF, p.3.

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⁵ See Appendix 1, pp.195, 196 for a diagrammatical representation of the composition of these bodies and the manner in which they interact in governance.

⁶ Sullivan, 100.

⁷ Estimates vary from between 10 and 50 thousand; no authoritative figure can be found.

⁸ See Killerby, C.K., *Ursula Frayne, a Biography* (Fremantle, 1996), p.18, and n.15.
See also *Ireland's History in Maps*:

<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~irlkik/ihm/ire1841.htm>, downloaded 8/05/11.

⁹ The Presentation Sisters, dedicated to education and charitable works, officially became a religious congregation in 1805; the Brigidine Sisters, also involved in education, were founded in 1807; the Sisters of Charity were founded in 1815 to serve the poor in schools, hospitals and refuges for women; the Loreto Sisters, founded in 1821, conducted schools for middle-class and poor girls.

¹⁰ In 1800 there were only 122 nuns in Ireland and all were enclosed. The only congregations without enclosure were the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul and the Sisters of Mercy. See:

<http://www.scoilnet.ie/womeninhistory/content/unit3/religion.html>, downloaded 08/05/11. See also Killerby, op.cit., pp.18-19 and n.19.

¹¹ Used with the permission of Maura Barga RSM.

¹² See Sullivan, 110.

¹³ *ibid.*, 243, 234, 275. See also Sullivan, Mary C., 'Catherine McAuley and "Local Autonomy"', *Listen*, 24, i (2006), p.7.

¹⁴ See Letters of Catherine McAuley: to Angela Dunne, December 20, 1837 (Sullivan 67); to Mary Ann Doyle, August 20, 1840 (Sullivan 190); to Frances Warde, December 15, 1840 (Sullivan 218), where Catherine issues specific directions as to what should be done in a particular situation. However, in a letter to Teresa White on October 1, 1838, (Sullivan, 96) and in a letter to Frances Warde on November 17, 1838 (Sullivan 102) she expressed her belief that those on the local scene were the best judges of what should be done: 'Every place has its own particular ideas and feelings which must be yielded to when possible'. This is pointed out by Helen Delaney, in *Dissertation H.D.*, pp. 32-36. See also 'Background Material on Union, Federation and Conference', paper prepared by Sr Marie Anselm for the Executive Council of the Conference of Sisters of Mercy, (1978), p.2 where it is pointed out that this matter had been researched and presented by Sr Carmel Burke.

¹⁵ See Sullivan 53 and n.19.

¹⁶ Quoted in MacGinley, R., *A Dynamic of Hope: Institutes of Women Religious in Australia*, 2nd edition (Sydney, 2002), p.103.

CHAPTER 2: THE SISTERS OF MERCY IN AUSTRALIA

In September 1845, four years after Catherine's death, a group of six sisters under the leadership of Ursula Frayne, herself recently returned from Newfoundland, set out from Dublin to carry Catherine's vision south of the equator to minister to the poor, sick and uneducated of Western Australia, unaware that the total Catholic population of that state numbered about three hundred. They were equally unaware that there had not been any provision for their accommodation in the new foundation. In fact, on arrival they were literally homeless. Their plan was to establish a school and care for the aboriginal population.¹



Mother M Ursula Frayne.

In 1849 the first Mercy secondary school was opened in Western Australia. It was a select fee-paying school patronised mainly by middle class non-Catholics, the fees from which would subsidise Ursula's work with the poor. As well, a House of Mercy was established for female immigrants and, when transportation was introduced into Western Australia in 1850, the sisters made the care of female convicts a priority. Dismayed by the conditions under which Ursula and her sisters were expected to minister, the sisters at the Mother House in Dublin suggested they return home and sent them the money for their passage. Being made of sterner stuff, giving up was not an option for Ursula and her companions, but progress was slow, hampered by the small Catholic population and a consequent lack of local vocations and, later, by difficulties with the Bishop. Although by 1857 the foundation was strong and the schools flourishing, problems with the Bishop escalated to the point where Ursula accepted an invitation from Bishop Goold of Melbourne and, accompanied by two sisters, departed from Perth in 1857 to make a foundation in his diocese.²

Melbourne by 1857 was a well-established city. The discovery of gold at Clunes in 1852 sparked a population explosion: from 29,000 in 1851, it increased fourfold in three years and was moving rapidly towards 140,000 by 1860.³ The need for education and pastoral programmes had expanded in proportion to the population growth, thus providing ample scope for the sisters' ministry. Their first task was to start a school. Within six weeks of her arrival, Ursula had paid off the mortgage on the Nicholson Street property assigned to accommodate the community. Then, although the sisters wished to turn their attention to educating the poor, Ursula acceded to the wishes of the Bishop and opened a select day school with provision for boarders.⁴

It was pointed out by the Bishop that provision was already made for [the poor] in what was termed the common schools and that, in fact, the great work of charity at that time was education of the 'poor rich'. Thus a school for young ladies, The Academy of Mary Immaculate, was opened on April 20th 1857. By 1863, the educational work on the premises comprised three sections - a boarding and day school for young ladies ... a middle school for children of humbler means, and an infant school. Part of the rationale of such a system was that fees proffered by the 'young ladies' maintained the school for poorer children.⁵

Orphanages, domestic training schools, primary and secondary schools and a House of Mercy soon followed, complemented by an extensive building programme.⁶

Thus began mercy ministry in the east of Australia. Very soon other groups of sisters began to arrive from other convents in Ireland and England.



A group of Founding Mothers.

In 1859, despite the misgivings of the Archbishop of Dublin, Mother Xavier Maguire, accompanied by five sisters, left Baggot Street for Geelong. In the same year Mother Ignatius Murphy led a group of five from Liverpool to Goulburn. Queensland having been made a separate colony in 1861, its new Bishop was anxious to secure a group of sisters to minister in his diocese.



The sisters who arrived in Cooktown from Dungarvan, Ireland, 1889. Mother Mary de Sales Meagher (centre front), Sr Mary Evangelist Morrissey (rear left), Sr Mary Rodriguez Sheehy (rear right), Sr Mary Josephine Jones (front left) and Sr Mary Joseph McGrath (front right).



Mother M Ignatius McQuion.

He enlisted Mother Vincent Whitty and several other recruits to work in his diocese after overcoming the opposition of the Baggot Street community. More foundations in New South Wales followed. Mother Ignatius McQuion from Liverpool established a convent at Church Hill in 1865 thereby laying the foundations of the North Sydney congregation. From Charleville, led by Mother Ignatius Croke, came the group which settled in Bathurst in 1866 at the invitation of the newly-appointed Bishop, Matthew Quinn.



Mother M Clare Dunphy.

During the following two decades, spurred on by State governments' attempts to secularise education, Australian bishops actively recruited religious from England and Ireland to staff Catholic schools. In response to their requests several more foundations were made. Mother Philomena Maguire founded Warrnambool from Baggot Street in 1872. The Mercy community at Rochfort Bridge West Meath, sent a group to Yass in 1875 led by Mother Paul Fielding. Mother Stanislaus Kenny with six professed sisters and

three postulants arrived in Singleton the same year. The following year, a group with Mother Aloysius Martyn as their superior came from Swinford in County Mayo to Bendigo in the newly-established Sandhurst diocese. Adelaide was

founded in 1880 by a group of sisters returning from an unsuccessful mission to Argentina, Grafton in 1884 by a contingent of sisters from Bermondsey, Catherine's first foundation in England. In 1885 Sister Vincent Mulhall founded Emmaville, having come to the Armidale diocese via Cooktown and to Cooktown via Oregon USA. Cardinal Moran brought Mother Clare Dunphy and a group of sisters from Callan in County Kilkenny to Parramatta in 1888. Five sisters from Dungarvan came to Cooktown in 1889. Mother Ignatius Walsh led a foundation to Yarrawonga from Wexford in 1890 and the following year difficulties with a foundation in the Dunedin diocese led to members of that community joining with others from Carrick-on-Suir in Ireland to found a community in Mansfield.⁷

Generally speaking, with each of these foundations, the pattern of governance established during Catherine's lifetime was repeated.⁸ Each foundation was initially independent. As each grew strong and as more pastoral needs became evident, new foundations were made, often far away from the 'mother' house. Frequently these, too, became independent, establishing branch houses which occasionally also became autonomous. This mode of governance, it is true, fostered rapid expansion.



Convent of Mercy Singleton.

At the beginning of the twentieth century there were in Australia fifty two autonomous foundations of the Sisters of Mercy, each following the same Rule and each loyal to Catherine's vision as it was interpreted in each local situation. The diagram below illustrates the extent of autonomous foundations made over the sixty years from 1846.

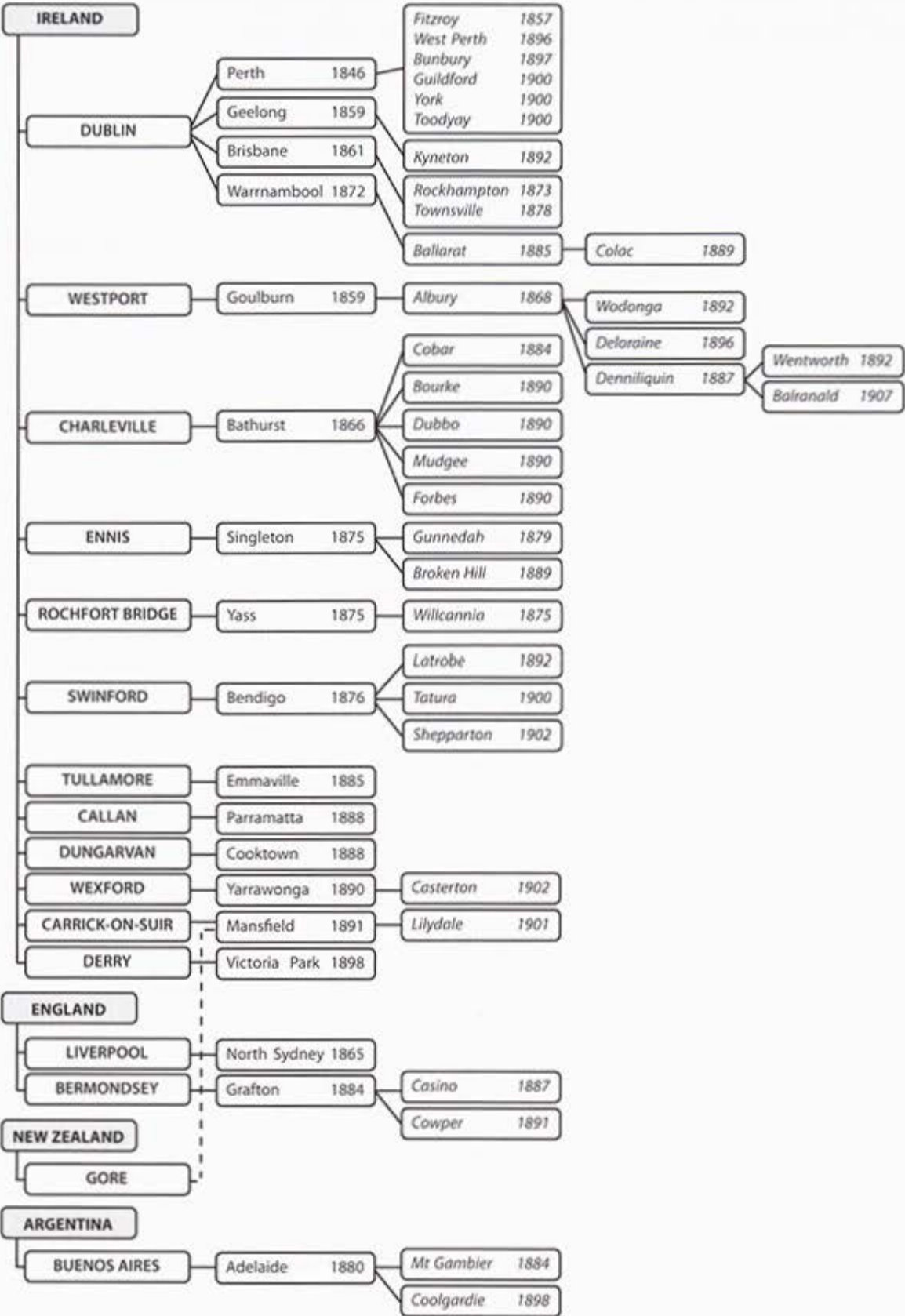
Consolidation

Circumstances in Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, were very different from what they had been in 1846. Improved transport and communication made it possible to establish closer links between religious houses; no longer were they so isolated. Just as the majority of foundations had been made in response to a crisis in Catholic education, a new development in education was responsible for bringing them closer together. Early in the twentieth century the various state governments enacted legislation to standardise the requirements for the training of teachers. Applying equally to Catholic and government schools, the requirements stipulated strict compliance by religious congregations, many of which in reality lacked the resources to meet them.



Statue of Catherine McAuley at the entrance to Mercy International Centre.

DIAGRAM 1: AUTONOMOUS FOUNDATIONS OF THE SISTERS OF MERCY IN AUSTRALIA: 1846 - 1907



The Bishops, who were ultimately responsible for Catholic Education in the colony, decided at their Plenary Council Meeting in 1905 that the solution was to consolidate resources and establish centralised diocesan novitiates for each religious congregation each with its own training college.⁹

Within a few years there was pressure on some of the autonomous houses, particularly the smaller ones and those in the same geographical region or diocese, to unite in a formal, canonical manner. As a consequence, there began a process whereby, over three decades, several independent mother houses and branch houses combined either by amalgamation or reunification with the larger more populous houses.¹⁰

Generally speaking, amalgamations and reunifications occurred as a response to directives from Bishops.¹¹ These processes, not without their difficulties and not always entered into with complete freedom, culminated in the formation of seventeen discreet groups of Sisters of Mercy in Australia, each loyal to the spirit and traditions of Catherine McAuley.¹² The course of amalgamation and reunification is illustrated in Diagrams 2 and 3.

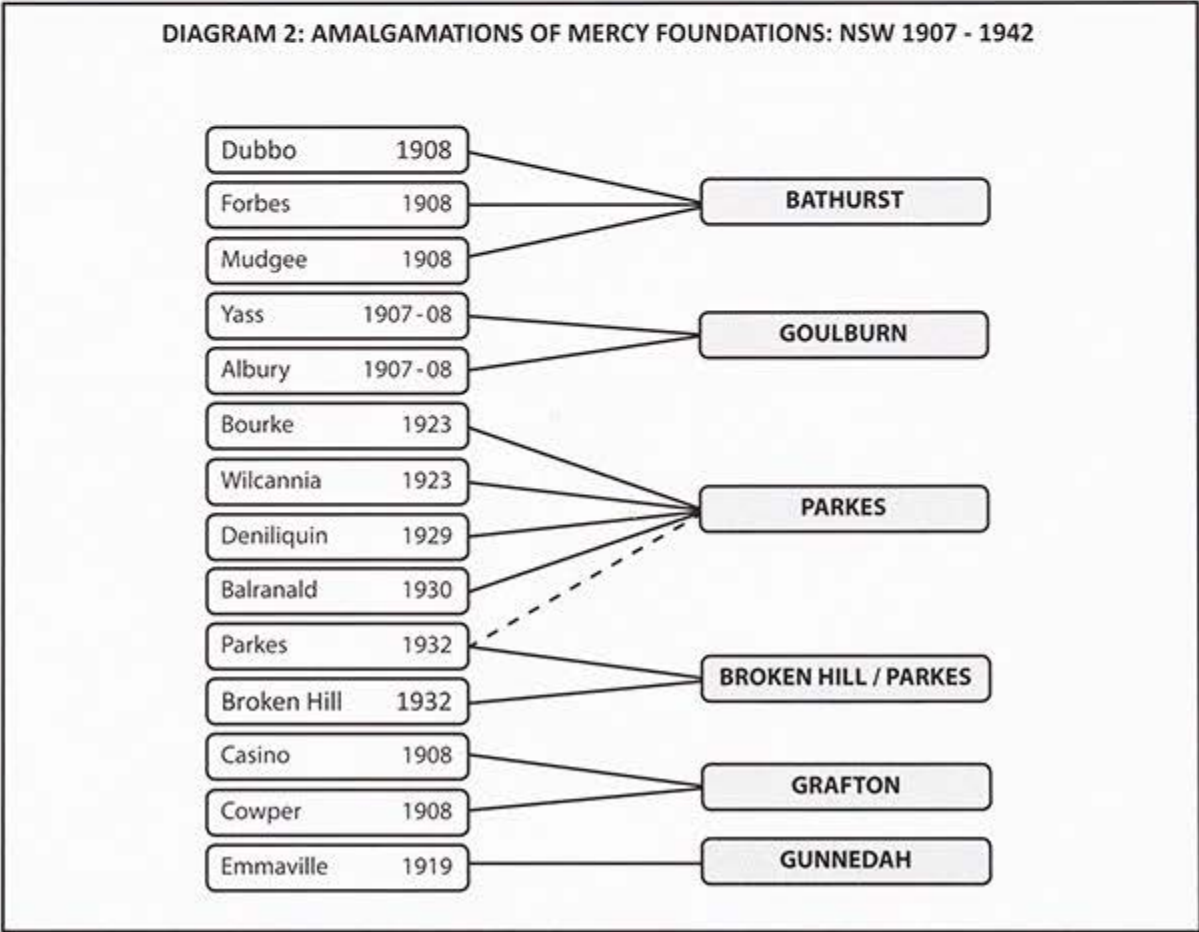
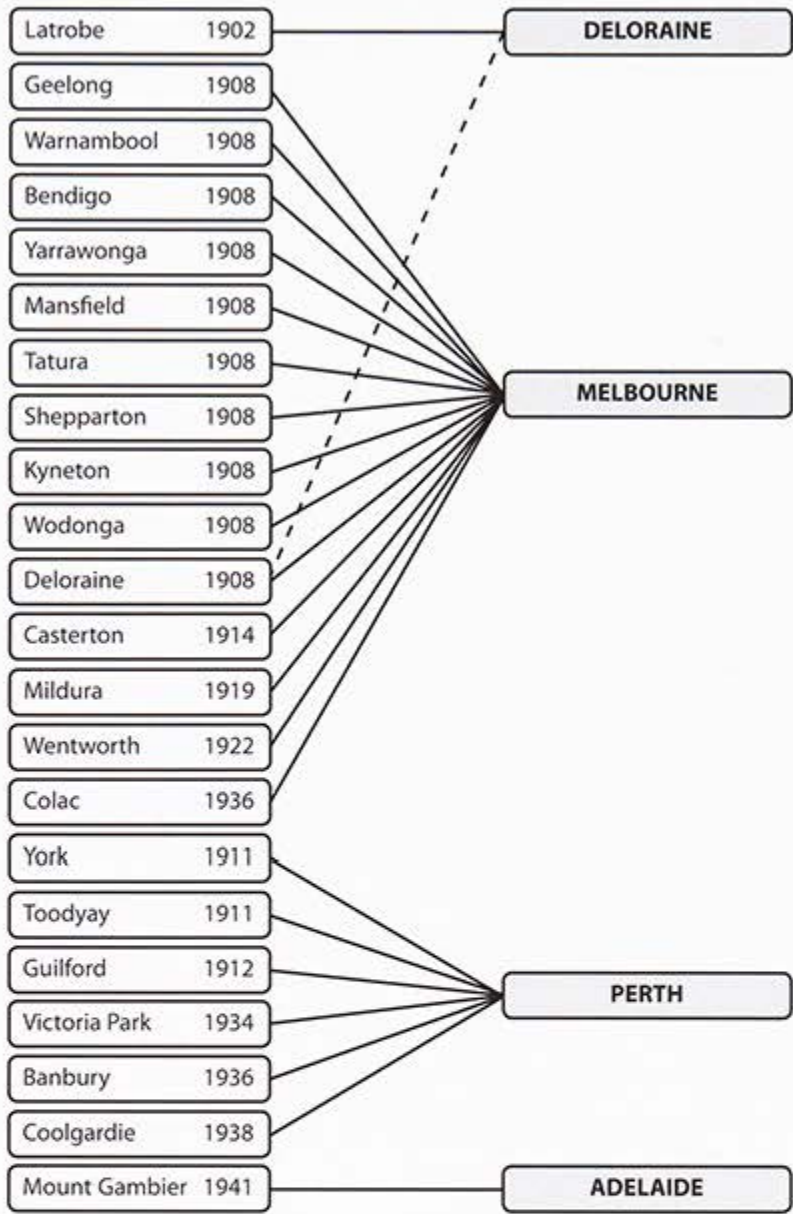


DIAGRAM 3: AMALGAMATIONS OF MERCY FOUNDATIONS: VICTORIA AND TASMANIA 1902 - 1941

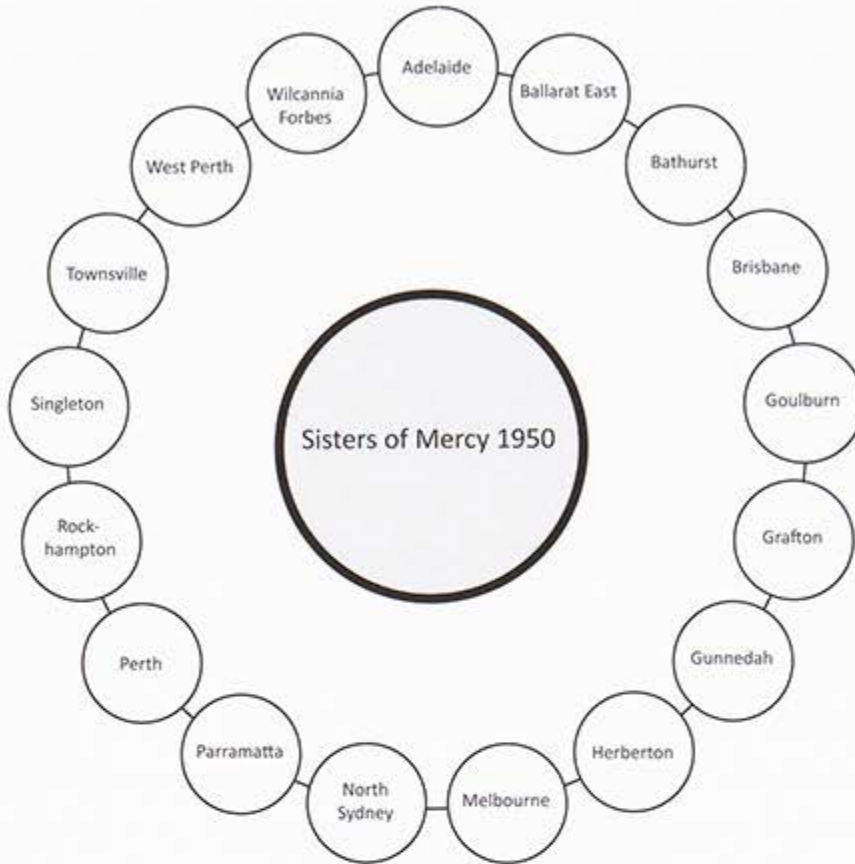


Some foundations, nine in fact, were unaffected by the amalgamation and reunification movements. In Queensland, a centralised system of governance having been agreed to as best suited to ministry in that state, the system of separate autonomous foundations had never been implemented except when a foundation in a newly-established diocese became self-governing. Brisbane, Rockhampton, Townsville and Herberton thus experienced none of the movement occasioned else where by the Bishops' decision.¹³ Governance in each of these congregations was according to the 'mother house: branch house' model such as Catherine had established with Kingstown and Booterstown in Ireland. Further south, North Sydney and Parramatta had made no foundations beyond the limits of the city of Sydney so a similar structure was already in place. Furthermore, each had a well-established teacher training facility. Singleton's independent foundations were beyond the Maitland diocese. Where appropriate these houses amalgamated with houses closer to them geographically, leaving Singleton unchanged. West Perth and Ballarat East chose to remain as they were, the latter establishing its own teacher training college which in time amalgamated with the Australian Catholic University.¹⁴

Rule and Constitutions

In terms of Rule and constitutions, there are some who see the story of the Sisters of Mercy in Australia as a constant effort to achieve a balance between the two elements of fidelity to the traditions of governance inherited from Catherine and the imperative of meeting, in the most effective manner, the apostolic needs of the people to whom they had been called. At the beginning of the twentieth century, despite regional differences, the unifying force among them all was the version of the Rule approved by Gregory XVI in 1841.¹⁵

DIAGRAM 4: AUSTRALIAN MERCY GROUPS 1950



Mother M Vincent Whitty.

However, from the early days in the colony it had become evident that, from time to time, adjustments to the Rule had been necessary in order to respond appropriately to Australian conditions. A typical example is the decision in 1860 by Mother Vincent Whitty, herself trained by Catherine, to make what could be interpreted as a radical departure from the foundress' original plan for governance of houses and establish a centrally-administered system in Queensland.¹⁶ As new dioceses were established in that State, this template

was followed. While fidelity to Catherine's vision and ideals was never in doubt, a local situation frequently required that amendments were made to the way in which that vision and those ideals were achieved.

Following the revision of the Code of Canon Law in 1917, more obvious local modifications to the 1841 Constitutions became necessary in order to bring them into line with the new Canons. The Melbourne Congregation had, for example, gained approval from Rome in 1918 for a form of the constitutions among the Melbourne Union.¹⁷ As other groups made small or more significant modifications to adapt to local circumstances, the influence of the 1841 Rule as the main source of unity began to diminish. The Apostolic Delegate of the time, in an attempt to achieve uniform revision 'for the good of the Religious themselves and for the interests of Religion in general', proposed that the Melbourne Rule be adopted by all Mercy groups throughout Australia.¹⁸ This proposal was not met with general approval; in fact, it was resisted. In 1932 Rome approved another form of the Mercy Constitutions, adapted for the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Victoria and Tasmania and designed to replace the earlier version. Different in many respects from the original, these constitutions seemed to be an appropriate adaptation to suit the different and demanding conditions in Australia. The 'Melbourne Constitutions', as they came to be known, were not widely accepted outside that amalgamated group. Other groups were nervous of adopting them.¹⁹



Mother M Joan Brennan.

Matters were further complicated by the dissemination of a revised version of the 1841 Constitutions which had been brought into line with the new Code. Known as 'The Baggot Street Rule' or 'The Dublin Constitutions', to some of the Mercy groups these represented a more faithful interpretation of the mind and vision of Catherine.²⁰ For reasons which may have been more sentimental than practical, some groups sought to adopt them, albeit with modifications, to render them suitable for Australian conditions. By 1950, therefore, Sisters

of Mercy in Australia were living by a number of variations of the original Rule of Catherine, variations made, it must be said, to enable a more effective pastoral response to the needs of the people among whom they ministered.²¹ The following, taken from a letter written in 1950 by Mother Joan Brennan, Mother General of the Wilcannia-Forbes congregation, illustrates a situation which undoubtedly prevailed in most congregations.

Mother Joan explains that in 1932 there were four distinct foundations of Sisters of Mercy in the diocese, all living by the Rule approved in 1841, a Rule which she claims was 'not practicable for convents with branch houses' and which contained other points 'impossible to observe'.

I have asked some of our old Sisters who were Superiors at different times between 1890 and 1932 how they managed to totally disregard certain sections of their old Rule. They told me that any difficulty about the observance of a particular section of the Rule was always referred to the Local Ordinary of the time ... who ... usually approved of disregarding or altering any particular section of the Rule that did not suit existing circumstances. This fact probably accounts for the different interpretations of the original Rule that existed when amalgamation was brought about in 1932.

As the 1841 Rule did not suit an amalgamated congregation ... after much study and discussion ... permission was sought and obtained from the Holy See in 1938 to adopt [the Rule approved for the amalgamated Sisters of Mercy in the Goulburn diocese].

Eleven years' use of the Goulburn Rule proved that it was inadequate in many respects ... Hence our efforts of 1949.²⁰

It must also be acknowledged that, despite these differences, Catherine's dying wish for her sisters, unity of spirit, had not been destroyed. Nevertheless, in the subsequent movement towards closer unity among Mercy congregations, the matter of Rule and constitutions presented an additional hurdle to be overcome.

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- ¹ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, online edition, <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A040239b.htm> downloaded 22/05/11.
- ² *ibid.* See <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A040239b.htm> downloaded 22/05/11.
- ³ Victorian censuses of 1861, 1871, 1881 and 1891, information obtained from the website of the Australian Bureau of Statistics <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats>, downloaded 22/05/11.
- ⁴ McGinley, R., *op.cit.*, p. 113 and nn. 50, 51 and 52. There had been considerable discussion at home and abroad as to whether opening schools for the rich was contrary to the spirit of the constitutions. Ultimately it was decided that under special circumstances it was permissible.
- ⁵ *History of the Academy of Mary Immaculate*, obtained from official website, <http://www.academy.vic.edu.au/our-college/dsp-default.cfm?loadref=22>, downloaded 23/05/11.
- ⁶ Allen, M.G., *The Labourers' Friends: Sisters of Mercy in Victoria and Tasmania* (Melbourne, 1989), p.39. See also *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, online edition <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A040239b.htm>, downloaded 22/05/11.
- ⁷ These foundations are illustrated in Diagram 1, p.20.
- ⁸ The exception is Queensland where Bishop James Quinn insisted on a centralised form of governance as being more suitable, given the vast distances and scattered population of that State. This matter is explored in Essay JOT, pp.4-5.
- ⁹ Kerr B.M., 'Jeremiah Joseph Doyle 1849-1909', *Catholic Life*, June 2009, p.18 and Kelly, E., *My Cause is Just* (Toowoomba, 1999).
- ¹⁰ See Diagrams 2, 3 pp 20-21 and Essay JOT, pp.6-10.
- ¹¹ Allen, *op.cit.*, pp. 203-207. See also Essay JOT, pp.6-10 where the wider context of amalgamation is explored as well as events in Victoria. In the archives at Star of the Sea, Grafton, can be found a letter dated 28 December 1908 to Mother M de Sanctis of Cowper, from the Vicar General of the diocese, which states: Dear Reverend Mother, You are aware that I am very much interested in the question of Amalgamation for the Sisters of Mercy in this diocese. I have just lately received from His Eminence, the Cardinal, a letter in which he declares that Amalgamation ought to be carried out for the benefit of the convents which wish for it. This Amalgamation is to take place without any change of Rule or Constitution. You are hereby invited to take part in this Amalgamation for yourself and Community at the Convent of Mercy Grafton on 12th January at twelve noon.
- Apparently not all were in favour as there exists in the same archive a telegram from the same source, which reads: Mother Columbia, Sisters Clare and Stanislaus are again invited to join in the Amalgamation at six this evening. (Emphasis mine). (Archives Grafton, Box 4) A different take on the process can be gained from a letter written to Bermondsey by one of the pioneer Grafton sisters. *This year in January I resolved to let you know of our re-union of foundations into branch houses ... Last Christmas it was thought advisable for the houses on the Richmond and Clarence Rivers to re-unite. Mother [de Sanctis] willingly gave up her office and beautiful little Convent and Community, a flourishing one with Novices and Postulants, and was glad to place herself under dear Mother M Aloysius's care.* Letter from Sr M Veronica Duggan to Reverend Mother Camillus, October 23, 1909, Archives Bermondsey, GL 39. See also Essay JOT, pp. 11-12.
- ¹² See Diagram 4, p.24.
- ¹³ In 1919, with the decline of Cooktown, the Mother House of the foundation which began there was transferred to Herberton. Later the administration of the congregation was moved to Cairns, the administrative centre of the diocese.
- ¹⁴ See Diagram 1,2,3 pp. 20,21,22.

¹⁵ See text of address by Rev. H Jordan MSC, to the meeting of superiors at Rosanna, 1953. *Even though they had no common superior, no unity in government, they did have unity in Rule, the same common Constitutions, and this it was that preserved unity among them, more than any single factor during the years 1841-1926.* AISMA U203.1.

¹⁶ See Essay JOT, pp. 4-5.

¹⁷ See Diagram 3, p.22. These were subsequently revised a second time and approved in 1932.

¹⁸ Bartolomeo Cattaneo was Apostolic Delegate to Australia 1917-1933. For his promotion of the Melbourne Constitutions see Dissertation HD, pp. 78-81.

¹⁹ Helen Delaney states that these were 'a major departure from the 1841 Constitutions.' *ibid.*, p.81.

²⁰ Jordan, *loc. cit.*

²¹ Father Jordan estimated that in 1953 there were in use among Sisters of Mercy in Australia, at least six different and distinct books of Constitutions, a situation arrived at over a period of about thirty five years. Jordan, *loc.cit.*

²² AISMA U401.2. The 'efforts of 1949' presumably were to secure some appropriate modifications to the Goulburn Rule.

CHAPTER 3: STEPS TO UNITY

In the period following World War II, under the leadership of Pope Pius XII (1939-58), the movement to update religious life commenced. It was well understood that the Holy See looked favourably on moves towards union or federation of religious houses, particularly among those with the same or similar spiritual heritage, to achieve greater effectiveness in the apostolate.¹

In September 1952 two Australian Sisters of Mercy, Mothers M Paul O'Connell and Joan Brennan, from Bathurst and Wilcannia-Forbes respectively, attended the International Congress of Superiors General of Orders and Institutes of Women held in Rome.



Some of the attendees at the International Congress of Superiors General of Orders and Institutes of Women in Rome. Mothers Paul and Joan are highlighted in the foreground.

Here the Pope called explicitly for religious orders to 'adapt to the present day situation', referring in particular to reforms to the religious habit, which, he said, needed to be 'suitable and answer to the requirements of hygiene'.² In addition, the Pope made it clear that communities with common heritage and similar interests should explore ways of developing closer links with each other. When, later that year, Mother M Patricia O'Neill of Melbourne received a letter from the superior of Carysfort Park in Ireland seeking suggestions on modifications of the religious habit, there was no question as to the origin of

the idea.³ Rather than make a unilateral decision and thus risk disunity on the matter, Mother Patricia called a meeting of all the Mercy superiors which took place in Sydney in December, Mother M Wilfred having offered Monte Sant' Angelo as the venue. At this meeting fifteen of the seventeen congregations were represented – West Perth and Rockhampton somehow having been overlooked when invitations were extended.⁴ The suggested modifications to the habit (doing away with the train and changing to a black rather than a white guimpe) were not acceptable to the New South Wales group and an impasse ensued.⁵ However, matters of greater import than trains and guimpes had come to the fore.

The Australian Union of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy

In his opening address to the meeting at Monte Sant' Angelo, the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Paolo Marella⁶ pointed out that, to accede to the wishes of the Holy See with regard to formation, the sisters should consider some form of unified government, quoting in support of his claim the unions which had been effected in various Australian states and dioceses and also in the United States of America. In words which left no doubt as to their intention, the Archbishop concluded his address thus:

This is a topic which should be the object of your private conversations and correspondence. I mention it because it is true today as always that 'union makes strength' and to let you know that if, and when, some of you, in whatever part of Australia, really and spontaneously thought that the time had come, the necessity had arisen, to implement a 'union' you are perfectly free to discuss such a procedure with the Ecclesiastical Authorities.⁷

The words of the Delegate were reaffirmed by reports from Mothers Paul and Joan of their audience with the Holy Father with the result that

those who had long cherished the desire for Union joyfully began to think the day might be closer than they had dreamed; others who had not thought of it as something to become an actual fact in their lifetime took the form of fearful hesitancy.⁸



Mother M Paul O'Connell.

Such were the positives achieved at this meeting that it was decided to make it an annual event. While there is a school of thought which claims the next meeting had been called to resolve the stalemate over the habit, when the sisters gathered in Melbourne a year later they found that seven leaders had asked for the question of union to be discussed.⁹ Many of these leaders had already aired the matter among their communities and were anxious to come to an agreement one way or another. As an indication of its importance, the topic of union had been placed first on the agenda.¹⁰

Two options were seriously considered; one for a union in which congregations would forgo their autonomy, another for some type of federation which preserved that autonomy. Each option had its protagonists. Mother Bonaventure of Ballarat East appealed to history and tradition in advocating federation; Mother Paul from Bathurst supported union as being more in keeping with the wishes of the Holy See and stressed that forming a union would not necessarily be a betrayal of the ideals of Catherine. Citing the experience of the Sisters of Mercy in the United States where different versions of the Rule had been proliferating, she concluded with the impassioned plea:

If we are to be true, in the fullest sense, to the spirit and teaching of our Mother Foundress, the time has come for us to act in unison, and by adopting a common mode of government to keep intact our heritage derived from Mother McAuley.¹¹

It seems that at that meeting, as frequently occurs, participants were initially reluctant to take decisive action. Some tried to slow the process.

The Annals record a

suggestion of postponing efforts towards Union until all English-speaking Sisters of Mercy were ready to take the first step.¹²

The catalyst for movement was a paper presented on the second day of the meeting by Father H. Jordan MSC, the sisters' canonical advisor. Basing his address on Catherine's dying wish for union and peace, he explored the notion of union, various forms of governance, the history of the Institute and the advantages of following common constitutions. This address, according to the annalist, 'after the known wish of the Holy Father and the Congregation of Religious, was largely instrumental in the formation of the Australian Union of the Sisters of Mercy.' The minutes state simply:

All who heard Father Jordan's discourse were greatly impressed. After much prayer, thought and consultation, the Mothers General of ... eight congregations decided to petition the Holy See for permission to form an organic union.

After that, actions followed in quick succession:

On Saturday 12 September ... Father Jordan drafted a letter petitioning the Holy See to allow these congregations to form a union.¹³

On 14 September the sisters of the various congregations returned to their respective convents, all expecting that at least a year would elapse before any final step would be taken to make the Union a reality.

In May 1954 the petition to form 'one organic union, divided into Provinces, under one Major Superior, with one common constitution', was sent to Rome.¹⁴ The reasons given to support the petition were that the formation of a union would foster greater unity among the group of Mercy Sisters who had a common foundress but who were at that time divided into many distinct independent groups; it would promote better formation in the principles of



Delegates to the first General Chapter of the Union with the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Carboni, Cardinal N Gilroy and Father H Jordan MSC.

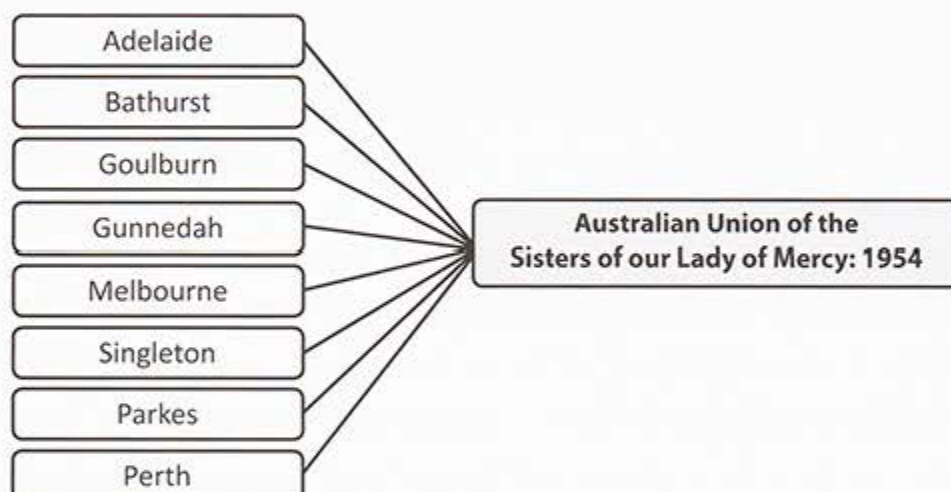
the spiritual life and the apostolic works of charity; it would eliminate the differences between the congregations by requiring adherence to common constitutions.¹⁵ As well, such a move was the logical conclusion of the movements towards union of Sisters of Mercy in Australia which had been in progress since 1907. As such, it was hoped that it would inspire a union of all English-speaking Sisters of Mercy. Finally, it demonstrated the desire of the sisters to follow the wishes of the Holy See.¹⁶

By August a reply had been received from Rome through the Delegation: the Congregation of the Australian Union of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy had been formally erected.¹⁷ The inaugural Chapter was called for the end of August and presided over by Father W. Keane, S.J.¹⁸ Elections were held in early September and on 12 October 1954, having received an invitation from Archbishop Eris O'Brien to establish the Generalate in the National Capital, the Mother General and Councillors – Mother M Patricia O'Neill, Mother M Calas Sanctus Cunningham, Mother M Agatha Farrell, Mother M Philip Moylan and Mother M Benedict Hennessey - took up residence in St Anne's Convent Manuka.



Mother M Patricia O'Neil, the first Mother General of the Union, with her Councillors.

DIAGRAM 5: THE AUSTRALIAN UNION OF SISTERS OF OUR LADY OF MERCY



The Australian Federation of Religious Sisters of Mercy

Nine congregations, however, despite the hopes of the others that 'a much greater union be formed', did not join the Union. Archbishop Daniel Mannix had argued in his letter of support for the Union that

*if these eight congregations are permitted to form one organic union, then I am confident that the remaining thirteen self-governing congregations will be encouraged to join such a union so that within a space of a few years all the Sisters of Mercy in Australia and New Zealand would be in fact and in spirit children of the one, united Religious Family.*¹⁹

This, however, did not eventuate. One of the sticking points was a central novitiate which, to many of the Mothers, seemed to be the antithesis of local autonomy. Mother M Bonaventure wrote to one of her colleagues:

*We should be pleased to join a Union on condition that we retained our novitiates and our subjects.*²⁰

Another bone of contention was the black guimpe with which the Union members had replaced the traditional white.²¹ Even so, collectively the Mothers General were not really sure what federation might entail. Ultimately it was fear of being forced into joining the Union which galvanised them into developing plans for an acceptable alternative.

Meanwhile a new Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Romolo Carboni, had arrived in Sydney full of enthusiasm to carry out the Holy Father's wishes and, in attempting to do so, had proceeded to step on some religious toes. Apparently he had been instructed to

*invite the Congregations of Sisters who still remain separated to consider seriously their eventual adherence to the Australian Union of the Sisters of Mercy and consequently to provide that, whenever they desire to modify their constitutions, they do so modify them as to bring them into uniformity with the Constitutions of this same Australian Union.*²²



Mother M Andrew Lynch.

To be fair to the Archbishop, it is evident that he was following instructions from Rome, but his sensitivity to the local situation was not quite in the same measure as his zeal and his actions caused no little anxiety among the Sydney congregations. In February 1955 he summoned Mother M Andrew of Parramatta to the Delegation and informed her that he wished the Parramatta and Monte Sant' Angelo Congregations to amalgamate as a preparatory step to their joining the Union.²³ Next he

contacted all congregations and, referring to what he saw as 'three different groups amongst the Sisters of Mercy', asked that a secret ballot be taken to ascertain the number of sisters in each congregation who were in favour of strict union; who favoured federation; who wished to remain unchanged.²⁴



Mother M Bonaventure Healy.

From both of these directives he was later obliged to resile. Following a meeting of the Parramatta superiors with Cardinal Gilroy, it was pointed out to the Delegate that he was acting beyond his mandate. Later he had to concede that, as sisters in congregations joining the Union had already voted and made their preferences known, to interrogate them again on the issue would, at best, cause confusion.²⁵

The positive outcome of his actions was the realisation by the leaders of the nine groups who had not opted for union that they needed to identify and work towards an alternative governance structure with all possible vigour. A flurry of letters, visits, consultations and meetings ensued. As described in a paper in the Parramatta archives:

*Consultation with eight others was initiated ... In April, at the invitation of Mother M Bonaventure, Mother M Thecla and Mother M Andrew went to Ballarat. Mother M Philip and [her] assistant from Perth were also there. Mother M Andrew was asked to act as secretary to keep the congregations aware of developments.*²⁶

Bishop James Carroll was enlisted to assist with clarifying the objectives of the group and developing the articles of Federation. Mother Andrew was appointed the official go-between and Mother Bonaventure seems to have been the campaign manager.²⁷ Mother M Damian circulated copies of the revised Rule, which had been accepted by her sisters in Brisbane, proposing that it be used by member congregations.²⁸

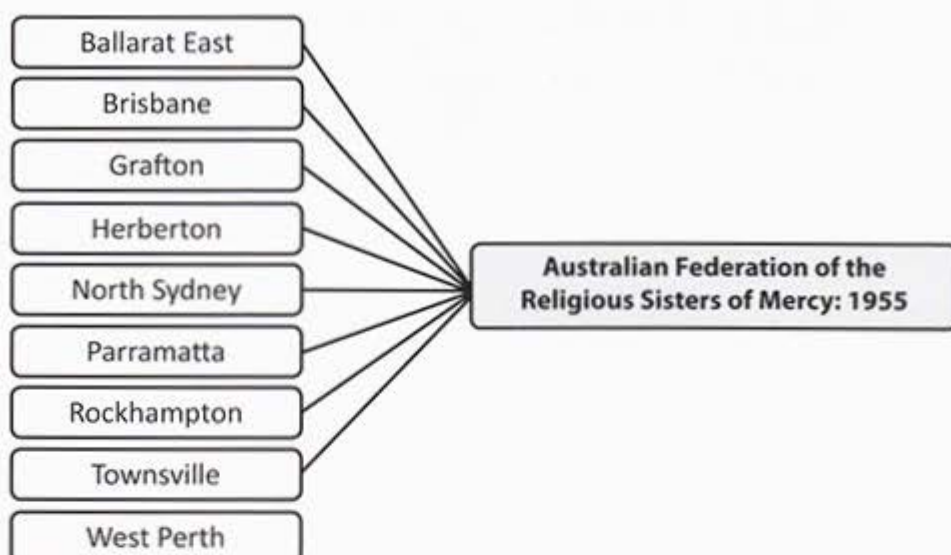
In August 1955 Bishop Carroll presented to the Apostolic Delegate the petition seeking permission from the Holy See for the nine congregations to 'be governed by a Federation Council ... in which Member Congregations shall preserve autonomy and share common rule and constitutions', in order to foster and develop the family spirit of mutual cooperation and harmony as autonomous congregations and to develop apostolates independently according to the needs of the local area.²⁹



Plaque at Ballarat commemorating the inaugural meeting of the Federation.

In November of that year the Decree constituting the Australian Federation of the Religious Sisters of Mercy was received by the Apostolic Delegate and Bishop Carroll was appointed to carry it out.³⁰ Members agreed to use, for a period of experimentation, the 'Brisbane Constitutions'.³¹

DIAGRAM 6: THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF THE RELIGIOUS SISTERS OF MERCY



The first meeting of the Federation Council - that is the Mothers General of each of the member Congregations - was held in Ballarat East in January 1957. Mother Damian Duncombe of the Brisbane congregation was elected president, Mother Bonaventure vice president and Mother Andrew treasurer.



The 'Federation' Cakes: one cake for each member Congregation.

At that meeting the Apostolic Delegate announced that he hoped that the Federation and Union would one day join together. He spoke of the need for 'largeness of vision' and put forward as exemplars the Sisters of St Joseph of North Sydney who, though operating through a centralised structure, 'foster

the religious, educational, social and moral interest of our dioceses and parishes'. Then, addressing the meeting, he challenged them

You my dear Sisters of Mercy in Australia have not yet constituted one family; nevertheless in the way of Union and Federation you have already done much, have taken important steps and thus have given an example, inspiration and real lead to other communities...

*All await the day when all the Sisters of Mercy in Australia, New Zealand and Oceania will be in everything, one big united family.*³²

That day, as is now known, was much further away than the Archbishop imagined.



First meeting of the Council of the Australian Federation of Sisters of Mercy, Ballarat East, January 1957.

From Seventeen to Two

By January 1957, then, every Sister of Mercy in Australia belonged to one or other group – Union or Federation. While it is recorded that the decision to join either group was the result of an almost unanimous vote in each congregation, it must be remembered decisions in religious life at that time were mostly made by the major superiors with the rank and file being 'advised' to comply with their wishes.³³ Although formal votes were taken in each congregation and the results sent to the Apostolic Delegate, generally speaking, prior to voting the sisters were not given much information concerning one form of

governance or another.³⁴ The decisions had frequently been made beforehand and the vote simply ratified what the Mother General and her advisors had decided. With regard to forming the Union, it has been said that the Mothers General who did not join were not prepared to make that decision without first consulting their communities and the local bishops.³⁵ Some of the latter, it is true, held a considerable amount of sway in congregations. Some supported Union, some encouraged the sisters to join it, some opposed it.³⁶

When considering factors influencing the decision as to which group to join, it is interesting to speculate on the influence of alliances within the group of Mothers General. Brisbane was not represented at the Melbourne meeting in 1953, neither was West Perth nor Herberton. None of these joined the Union. The strong advocates of Federation were Mother Bonaventure and Mother Andrew. West Perth was wont to follow Ballarat in major decisions, the two congregations having had a close relationship over a long period.³⁷ As well, the rivalry between West Perth and Victoria Square no doubt played



Mother M Calasactius Cunningham.

a part, especially as representatives of the former congregation had not been invited to the initial meeting in Sydney. Singleton had a close connection with Melbourne – some of their key personnel had studied there – and Singleton leaders were wont to follow Melbourne's lead in matters of policy. Mothers Paul and Joan from Bathurst and Wilcannia Forbes had been to Rome together and had a common experience of hearing Pope Pius XII. Moreover, most of the congregations which chose to join the Union had had some previous experience of amalgamation and possibly were less fearful of the consequences.

One might be tempted to think that, with the two groups thus formalised, the work towards union was complete. This was not so. People like Mother Calasactius Cunningham of Singleton were dedicated to the idea of achieving

unity among Sisters of Mercy and were not prepared to accept the status quo. Oral tradition has it that Mother Calas Sanctus 'had her heart set on all becoming one'. And she was not the only one who believed that the journey towards unity was still unfinished as subsequent events were to demonstrate.

Closer Links: The National Conference of Sisters of Mercy of Australia

The impetus to take the next step came from the publication of the Vatican Council Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life, which in Article 22 urged closer union among religious of similar origins and of similar spirit.

*Independent institutes and monasteries should, when opportune and the Holy See permits, form federations if they can be considered as belonging to the same religious family. Others who have practically identical constitutions and rules and a common spirit should unite, particularly when they have too few members. Finally, those who share the same or a very similar active apostolate should become associated, one to the other.*³⁸

This instruction, together with the news that the Sisters of Mercy in the USA were holding a meeting to link the separate Unions and Federations in the USA, aroused interest in Australia, especially when the Pittsburgh sisters invited some Australian sisters to attend the meeting.³⁹



Enjoying some sight-seeing during the Ireland trip. L-R, Mothers Philomena, Damian, Cyril, Thecla.

As the model for the American sisters was that each group would remain autonomous and yet all would be members of the National Federation, it seemed that it could be adapted to the Australian scene. To some, a world-wide federation was not out of the question but, come what may, leaders of both Australian groups saw the potential for rapprochement between the Union and the Federation.⁴⁰ Six sisters attended the Pittsburgh meeting, then travelled together to visit Mercy houses in Ireland.⁴¹

With the Union Special General Chapter called for 1966, delegates appointed a commission to investigate the possibility of forming a closer link between the Union and the Federation. During the Chapter a formal invitation was extended to a representative group from the Federation to visit them in Canberra before the Chapter closed, and the invitation was accepted. Informal meetings followed from which emerged a proposal to form a National Conference of Sisters of Mercy of Australia. The proposed body was to be a type of association since neither of the two existing entities could absorb the other without compromising its canonical status



Meeting of the National Conference of Sisters of Mercy 1967.

History was made in 1967 when, for the first time, the major superiors of all the Mercy Congregations in Australia met at North Sydney from 27 to 29 September with the view to forming the Conference.⁴² The programme of work included revision of constitutions, examination of the *Customs and Guide*, liturgical practice and prayers, developing a programme for Sister

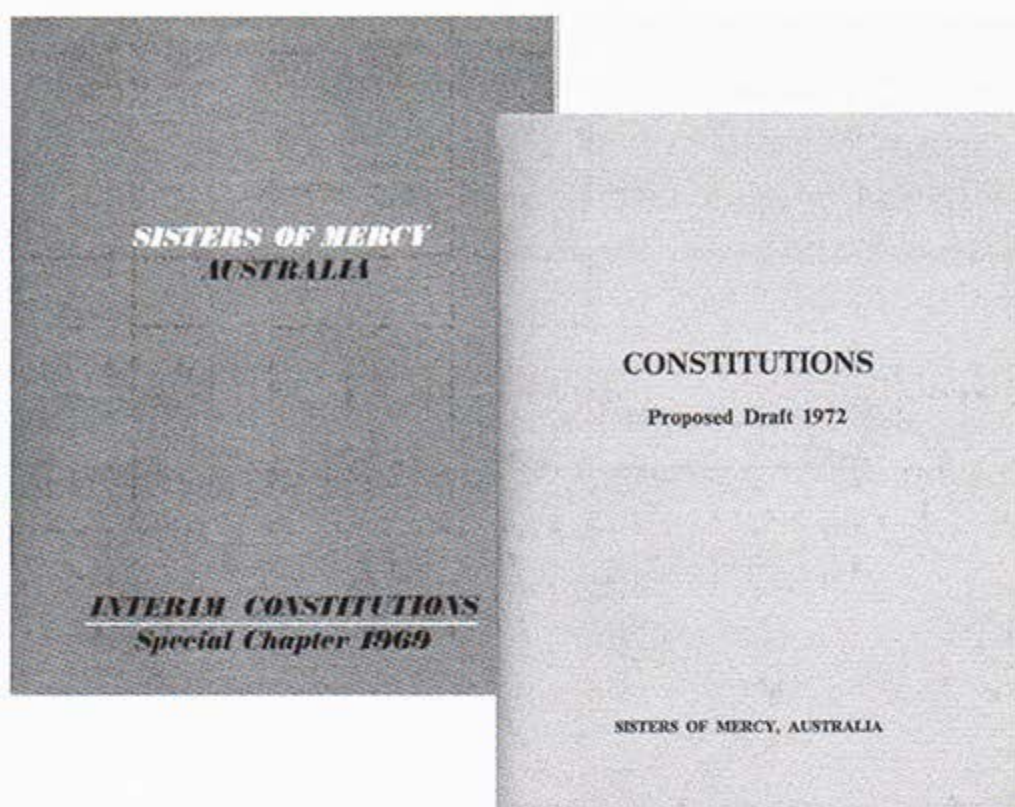
Formation, reaching agreement on a common mercy habit for Australia and promoting the cause for canonisation of the Foundress.⁴³ From this meeting a request went to Rome for the Articles of Agreement to be approved, and to the delight of all, approval was received in December.⁴⁴ Thus, while the Union and the Federation remained as canonical entities and autonomous bodies, a new association, representing all Australian Sisters of Mercy had been formed.

Towards Common Constitutions

At that time, the differences in governance notwithstanding, there was a significant degree of resemblance between the constitutions of the Union and the Federation.⁴⁵ In 1954 Mother Damian, Mother General of Brisbane, had been informed by the Apostolic Delegate that it would be advisable for all Sisters of Mercy to adopt common constitutions. She had visited Mother Patricia in Melbourne, discussed the similarity and had proposed variations in wording to suit the different circumstances of each group. As well, she tried to initiate similar discussions among the congregations which were considering joining a federation.⁴⁶ Mother Damian felt strongly that

*some effort [should] be made to come together to try to evolve a common Constitution that would form the basis of future meetings to try to preserve unity of spirit and uniformity of rule and custom.*⁴⁷

Circumstances did not favour common constitutions at that time. The Union Council did not judge that it was feasible. However, one of the first actions of the Federation Council was to appoint a commission to work at revising the constitutions, *Customs and Guide* for use in all of the member congregations. When, a decade later, the Union General Chapter set up a commission to examine their constitutions, the leaders of the two groups, Mother Damian and Mother Marie Therese organised for the Federation Commission to be invited to the first meeting of the Union group.⁴⁸ By this time the Conference of Sisters of Mercy was close to realisation.



Towards common constitutions.

Thus, in keeping with its objectives, from January 1967 the two operated as a combined committee of which the Superior General of the Union and the President of the Federation were ex officio members. The opinions of the sisters were surveyed, responses collated and the material generated was used as the basis of the first draft of new constitutions which was presented to the Conference in 1969. These were accepted as Interim Constitutions to be used until the next Union General Chapter in 1972. In the meantime two sisters, Sister Jean Marie Mahoney (Brisbane) and Sister M Thecla Day (Melbourne) were assigned full-time to the task of producing a more complete draft in time for this Chapter.⁴⁹ By the end of 1971 they had completed their task and

*each Sister of Mercy in Australia had a personal copy of the Proposed Draft Constitutions (1972) for her consideration, reflection and study.*⁵⁰

Work on the constitutions, participation in shared formation programmes, attendance at conferences and membership on various committees of the Conference gave sisters experiences of 'oneness' hitherto unknown to them.⁵¹



Sister Maria Joseph Carr.

Furthermore, the Union Chapter of 1972 mandated that the Superior General continue seeking means to strengthen the bond of unity within the Union and between Union and Federation.⁵²

The newly-elected Superior General, Sister Maria Joseph Carr, responded to this mandate with characteristic vigour. Following in the footsteps of some of the great mercy leaders before her, she devoted herself to promoting the National Conference as the instrument for the ultimate unity of Australian Sisters of Mercy. Of her leadership it has been said,

*The policies of her period of administration ... must be recognised as a most significant contribution to the readiness for a new form of government for Australian Sisters of Mercy, as the unification movement matured in the next phase.*⁵³

It became increasingly evident that most sisters wanted actual unity – some kind of structural unity which gave public witness to their unity of spirit. Surveys taken in 1975 among members of the Federation and the Union to test the readiness of Sisters to achieve a greater degree of unity among Australian Sisters of Mercy indicated that among both groups the majority of respondents were in favour. As well, Mother M Philomena pointed out to participants at the ninth Biennial Federation Conference Meeting that

*the feeling of unity among Sisters is very strong and the desire for a means of coming together is constantly being expressed.*⁵⁴

At the annual meeting of the National Conference in 1975, members were addressed by Sister M Silverius Shields, the Executive Director of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, whom Sister Maria Joseph had met at the fifth meeting of the American Federation held in Limerick in 1971.⁵⁵ As Sister



Sister Patricia Pak Poy.

Silverius outlined her responsibilities in fostering unity of spirit in accordance with the charism of the foundress, the value of having someone perform a similar role for the Australian body became obvious. The Conference thus resolved to revise its statutes in order to increase its capacity to pursue unity. Following the acceptance of the revised statutes in 1976 two important decisions were made: to appoint of an Executive Director and to elect of an Executive Council. The latter replaced the 'ex officio' membership of the Union Generalate and the Federation Executive. For the first

time in history there was an elected body which was truly representative of all Australian Sisters of Mercy, irrespective of their mode of governance. Presidency of the Executive Council was to be on a two-year alternating schedule between the Union Major Superior and the Federation President. At the first meeting of the Executive Council Sister Patricia Pak Poy was appointed as Executive Director and authorised to plan a National Assembly of Sisters of Mercy. That same year the work of redrafting the constitutions took a different turn with the appointment of Sister Ann McLay of Brisbane to the task of producing a final draft.



Programme of the First National Assembly.

National Assembly 1977

Having visited all seventeen congregations in Australia and familiarised them with the working of the Conference, Sister Patricia Pak Poy turned her attention to organising an assembly of all Sisters of Mercy. Ten official representatives from each congregation or province were joined by hundreds of others who came as observers to this National Assembly of Sisters of Mercy of Australia, held in Melbourne from 28 August to 3 September, 1977. In all, approximately 800 sisters gave tangible

expression to their desire for unity and their commitment to manifest their mercy charism in forms of ministry which promoted justice. Through a series of workshops participants focused on four key areas: local community, Sisters of Mercy in a changing church, mercy and justice in the administration of institutions and education for mercy and justice.

President of the Conference, Sister Valda Ward, addressed the assembly in words reflecting the energy which characterised the event from the very beginning.

We are the largest single group of religious women in this country ... How do we view our stewardship of power? This is a most serious question, a question that will continue long after we begin to answer other questions considered at this National Assembly.

In the past few months we have ... studied aspects of mercy and justice in the administration of our own institutions. We have asked ourselves questions concerning internal structures, distributive justice, financial policy and moral responsibility.

In our time of reflection we have explored these questions and many more. In the next few days we will hear how the Sisters of Mercy in Australia and Papua New Guinea plan to respond to these challenges.⁵⁶

Valda's assessment of the National Assembly and its influence on future developments in the history of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia is noteworthy.

In terms of 'critical events' in the process of change leading to the new structure of governance ...[this was] the most significant event. The Assembly served as a reference point, a watershed in time, around which could be described the many changes that have taken place since then in the Mercy Order. The changing attitudes of the Sisters, towards their own group and each other and the relationship between individual groups and the national body, could all be discussed in terms of the

It enabled processes begun decades ago to move quickly to a conclusion and herald in a new era.

*At this point a strong groundswell of opinion from the Sisters revealed the need to hasten the formulation of a proposal for a new structure of governance for the Mercy Order in Australia.*⁵⁸

The Executive Director of the Conference, Patricia Pak Poy held similar views on the critical impact of the Assembly.

*The Assembly was an important step in this ... [unification process] as it expressed the unity of spirit already existing in the Conference. It also showed the potential for real cooperation and collaboration across the member groups.*⁵⁹

¹ See, for example, the encyclical *Sponsa Christi* which, while being addressed to contemplative nuns, nevertheless is specific concerning the wishes of the Pope in regard to union or federation of independent religious houses. *Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII: Sponsa Christi* (November 21, 1950), available from the following website:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_pxiia_pc_19501121_sponsa-christi_fr.html, downloaded 20/01/10.

² Address of His Holiness Pope Pius XII to the Superiors General of Religious Orders and Institutes of Women, Castel Gondolfo, Monday 15 September 1952, AISMA U401.2.

³ It seems that Carysfort Park had circularised all Mercy groups in the world. AISMA U203.1.

⁴ It is interesting to speculate on the reasons why these two congregations were not represented and on the implications of this for later developments.

⁵ Raphael, Mother M., and Celestine, Sister M., *As Gentle Rain*, Sydney (1960), pp.139-40.

⁶ Paolo Marella was Apostolic Delegate to Australia from 1948-1953.

⁷ Minutes of the Meeting of the Superioresses of Australian Sisters of Mercy, 6/12/1952. Address of the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop P Marella, AISMA U101/1.

⁸ *Annals* 1954, AISMA U203.1/1.

⁹ See Raphael & Celestine, *loc.cit.* Three leaders were absent from this meeting: Mother M. Norbert of All Hallows was about to go out of office and was waiting directions from Rome regarding elections, Mother Wilfrid of North Sydney was ill and did not send a substitute and Mother M. Philip of West Perth was not invited, Sr M. Philippa, Secretary General of Melbourne, still being under the assumption that West Perth was a branch house of Victoria Square. See Essay JOT pp.19-20.

¹⁰ See *History in the Making*, AISMA U 401.2.1. p.2.

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp.2-6.

¹² *Annals* 1954 p. 4. AISMA U203.1.1

¹³ Minutes of meeting held in Melbourne, *ibid*.

¹⁴ AISMA U401.2/1 pp. 23ff. The Mothers General of the nine congregations not in favour of union were initially given six weeks to change their minds and another final chance to join early in 1954. A letter from Mother M Bonaventure to one of her colleagues states: *We were given the opportunity of signing the Petition which we declined to do as there were not incorporated in it the conditions we thought essential*. Archives Grafton, Box 4. It seems, however, that there was no positive attempt to 'woo' the nine. Essay JOT, p.23.

¹⁵ The 'Washington Constitutions' were taken as a model.

¹⁶ See *Petition to the Holy See for Union of the Sisters of Mercy in Australia and New Zealand*, December 8 1953, AISMA U805.1

¹⁷ See Diagram 5, p.34.

¹⁸ Father William Keane had helped several congregations of religious in revising their constitutions and was asked by the Apostolic Delegate to assist the Sisters of Mercy. His diary from March to September 1954 is in the Archives of the Institute. AISMA U203.22/2.

¹⁹ Copy of letter of Archbishop Daniel Mannix supporting the petition of the establishment of the Union, undated, AISMA, U805.1.

²⁰ See Letter from Mother M. Bonaventure to Mother Raphael of Grafton, 26/02/1954. Grafton Archives, Box 4.

²¹ *ibid*. See also Minutes of the Meeting of Mercy Delegates, Melbourne, 9 September, 1953, which record that a ballot was taken on whether guimpes should be black or white. Eight opted for white; seven for black, so 'no final decision was announced' AISMA U401.2. Guimpes of the Union sisters were officially changed to black after the first Union Chapter. A letter from Sr M. Paul, Provincial of Bathurst, dated 2nd September, 1954, states: *We will assume our black guimpes on the feast of Our Lady's Nativity, September 8th. You have all received a pattern, and, as it is holiday time, you will be able to get them made in the short time allowed*. AISMA U401.2.

²² Letter from P.A. Laranona, Secretary, to His Excellency the Most Rev. Romolo Carboni, Apostolic Delegate, November 30, 1954, AISMA U806.

²³ *Brief Resume of Events which led to the Federation of the Sisters of Mercy* (Copy provided by Archivist, Parramatta).

²⁴ Letter from Archbishop Romolo Carboni, Apostolic Delegate, to Mother M Paul O'Connell, 27 March 1954. AISMA U806. An identical letter, addressed to Mother M Raphael, exists in Grafton Archives indicating that it went to those congregations who had not opted for union as well as those who had done so.

²⁵ Even though most congregations had previously put the matter to a vote, a second vote was held in some houses: See letter of Mother M Raphael April 1, 1954 in which, while reminding Sisters of the need to vote according to their conscience, she encourages sisters to adhere to the decision they had previously taken with regard to Federation. Grafton Archives, Box 4.

²⁶ *Brief Resume of Events which led to the Federation of the Sisters of Mercy*.

²⁷ Mother Bonaventure in a letter to Mother Andrew referred to her as *the instrument chosen by God to do the work of unifying the many groups of Sisters of Mercy in Australia and possibly New Zealand*. Copy of letter of March 7 1954, Grafton Archives, Box 4.

²⁸ As Mother Andrew stated: *I am sure we all agree that excellent work has been done in adapting the Baggot Street Rule to Australian conditions*. Letter to Reverend Mother, Grafton, from Mother M Andrew, Parramatta, 22 October, 1954, Grafton Archives, Box 4.

²⁹ Archives, Convent of Mercy, Grafton, Box 4. The archives of all members of the Federation would contain a copy of this document.

³⁰ See Diagram 7. p.31.

³¹ See *Decree of Sacred Congregation of Religious* 1556/55, 21 November 1955, private translation by Dr T Connolly, Archives Grafton Box 4; and Circular letter of Mother M Raphael to all sisters of Grafton congregation, 24 September 1956, *ibid*.

Brisbane congregation had for some time been engaged in adapting to Australian conditions a 1953 version of the Dublin Constitutions, known as the Carysfort Constitutions. The Washington Constitutions also were used. When the petition for forming the Federation went to Rome, permission was requested to use for an experimental period the Constitutions developed by Brisbane.

³² Address of His Excellency the Most Reverend Romolo Carboni, Apostolic Delegate in Australia, New Zealand and Oceania, to the first meeting of the Australian Federation of the Sisters of Mercy at Ballarat Victoria, on 19th January, 1957. AISMA U 805.1.

³³ Essay JOT p.21

³⁴ *id.* Father J Hogan is quoted as stating that 'many [sisters] confessed later that they had no clear idea [of the real meaning] of the two words Federation and Union'.

³⁵ Dissertation HD, p.108.

³⁶ It is said that Bishop Patrick Farrelly of Lismore strongly advised the Grafton Congregation against joining a Union; Thomas Cahill of Cairns at first opposed the Federation, then supported it. *ibid.*

³⁷ Record of Interview conducted on Monday 29 September, 2007, with Sr Joan Flynn (West Perth) at her residence at 254 Camberwarra Drive Craigie, in the presence of Sr Beverley Stott, Congregation Leader.

³⁸ Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis* proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, October 28, 1965, # 22. Available on line: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents See also letter from Mother Damian to Mother Patricia 13 August 1966, AISMA U401.2.

³⁹ The invitation was no doubt in part prompted by the association which Mother M Cyril and later Mother Marie Therese, both of Bathurst, maintained with Sisters of Mercy of the Americas whom the former had met in Rome in 1952. See Sr Maria Joseph Carr, unpublished manuscript prepared for Sr Dorothy Campion, May 2002, private paper provided to the writer.

⁴⁰ The minutes of the 5th Biennial Federation Conference Meeting indicate that on Sunday 25 May, 1966, Mother M Thecla of Parramatta read a paper encouraging an approach to the Sisters of the Australian Union for some form of link up. She also indicated that in order to comply with the expressed wish of the Holy See some move should be made here in Australia for closer cooperation which may eventually lead to a world Federation. Minutes of Federation Council Meetings, AISMA F204.

⁴¹ Mother M Alexius Cunningham (Singleton), Mother M Cyril Ivers (Bathurst) Mother M Ignatius McGilvray (General Councillor), Mother M Damian Duncombe (Brisbane), Mother M Thecla Kerwick (Parramatta) and Mother M Philomena Rymian (North Sydney). *History in the Making*, 3 (1966-1972), p.4. AISMA U401.2/3.

⁴² Attendees are listed in *History in the Making op.cit.*, p.14; three sisters from New Zealand were present as well. *Chronicle*, 3 (1969-1978), p.2. AISMA U203.1/3.

⁴³ *History in the Making*, op.cit., pp.14-16.

⁴⁴ A member of the Union, in an informal interview, described her feelings thus: *We were all thrilled! We all came together! That's what we wanted!*

⁴⁵ Dissertation HD, p.121.

⁴⁶ Letter from Mother Damian to the Mother Superior of Grafton 15/12/1954, Grafton Archives, Box 4.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Dissertation HD, p. 134, n.115.

⁴⁸ Religious Institutes had been directed to hold extraordinary General Chapters and to revise their constitutions in keeping with the provisions of *Perfectae Caritatis* and other documents of Vatican II.

⁴⁹ *History in the Making*, 3, op.cit., p.21. AISMA U401.2/3.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p.22.

⁵¹ For example Xavier Institute at Lavender Bay NSW and Assumption Institute in Melbourne .

⁵² Brief History, p.6.

⁵³ *ibid.* See also *Circular to all Sisters of Mercy in Australia* from Sr Maria Joseph (Carr) Chair of the Executive Council of the National Conference of Sisters of Mercy, n.d. (between 15 August and 18 September 1975). AISMA C805.3.

⁵⁴ Minutes, Ninth Biennial Federation Council Meeting, AISMA F204.38

⁵⁵ Sr Maria Joseph Carr, unpublished manuscript, prepared for Sr Dorothy Campion, May 2002.

⁵⁶ Address of Sr Valda Ward to the First National Assembly, Sisters of Mercy, Australia, Melbourne 1977, *Mercy and Justice*, official record of the First National Assembly, Sisters of Mercy, Australia. 1977, AISMA C805.

⁵⁷ Thesis, VW p.72.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Pak Poy, P., *Report to the National Council of the National Conference of Sisters of Mercy*, September 1977-April 1978, AISMA C504.3.

CHAPTER 4: THE INSTITUTE OF SISTERS OF MERCY OF AUSTRALIA

The 'groundswell of opinion' referred to in the previous chapter had been rising for some time. Although the National Conference had provided opportunities for common experiences among all sisters and had promoted unity through visits of the Executive Director, it was evident that, as a national body, it had some serious structural deficiencies. To begin with, it had no intrinsic authority – a situation made manifest when the mission was established at Aitape in Papua New Guinea.¹ As well, the complexity of the issues with which the Conference was called to deal demanded a level of leadership it was unable to deliver. One of the consulting canonists summed it up neatly when he advised:

*The Conference ... is not an end in itself. It provides a road to the goal of national collaboration and is a means of strengthening unit ... At the present time the Conference, of itself can only offer stimulation and inspiration.*²

Moves Towards Unity

From the late sixties there had been formal moves to devise a single entity to which all Australian Sisters of Mercy would belong. At the Fifth Biennial Federation Conference Meeting, Mother Mary Austin from Townsville, speaking on behalf of her congregation, made a strong appeal for all to work more directly towards the establishment of one body – the Sisters of Mercy Australia.³ And she was not alone in urging action in this direction. Mention has already been made of the work of Sister Maria Joseph Carr, Superior General of the Union 1972-1978. During her term of leadership the issue of the ultimate union of all Australian Sisters of Mercy was never far from the top of the agenda.⁴ At the 1975 meeting of the National Council of the Conference of which she was a member, there was one principal issue for discussion: a new form of association for all Sisters of Mercy.

Sisters present at this meeting expressed the hope that the new body would give rise to greater apostolic vitality, allowing the Sisters of Mercy to become a stronger force and honouring the unity which the majority of sisters believed

had developed. Aided by input from Sister Silverius Shields, a draft structure was developed for such a body. This was to be discussed and reviewed the following year.⁵ One of the Canonical advisers to the sisters had already suggested that

*the Holy See might be approached to disband each of the existing groups - Federation and Union - and that the Sisters meet to establish some form of association with a central secretariat.*⁶

This seemed to be a workable plan: modify the Conference in such a way that it could supersede the Union and the Federation.

Later in 1975 the sisters attending the Conference of the International Union of Superiors General in Rome sought advice on that matter from a representative of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes.⁷ They were informed that, in its current form, the National Conference was simply an



Executive Council of the National Conference of Sisters of Mercy: L-R, Back: Sisters Patricia Pak Poy, Gabrielle Jennings, Catharine Courtney, Patricia Kerin, Marie Gaudry, Bernadine Evens. Front Valda Ward, Judith Carney.

association, the statutes of which would need to be changed substantially to accommodate the incorporation of the Union and the Federation.⁸

The momentum of the National Assembly carried the movement forward. The majority of the sisters knew that they wanted unity. What needed to be established was the way in which this unity was to be achieved as well as the structure of the unifying body. A working party was set up to

'explore ways of making the governing and administrative structure of the Conference ... such that it would possess adequate authority, representation and executive power in the event of the Conference's becoming the sole body of Sisters of Mercy in Australia'.⁹

A New Administrative Structure

As alternative models were presented and discussed, it soon became obvious that an entirely new administrative structure was needed to replace the Union and the Federation – a request for which came from the Union Chapter of 1978. With Federation Superiors General present as participant observers, this Chapter worked at producing models for a new structure.¹⁰



Delegates to the historic fifth General Chapter of the Union.

At the end of the Chapter it was proposed that once the first draft of a model was prepared, it would be presented to all sisters, and once they had time to discuss it and respond, it would be considered at a special national meeting to which the Superiors General and one elected representative of each

night, at the final session of the meeting delegates accepted unanimously the first draft of a new organisational structure to replace the two existing entities of the Union and the Federation. The key issue at stake had been how to balance congregational autonomy with the authority invested in the proposed national body. Some wanted precise delineation of authority; others wanted more flexibility. Each group vigorously defended its position - as one participant remarked: 'It was not all easy going'.¹³ Thus, while the first draft may have been accepted, there was a plethora of detail to be agreed upon and some participants were dubious as to whether the proposed union would ever eventuate.¹⁴

Following on from Gunnedah there was a great deal of action. By-laws were drafted, responded to and prepared for discussion and decision in October. Major Superiors had agreed to undertake a programme of education throughout their congregations and provinces, giving every sister an opportunity to express agreement or dissent with the model. It was reported that

*the response throughout the whole of Australia had been overwhelmingly positive, although there remained, predictably enough, some hesitation and doubts among a very small minority.*¹⁵



During the Gunnedah Meeting: L-R, Sisters Judith Carney, Gabrielle Jennings, Catharine Courtney, Marie Gaudry.

At the second session at Ryde, held in October 1979, despite the apprehension of some of the delegates, the landscape had changed. The 'hesitations and doubts' were given due consideration, but agreement was reached, autonomy resting with the individual groups. Of the climate at that meeting, Father Esler observed: 'some of the tension had disappeared; there was far more willingness'.



In Rome: Srs Valda Ward, Dorothy Campion and Fr Jim Esler SM.

After several minor alterations to the Constitution on Governance, in which the best features of both Union and Federation were said to have been incorporated, the advisors decided it was ready to go to Rome for approval.¹⁶ Dorothy Campion, Superior General of the Union and Valda Ward, President of the Federation and of the Conference, were appointed to take it, with letters of support from the Bishops of each diocese where the sisters lived or ministered, to the Sacred Congregation for Religious. They were accompanied by the two canonists, Fathers Esler and Connolly.

Negotiations in Rome

Two key figures who assisted negotiations in Rome were Sister Mary Linscott SND and Father Augustine Mayer, OSB. The former was the English-speaking representative on the Congregation for Religious, the latter, secretary to Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, head of the Congregation. The apparent ambiguity in lines of authority which, from the beginning, some canonists feared would

be a stumbling block, was of little consequence to Father Mayer, since it resembled the Benedictine structures with which he was familiar.

Nevertheless, it required an intervention by Father Esler to obtain the sanction of the full council of the Sacred Congregation. Confronted by an overwhelming 'no' vote from the assembled canonists, Father Esler was asked his opinion. His reply that the type of organisation the sisters were seeking was against neither natural law nor the Gospel won the day. In his words,

approval was given subject to the sisters having the last say.¹⁷



Working on 'the document': Dr T Connolly with Srs Valda Ward and Mary Linscott SND.

The relative ease with which the Constitution on Governance gained approval from the Congregation for Religious can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, there were people 'on the spot' to make sure the document did not sit on the desk of some bureaucrat, there to 'wait its turn'. Two of these people, Valda and Dorothy, played a very significant role. Described as 'tenacious and obedient', each night they made the suggested alterations and returned with the document the following day. In addition, the influence of the two canonists, Fathers Connolly and Esler was unique. As modifications or amendments were

suggested, they could provide immediate and accurate advice. Actually, it was they who sat up at night, typing in canonical language the revisions to the documents which the two sisters then presented. However, the master stroke, according to Father Jim Esler, was the letters of approval from the Bishops demonstrating to the officials that the proposal would be of benefit to the Australian Church. Such a move had hitherto never been made and it seems the members of the Congregation for Religious were impressed. They were impressed as well by the extent of consultation which had been engaged in with regard to the Constitution. The fact that every Sister of Mercy in Australia had been given the opportunity to study the draft document, make her comments on it and have them considered was proof positive of the democratic processes which had been followed.

Apparently, during negotiations in Rome, on more than one occasion representatives from the Sacred Congregation asked the group if the real desire of the sisters was not to become one institute in every respect. The representatives replied that while this may be a future development, it was not the mind of the sisters in 1980.¹⁸

The Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia

On 28 January 1980, the formal request for in-principle approval of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia was made.¹⁹ Three days later the news was received: 'the Sacred Congregation views favourably the project submitted'.²⁰ In June 1981, this 'favourable view' was validated by a decree which stated:

*... Having carefully considered the matter and being informed of the favourable opinion of the Local Ordinaries ... [the Holy See] ... erects the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia.*²¹

The Conference was given the task of preparing for the inaugural National Chapter to be held in two sessions during 1981. The sisters in each congregation or province of the Federation or Union having formally ratified the new canonical entity, the Decree of Establishment of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia was proclaimed by the Apostolic Delegate on December 15, 1981. This was followed immediately by the signing of the Document of

Dissolution of the Union and the Federation by the members of the General Council of the Union and the Federation Council.²²



First Institute Leadership Team with Archbishop Barbarito: Sisters Dorothy Campion, Pauline Smith, Margaret McGovern.

Office bearers were elected: Sister Dorothy Campion as President, Sister Margaret McGovern as Vice President and Sister Pauline Smith as Secretary.²³ Initially the Institute consisted of the seventeen Australian groups but subsequently two other groups, Papua New Guinea and Pakistan, gained representation.²⁴ Their story will be told below.

This, of course, was simply the beginning. Dorothy Campion remembers the National Executive Council trying to work out what they were supposed to be doing. Without any explicit mandate from the Chapter, theirs was the task of 'making the path by walking'.

*We knew there was going to be work to be done in trying to get the sisters to accept the new reality. They had accepted it in their minds but to really identify with it was another matter. So we took unity as being paramount in the beginning. We visited all the places, talked with the sisters and stayed there and met them.*²⁵

Patricia Fox
 Bernadette J. Woods
 Patricia L. Poir
 Mary Clare Lohes
 Bette D. Dand, OMI
 Frances Watt
 Bernadine O'Brien
 Marie Agnes Carey
 Veronica Goodwin
 Elizabeth Devine
 M. Rose Beard
 Sheila Lamb
 Laureen Cannon
 Maria Cleary
 Angela Jordan
 Marie Therese Langan
 Mary Christina Dwyer
 Ruth Beady
 Ellen Conway
 Germaine O'Garra
 Pauline Smith
 Dorothy Campion
 Mary Harrington
 Patricia E. Powell
 Patricia Lake
 Maria Joseph Carr
 Betty M. Wylie
 Gabrielle Janing
 Elizabeth Blomman
 Aileen Harrington
 Patricia Dawson
 Jennifer Bentley
 Bernadine Hughes
 Rita M. O'Malley
 Denise Burns
 Margaret Rush
 Sheila Crossley
 Annette Tinkler
 Sandra Tinkler
 Mary Anne Hayes
 Patricia Hayes
 Mary Paul Schofield
 Josephine Byrnes
 Margaret McEwen
 Maureen McEwen
 Gabrielle Foley
 Mary Emma O'Connell
 Regina McEwen

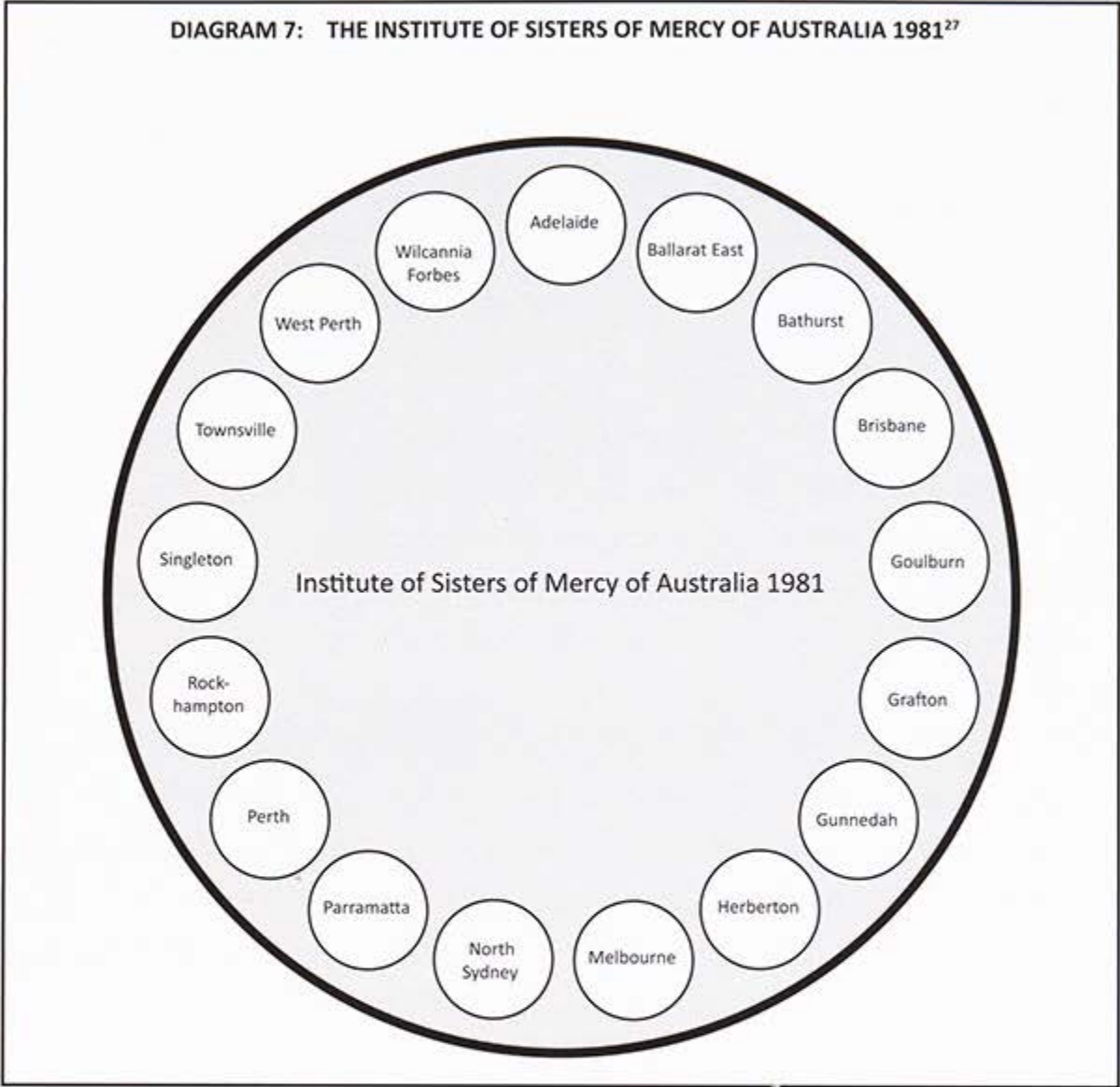
1981

Signatures of Delegates to the First National Chapter of the Institute.

At this point the Sisters of Mercy of Australia were confident that the structures which had been set in place were the most satisfactory outcome of the gradual movement towards unification which had been taking place over the past thirty years. As one sister described it:

This unification is one adapted to Australian conditions, geographical, cultural and political; it is adapted to the needs of the Australian Church, facilitating the effective and appropriate

service of local needs, while being flexible enough to embrace a national vision; above all it has grown out of mercy history and is faithful to the charism of the foundress and of the Congregation.²⁶



Factors Influencing the Change

Having traced the history of the formation of the Institute from the first foundations, the expansion and the amalgamation into smaller units, through Union, Federation and Conference and culminating in the Institute, it may be worthwhile to ask some questions as to what actually occurred over that thirty-year period. What were the main factors which influenced the decision to form the Institute? Why were the forces, so strong in the early fifties, which led to the formation of the Union and the Federation no longer important in the late seventies?



Delegates to the National Chapter: Kensington 1981.

One can identify an attitudinal change among the sisters as well as a generational change. Up until 1950 there had been little movement among congregations - some members of one congregation may have stayed with another for study purposes or for medical reasons, but generally this was an exception. Mostly people remained within their own congregational boundaries.

All this changed in the sixties. We cannot pretend that the political and societal changes which began in the sixties did not affect religious life. Without discussing each in detail there is no doubt that post-war immigration, the decline of British influence, the Vietnam War, the election of a Labor Government and the raft of political and social reforms it instigated influenced profoundly the attitudes and values of all Australians, religious included.

With the increase in the number of sisters gaining university qualifications, with increased mobility and particularly with increased missionary activity, the old attitudinal barriers were seen to have little relevance and the underlying commitment to vowed religious life as a Sister of Mercy took precedence.



Principals' Conference Canberra, 1972. Group of Principals with Mother Marie Therese Moore, Professors Fitzgerald and Walker and Mr Ross Thomas.

This was particularly evident in Papua New Guinea where, initially, foundations were made either from the Union or the Federation. After independence was gained in that country, the local boundaries became more fluid and sisters who had previously taught in schools in one region found themselves in ministries such as Teachers Colleges where they were no longer tied to a particular region or group; projects were managed by sisters without any reference to their governance structures at home. The Aitape foundation (referred to earlier) demonstrated the inability of Union, Federation or Conference to sponsor joint projects and pointed clearly to the need to develop a governance structure which could operate on behalf of all. A major initiative came from the sisters themselves: by wanting to unite as one group of Sisters of Mercy of Papua New Guinea and wanting to facilitate the acceptance of indigenous women into one Congregation, they demonstrated that the divisions in Australia were

meaningless to them and their situation uncovered possibilities which the congregational groups in Australia began to see were within their reach. The questions which arose pushed the boundaries in Australia; major superiors with personnel in PNG, in meeting to address issues which had emerged there, applied the same solutions to the Australian scene. Papua New Guinea was, in one way, the harbinger for union in Australia.

One of the outstanding achievements of the National Conference was to sponsor a plethora of joint projects: common constitutions, habit, formation, social justice, education and health care. Australia wide, sisters were meeting and collaborating in ventures, sharing ideas and resources. The unity which they experienced needed to be expressed in formal structures. As sisters grew in fellowship with their peers from other congregations the divisions of Union



Sisters at Xavier Institute of Sister Formation, 1968. Eight Mercy groups were represented.

or Federation were perceived as quite irrelevant: 'We are Sisters of Mercy' was the standard reply of students at Xavier Institute of Sister Formation to the question as to whether they were members of the Union or the Federation.

During the seventies, as well, a new generation of leaders had emerged to whom the distinctions of Union and Federation were not as important as they had been to the Mothers of the fifties. They did not carry the history of those early days when superiors felt pressured by the Apostolic Delegate or the local Bishop and had to assert their independence any way they could. Furthermore, having experienced both types of governance over a thirty-year

period, they could appreciate that, in one sense, the issue of local autonomy was a matter of semantics - what the Federation described as 'autonomy', the Union described as 'subsidiarity' - and that all were seeking maximum collaboration and maximum freedom to respond in mercy within the local church. They had observed that

while the Union had canonically and constitutionally the full powers of a centralised government, its whole history was one of devolution of powers to the provincial level, of allowing for local initiatives, of permitting and fostering diversity, of encouraging preservation of provincial identity. Paradoxically enough ... the Federation council, while emphasising autonomy as a cornerstone of the edifice of Federation, achieved a remarkable degree of unity of policy and practice, comparable to that achieved by the Union system of government.²⁸

Events such as the Assembly in 1977 provided a major incentive to unite. At the Assembly the underlying unity of all Sisters of Mercy of Australia was obvious. People began asking publicly why this was not echoed in structures. This was the grass-roots desire for unity. It was not in response to the wish of the Pope or the Mother Superior. Everyone wanted it and was prepared to own it.



Section of the choir at Mass to celebrate the sesquicentenary of the Sisters of Mercy and the foundation of the Institute: St Mary's Cathedral Sydney December 12 1981.

And there was the basic desire to be one. From the beginning there were sisters who were sure that divisions and distinctions were not in keeping with the vision of Catherine McAuley and they strove to promote a climate in which movement towards unity was made possible. Essentially, all wanted to be one and unity of mind and heart had never been lost. There was just some confusion as to what form of governance the 'one' should follow.

There are those who claim that the Institute was fundamentally a compromise, that the Union gave up the most effective of its structures for those that were, at best, ambiguous and inefficient. In retrospect this critique may be justified. At the time of the foundation of the Institute, hopes were high. In the newsletter following the Ryde meeting can be found the following:

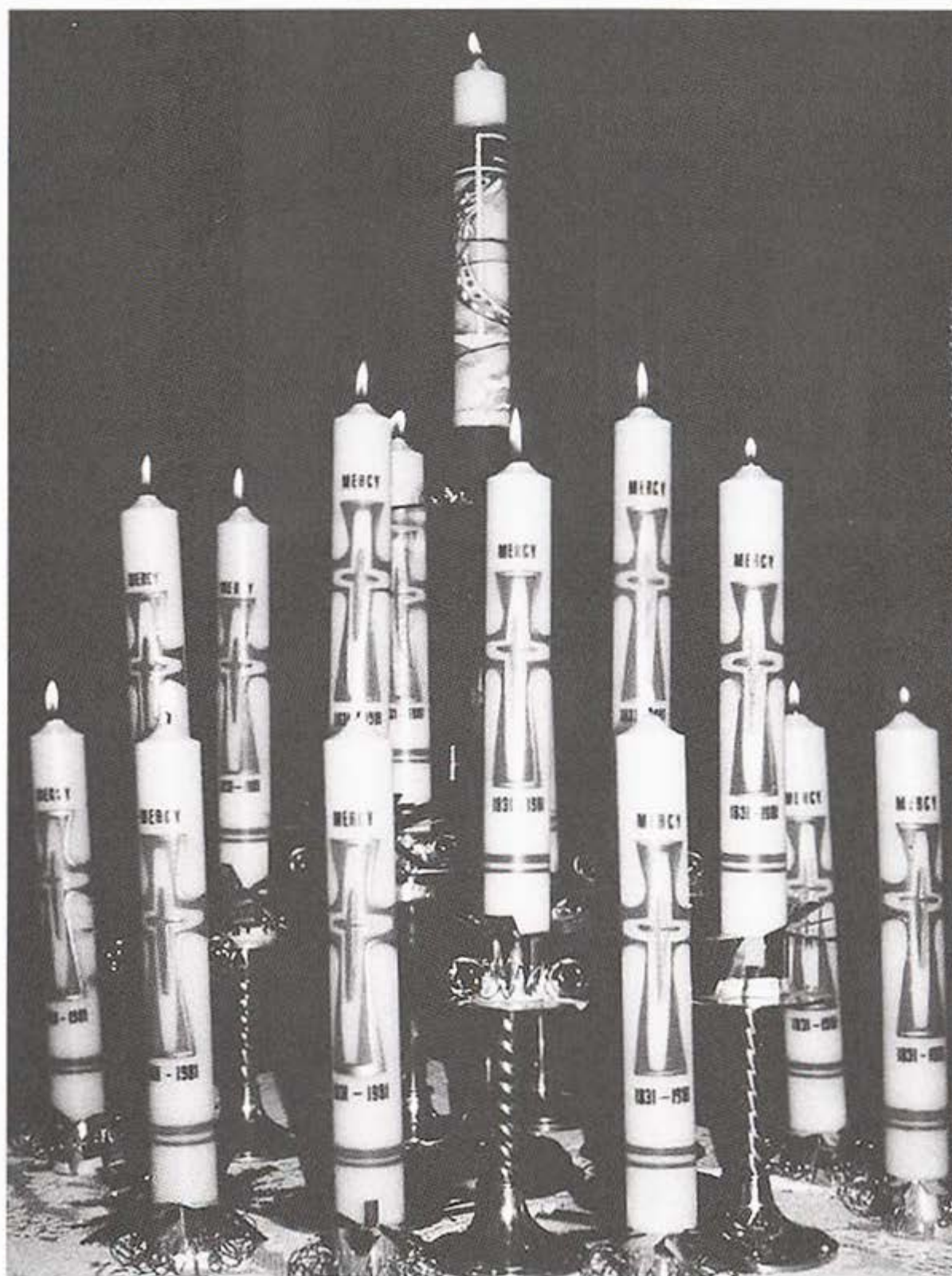
Our hope is that the establishment of such a strong consensus on unification and the minimal structures for [the Institute] will release all the physical, psychic and emotional energy that has been absorbed in this work, so that we can turn our attention and this same energy to our service of the people... We hope the work of the secretariat has contributed to the release of apostolic energy for 'the sake of truth' and 'in the cause of right'.²⁹

Over the past thirty years there have been many evaluations, explorations and examinations of the structures of the Institute in an effort to make them more effective and efficient and to increase the sense of identity among its members. These will be discussed below in the section which treats structural change. At this point it is important to consider the events of 1981 as a watershed and to question whether at that time the congregations could possibly have progressed further along the path to complete unity. Father Jim Esler, who walked those years in close association with the sisters, does not think so. Tortuous the path may have been, heady may have been the expectations but ultimately reality prevailed.

This [the decision to form the Institute] was a modest beginning,

he asserts.

I personally never thought it was the last thing that the Sisters of Mercy would do. But it was all they could manage at the time.³⁰



¹ See below pp. 40; 44.

² Connolly, T.J. *Conference, Federation and Union: Present Status of Conference, Federation and Union* September 1977. AISMA C805.

³ See *Records of Federation Council Meetings*, Tuesday 23 May 1967, par 44. AISMA F204.38.

⁴ See letter from Mother M Philomena to Sr Maria Joseph, 21 May 1975: *When you wrote to us after your general Chapter of 1972 and told us of the desire for the Sisters to live and work in closer collaboration with the Federation Sisters, you set in motion a real desire for some stronger bond... We are all praying for the day when the unity which is already in us will be manifested to the People of God.* AISMA C805.

⁵ *Chronicle*, 1969. AISMA U203.1/3.

⁶ *Minutes of Ninth Biennial Federation Council Meeting*, May 12 1975, p.3. AISMA F204.38.83

⁷ They were Sisters Patricia Brown (Grafton), Maria Joseph Carr (Union Generalate) Catharine Courtney (Brisbane) and Patricia Kerin (North Sydney).

⁸ *Report to Members of the National Conference of Sisters of Mercy*, 19/11/1975. AISMA C805.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ The significance of this gesture towards unity by Sr Maria Joseph Carr, in inviting the Superiors General of the Federation to attend this Chapter must not be underestimated.

¹¹ Brief History, p.8.

¹² *Report to the National Council from the Working Party for the Administrative Model for Sisters of Mercy of Australia*, n.d. (Internal evidence suggests date as some time in 1978 prior to the meeting Gunnedah in March 1979).

¹³ Notes provided by Sr Judith Carney 02/06/20. On the matter of authority, see letters of Sr Gabrielle Jennings to Dr T Connolly and Fr Cormac Nagle 15/06/79, also to Srs Valda Ward and Dorothy Campion, 14/06/79. AISMA C805.

¹⁴ Ryan, C.T. 'A Modest Beginning: Creating the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia', *Listen*, 24, ii, (2006) p.5. Also interview with Dorothy Campion 18/02/10.

¹⁵ Brief History, p.10.

¹⁶ The Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Barbarito, gave his support and encouragement to this course of action. Ryan, *op.cit.*, p.6.

¹⁷ The Cardinal had insisted: *It must go back to each of the seventeen branches and they must reaffirm that this is what they want.* *ibid.*, p.8.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ The decision was made in Rome to name the new entity the 'Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia' rather than the 'Congregation of the Australian Sisters of Mercy, 'Institute' being a more general term canonically which would allow organic development. Interview with Dorothy Campion 18/02/10.

²⁰ AISMA U 807.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *Proceedings of the First National Chapter*, 15/12/81, minutes, p. 3. See also ISMA Chapter Report, January 1982 which features a photograph of several sisters signing the Document of Dissolution.

²³ *ibid.*, pp. 4-6.

²⁴ Representatives from Papua New Guinea had been admitted to the First National Chapter, earning the Chapter a reprimand by Dr Connolly for acting unconstitutionally since Papua New Guinea was not a canonically-constituted congregation. Minutes of the First National Chapter, 11/12/1981.

²⁵ Interview with Dorothy Campion, 18/02/10.

²⁶ Brief History, p.11.

²⁷ In 2006, following a vote at the Institute National Chapter, Papua New Guinea became a member of the Institute as an autonomous region.

²⁸ Brief History, p. 10.

²⁹ Newsletter, December 1979.

³⁰ Ryan, C.T., *loc.cit.*



National Conference of Sisters of Mercy (Union & Federation) 1967.

CHAPTER 5: INSTITUTE COLLABORATIVE MINISTRIES (NATIONAL PROJECTS)

1. Papua New Guinea

In his address to the first meeting of the Federation sisters at Ballarat, the Apostolic Delegate predicted that the Union and Federation would together bring a new life, a rejuvenation, to the Sisters of Mercy of Australia. He went on to refer specifically to the missionary endeavours in Papua New Guinea which, he declared

will do much to deepen the present high spirituality of the Mercy Sisters as well as be of tremendous assistance to our needy people in those areas.¹

Evangelisation of Papua New Guinea and the wider Pacific region was a cause close to the Archbishop's heart. However, other factors contributed to the interest of Australian religious in these regions. Geographically, Papua New Guinea was Australia's nearest neighbour; politically, the country was an Australian Protectorate. Moreover, Australians felt they owed the people of Papua New Guinea a particular debt of gratitude, as during the Second World War, the peoples of PNG had assisted Australian soldiers with great courage and loyalty. Requests for sisters and brothers to assist in education and health services in the Pacific region were thus bound to find a favourable hearing from Australian religious leaders.

On the invitation of the local bishop, four sisters from the Australian Union of the Sisters of Mercy commenced ministry in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea in the diocese of Goroka in 1956.²

They established schools and prepared adults to be catechists. A year later a group of Brisbane sisters established a mission station at Kunjingini in the East Sepik region of the Wewak diocese, involving themselves in education and health care, having been invited there by Bishop Leo Arkfeld.³ Further requests followed and further foundations were made in these two dioceses, spreading, in 1965, into the diocese of Mount Hagen. The work expanded - adult catechesis, primary, secondary and upper secondary education,



Off to Goroka: 1956.

teacher education, administration, health care, pastoral work and community development called on the sisters' ingenuity and commitment, and during the next decade several more foundations were made.

Over a period of fifty years more than 170 sisters came from various Australian Congregations to minister in various provinces.⁴ In all their projects the Australian sisters collaborated closely in local initiatives, working within and respecting the Melanesian culture and supporting the growth of the local church.

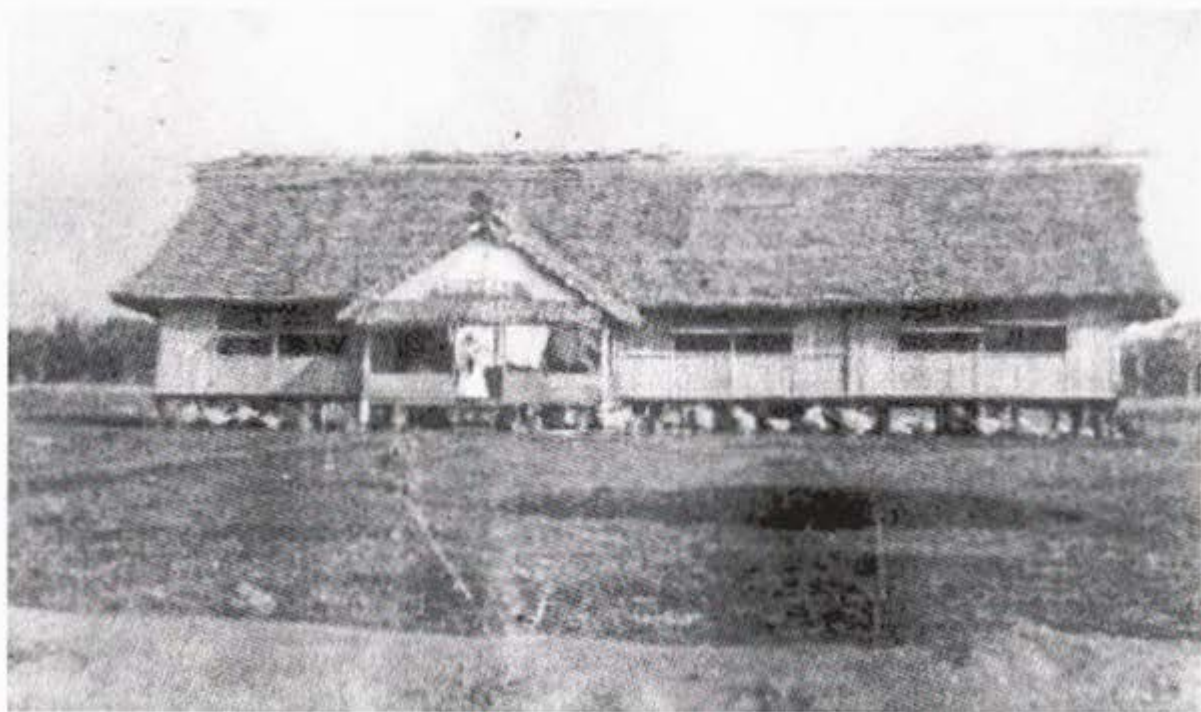


Sister Ireneaus Carroll teaching at Tafeto.

On a broader canvas, in the early 1970s the Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea experienced a period of renewal. Implementing the insights of Vatican Council II with regard to church and mission, the Church in Papua New Guinea involved the sisters in higher education in institutes such as the Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service and the Liturgical and Catechetical Institute as well as in catechist training centres,

pastoral centres and seminaries.⁵ At the same time the country was moving towards self-government, culminating in the granting of Independence in 1975. This also required a shift in focus for ministry. A major task was to empower the local people, giving them the skills necessary to take on the responsibilities associated with Independence. The young country would need future leaders and Sisters of Mercy were among those who assisted in training them. Here was a classic illustration of the mercy paradigm: local needs called forth local responses and in both the political and the religious setting the sisters in Papua New Guinea made courageous responses to those needs.

They experienced the inevitable tension between community and ministry and grappled together to find creative and constructive solutions for changing times. There were often no simple, and very few unanimous solutions to complex everyday problems of mission.⁶



Convent Torembe.

One of the consequences of the shift in ministry focus was that the boundaries of the geographical and administrative structures under which the sisters were living became increasingly porous. The needs of the local church provided a greater imperative than the boundaries of Federation, Union or Conference.



Staff: Mercy College Yarapos 1973.

The unity of spirit the sisters experienced expressed itself in an increasingly insistent movement for actual unification among them. This, of course, mirrored the movement in Australia which by close of the 1970s had developed its own momentum. However, in one sense Papua New Guinea can be viewed as a microcosm as developments there pushed the canonical boundaries and forced the Major Superiors to make decisions about a form of governance which would unite all Sisters of Mercy.⁷ A case in point was the establishment of the mission at Aitape by the Conference of Sisters of Mercy. At its first general meeting the National Council of the Conference agreed to send sisters from Melbourne, Goulburn and Perth together with a lay missionary from Ballarat to staff the hospital in Raihu.⁸ This was the first inter-congregational foundation in Papua New Guinea. Hitherto sisters had been responsible to, and were the responsibility of, their own congregation or province. It was later pointed out to them by a canonist that the Conference did not possess the authority to make such a decision but by then it was too late; sisters were on the ground and were busily engaged in their ministry.⁹ However, this is not to say that there were not difficulties with regard to where responsibility for the personnel of the mission ultimately lay. As a group, the sisters did not belong to a canonically constituted congregation. Subsequently the Melbourne Province took over responsibility for the foundation.

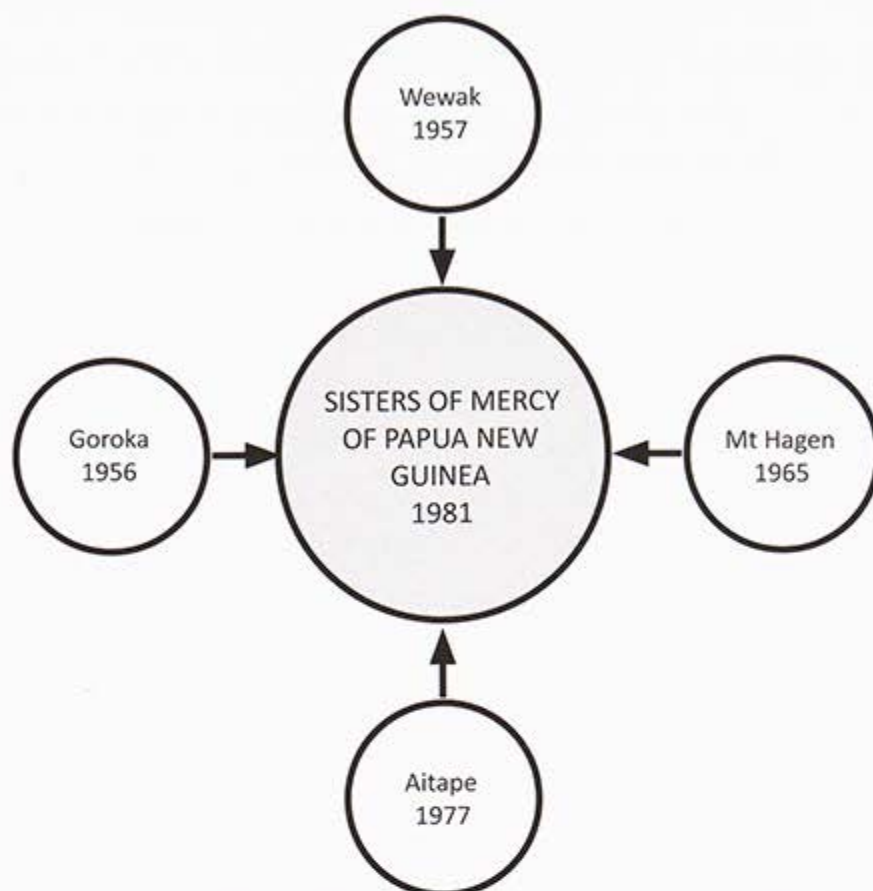
In the meantime the two groups of sisters in the Highlands began to take more decisive steps towards uniting. In 1979 the Australian leaders of these groups, Patricia Kerin and Valda Ward, met with the sisters from Goroka and Mount Hagen, a meeting which led to a combined meeting of all sisters in Papua New Guinea in April the following year. The Aitape group, neither Union nor Federation, asked for a place at this meeting and indicated their readiness to be included in any exploration of unification structures. From this meeting came the decision to accept indigenous women as postulants, and to request a sister to promote and coordinate the movement towards unification and to liaise with the nascent Australian Institute. Already the sisters in Papua New Guinea were envisaging the formation of a local Congregation of Sisters of Mercy, convinced that the local church was better served by a united Mercy presence.

In 1981 a diocesan structure was accepted. Sisters from Aitape, Goroka, Mount Hagen and Wewak became the Sisters of Mercy of Papua New Guinea, each with its own superior and authorised by the Melbourne, Adelaide, North Sydney and Brisbane congregations respectively.¹⁰ As liaison person, Sister Stancia Cawte interviewed each sister and concluded that unity would give security to the indigenous sisters wanting to join and would allow the total group to achieve greater efficiency in ministry.



Pioneers of Goroka with Mother Mary Patricia and the Apostolic Delegate.

DIAGRAM 8: THE SISTERS OF MERCY OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA 1981



The report also recommended the election of a national superior who would work to unite the groups and, importantly, be a symbol of unity. At the first Assembly of the Sisters of Mercy of Papua New Guinea in July 1981, Sister Helen O'Brien was elected as the national superior and the leaders of each of the four diocesan regions were designated her leadership team.¹¹ Since, at this stage, the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia had not been formally constituted, these decisions had to be taken to the first Chapter of the Institute where they were ratified.¹²

Membership: Decision to take Papua New Guinean Women into Formation

Initially, any Papua New Guinea nationals aspiring to live religious life as Sisters of Mercy had been directed to join one or other of the national religious congregations. In 1979, however, three indigenous women, Petronia Gawi, Theresia Gongi and Veronica Lokalyo came forward with persistent demands to become Sisters of Mercy, demands which could not be ignored.¹³

At the first gathering of the Sisters of Mercy of Papua New Guinea, to honour their request, and with the awareness that the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia was about to be proclaimed, the decision was made to accept them. Unification of the four regions of Papua New Guinea cleared the way for the establishment of a novitiate and the development of a formation programme. Brisbane congregation accepted the role of authorising congregation for new membership. Within three years the first Papua New Guinean national sister, Petronia Gawi, had made her first profession.



Sisters of Mercy in Papua New Guinea, 1980.

In 1984 the diocesan regions were abolished; councillors henceforth were to be chosen from the total group and a determination was made to move towards forming a single canonical body of Sisters of Mercy of Papua New Guinea. By the time the third National Assembly took place in 1987 there were seven sisters in initial formation. This no doubt contributed to the decision to establish a Congregation of Sisters of Mercy of Papua New Guinea which would reflect the multi-congregational and multi-national characteristics of the present group.¹⁴ A statement outlining the reasons behind this decision asserts:



Sisters of Mercy in Papua New Guinea, 1980.

We see the formation of the Papua New Guinea congregation as a natural evolution of the groups of Sisters of Mercy who have lived in PNG since 1956. It is a sign that the seed that has been planted is growing and coming to maturity, as the Congregation moves from dependence to independence. There is a growing number of Papua New Guinean sisters among the Mercy Sisters of PNG. We are trying to express the mercy spirit in PNG in a Melanesian way so that we become a living witness to mercy in this culture.

Vatican II emphasised that the church should be rooted in local cultures. Our Constitutions also remind us that our tradition leads us to identify with and to be a prophetic witness in, the local church. Being an autonomous congregation will enable us to be, and to be recognised as, a more authentic part of the local church of Papua New Guinea. This recognition of a distinct identity is merely the formalising of the reality that has already taken place. This process is in keeping with the charism of the Mercy Institute which gives as much autonomy as possible at the local level.¹⁵

This, of course, required ratification by the Institute National Chapter of 1988, a ratification which was freely given. Other important developments at this Chapter were the approval of Interim Statutes for Papua New Guinea and the authorisation in principle for a Mercy-owned residence for the sisters.¹⁶



Sisters Veronica Lokalyo, Carmel Burke, Theresia Gongi and Petronia Gawi.

The Chapter established a task force to expedite matters and commissioned research by Sister Deirdre Jordan to assess the readiness of each member of the group to proceed towards congregational status. However, the process received a set-back in October 1990 with the realisation that the group needed a minimum of 40 members before this status could be granted. This was disappointing but in the long run served only to strengthen their resolve. By 1992, with thirteen professed Papua New Guinean sisters and four postulants, the request for autonomous status had gained legitimacy. This was expressed strongly at the Assembly of 1992 concerning which Kath Burke, the second Institute President, observed

the Assembly of 1992 brought to a high-water mark the strength and the depth of the movement towards a Papua New Guinea congregation, one that is not based on numbers but on the 'rightness' of a Melanesian expression of Mercy in Melanesia. The serenity and maturity of the group of women ... undoubtedly purified by their common experience of living through a turbulent period of history – has brought them to an impressive mutuality and realism.¹⁷



PNG Assembly 1997: Mariska Kua, Angeline Singiat, Veronica Lokalyo, Sophie Samiak, Petronia Gawi, Theresia Nanankwien.

Gradually, indigenous sisters were trained in and assumed the tasks of leadership. In 1993 Sister Theresia Nakankwien was elected to the leadership team; in 1997 Sister Mariska Kua took on the role of vicar with Veronica Lokalyo and Sophie Samiak as team members. In subsequent years, as they gained experience and confidence, indigenous sisters were elected to other



Sister Mariska Kua, first indigenous leader of the Sisters of Mercy of Papua New Guinea.

positions of responsibility, culminating in 2003 in the election of Mariska Kua as the first national superior. Sisters were trained in financial matters and engaged in various professional development and spiritual renewal programmes. Such maturing of the national group enabled the sisters in Papua New Guinea to be more outward looking, to involve themselves more with matters of social concern. The report to the Fourth National Chapter records that

Mercy Sisters offer a counter-cultural challenge to PNG society, to traditional and conservative expressions of religious life and of 'church'. They are learning to be proud to be women, able to stand against the tide of custom and tradition.

This was exemplified in the statement issued at the end of the 1997 Assembly:

*We Sisters of Mercy of PNG, witness to Mercy that does Gospel Justice. We pledge ourselves to live this personally, communally and in ministry. We will take, and support public action against oppression and violence. We accept the risk this stand will bring.*¹⁸

More and more the Papua New Guinean sisters continued to take responsibility for the life and future of their group. At the same time, however, they were adamant about wanting to keep strong links between themselves and Australian Mercy.

In 2004 Sister Mariska Kua in her role of national leader Papua New Guinea addressed the Institute Plenary Council concerning the possibility of making application for the Sisters of Mercy of Papua New Guinea to be recognised as an 'autonomous region' within the Institute. Later that year the sisters made the official request.¹⁹ It was evident that the group was ready to take this step. In most of its practices it was already operating that way. Delegates to the fifth Institute Chapter recognised the growth which had occurred in the group over half a century and were convinced of its capacity to be self-governing. They were unanimous in their support of the proposal and, the canonical hurdles having been overcome, this was subsequently endorsed by the Holy See.²⁰ Fittingly, this endorsement was received in 2006, fifty years after the foundation in Goroka. Jubilee celebrations there were



Sister Maryanne Kolkia providing training in budgeting to PNG women.

enhanced by the proclamation by the Institute President, Sister Nerida Tinkler, that Papua New Guinea had been granted the status of an autonomous region within the Institute. Both Nerida and Mariska Kua, the leader of Papua New Guinea, recognised publicly the formative role which the Brisbane congregation had taken with regard to the region.

Support of Papua New Guinea has been a priority of the Institute since its foundation and the fact that the group had 'come of age' did not mean that this support would lessen to any degree. While the leader of Papua New Guinea had long taken her place at meetings of the Institute Plenary Council, under the new arrangements she would have an independent and equal voice in all Institute matters. The Congregation in Papua New Guinea is self-governing, receives and professes its own members and initiates and conducts its own ministries. Sisters are involved in health care, teaching, community development, leadership and religious formation. To facilitate their ministry of offering community development programmes, the sisters have established Mercy Works PNG, a partner of Mercy Works Ltd, a body owned by the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia.

From that initial foundation of four sisters in 1956 a vigorous congregation has grown. With an equal voice at the Institute table, the representatives of Papua New Guinea now negotiate to ensure the group's capacity to respond to the needs of the Church and wider society. This small but increasing community of indigenous Mercy Sisters identifies itself with the church and the people of Papua New Guinea and faces the future with confidence.

2. Pakistan

Mercy involvement in Pakistan has followed a complicated and at times tortuous path, a path trodden by some courageous and remarkable women. It illustrates a response to the renewed emphasis on missiology fostered by Vatican Council II and was animated by the energy for mission generated by the formation of the Institute. Several possibilities for mercy endeavour had presented themselves for consideration, in particular South America and Asia, including Pakistan. A request had been received from the diocese of Lahore but people were uncertain about how appropriate it would be for sisters to go to a

country which was virtually unknown. When, in 1980, Sister Elizabeth Cloonan represented Australian religious at a Conference in Colombo, it seemed wise to send her on a fact-finding mission to Lahore and to ask her to report her conclusions to the First National Chapter of the Institute.²¹

At the Chapter it was agreed that although Lahore did not fit the guidelines for involvement, other locations in Pakistan might do so, and the possibility of missioning a small number of sisters to Pakistan remained open.²² Thus the first invitation to minister in Pakistan met with a qualified refusal,²³ but following lively discussion of the issue at Chapter it was decided to appoint a small group of sisters to investigate the areas and apostolates in which sisters would seem to be most needed in Pakistan.²⁴ Meanwhile interest in ministry in Pakistan intensified, especially among members of the Melbourne Congregation.

Eighteen months later a second request was received, this time from the diocese of Rawalpindi, for sisters to 'take care of a hospital as well as to run a small school with a children's hostel and even engage in pastoral work'.²⁵ Since a team of teachers from the Mercy Institute of Catholic Education was working in that diocese during the Christmas vacation, two members of the Melbourne



The pioneer sisters for Pakistan: L-R: Sisters Lexie Brooks, Elizabeth Cloonan, Jean Walton, Irie Duane.

Council, Mary Harrington and Leonie Glennen, went with them to consider at first hand the needs of the diocese and the possibilities it offered for mercy involvement.²⁶ At home, leaders of congregations were asked to assess the actual possibilities for a mission to Pakistan.

The report from the two sisters showed that Pakistan met all the guidelines for Institute projects. Poverty, inadequate health care, an underclass of Christians, low participation of women in society and a country which then, as now, was politically unstable, moved the reporters to state:



Sister Maureen Sexton at Holy Rosary Hospital, Gujrat.

There is no doubt that the people of Pakistan fit into any category of need that we mention in any of our vision or mission statements – they are poor, needy, ignorant, oppressed and greatly in need of health care.²⁷

In May 1984 several decisions were made:²⁸ sisters would go to minister in the parish of Gujrat, the Pakistani mission was accepted as an Institute project, Melbourne, with several volunteers and ready to move into 'preparation mode', was appointed the authorising congregation, taking

responsibility for administration.²⁹ By July, four sisters - Lexie Brooks, Elizabeth Cloonan, Irie Duane and Adele (Jean) Walton - had been selected from twenty volunteers and were involved in their preparation programme; by January 1985 they had left Australia for Pakistan. *ISMA News* proclaimed to the Institute: 'Australian Mercies for Pakistan', providing information on where, why and who, as well as an outline of the ministries in which the sisters were to be involved.³⁰



Gujrat: Sister Jean Walton visiting the sick.

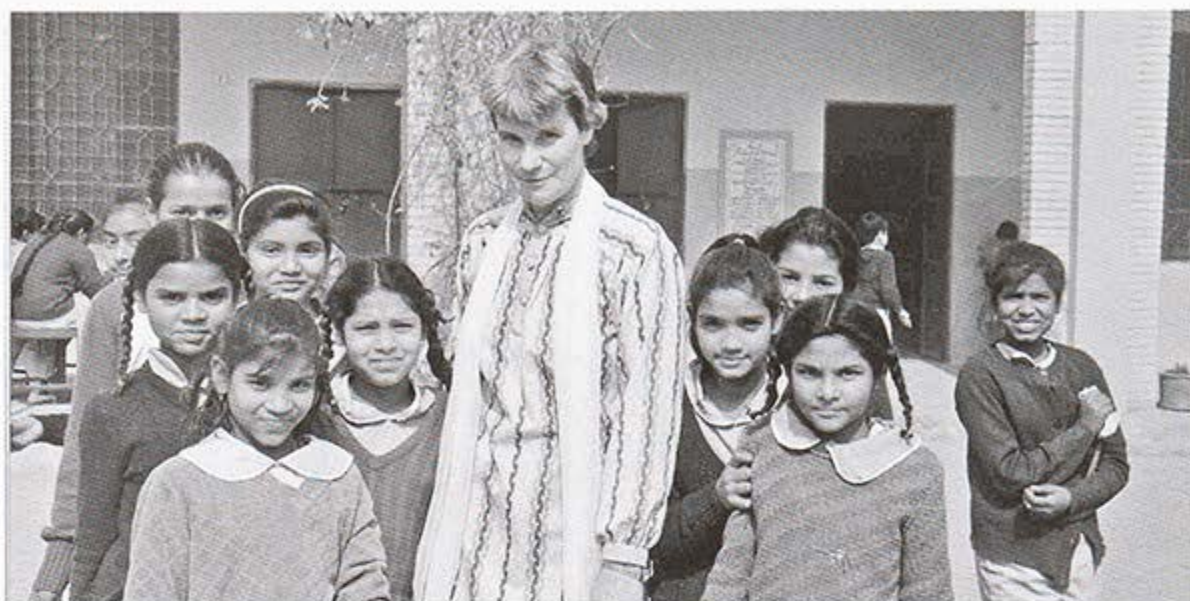
After spending nine months learning Urdu and acquiring some field experience, sisters began their official engagement in mission on September 1, 1985 when Irie Duane accepted responsibility as administrator of Rosary Hospital for women and children. At the same time the other sisters began ministering in education, social and pastoral work.

Gujrat 1985-October 1998

Involvement of the sisters in Gujrat lasted 13 years, during which time they administered a small maternity hospital, worked with nurses, supervised the primary school and

engaged in pastoral activities, in particular a hostel for training young women. Outreach from the hospital included an extensive community health and development programme in the villages while the school became the hub for five small schools in the poor Christian villages. A total of eight sisters ministered in Gujrat: Elizabeth Cloonan, Irie Duane, Lexie Brooks, Jean Walton, Cheryl Camp, Monique Nyland, Maureen Sexton and Brenda Moss.

The decision to withdraw was prompted by a combination of circumstances. Despite its excellence in maternity care, competition from other more modern and attractive hospitals in the district, as well as financial and staffing difficulties, had undermined over time the sustainability of Rosary Hospital. Furthermore, the sisters who held the positions of Principal of St Mary's High School and Director of Mercy Women's Hostel, having completed their contracts, were due to return to Australia. Although their positions had been advertised in Pakistan and Australia, no one had volunteered to fill them. At the Mercy Assembly held in Rawalpindi in 1997, the seventeen sisters ministering in Pakistan at the time, together with the leader of Melbourne congregation, came to the conclusion that the sisters would not be able to remain in Gujrat beyond the



Sister Colleen Livermore with girls from St John Vianney's School, Peshawar.

end of November 1998. A group was appointed to work with the Bishop and to plan appropriate processes of withdrawal. Fortunately, they were able to negotiate for a Pakistani congregation, the Daughters of the Cross, to take over the ministries of the school and the hostel.

Peshawar

Twelve months after the arrival of the sisters in Gujrat, again at the request of Bishop Pereira, four sisters accepted the call to Peshawar to care for the educational needs of girls and to do pastoral work in the parish, especially with women.³¹ Here the sisters ran three schools, two centres for women and visitation to the jail and mental hospital.



Peshawar; Sister Flo O'Sullivan with some of the women from her literacy project.

Formalised as Mercy Family Welfare Services, this work involved the rehabilitation of mentally ill patients and discharged prisoners to give them skills for self-help. The work expanded and in 1997 the GulBahar Project was born. Centred on GulBahar, this ministry to women and children involved outreach programmes in five different areas with sewing centres, pre-literacy centres, nursery classes, literacy and sewing classes for Afghan refugees as well as non-formal education, coaching, jail visitation, social experiences for children whose mothers were in jail and visitation of women in the mental hospital. Sisters who ministered in Peshawar were: Win McManus, Abina Looney, Colleen Livermore, Francis Mary Gillies, Flo O'Sullivan, Gaye Lennon, Elizabeth O'Connell, Jean Walton, Patrice Orchard and Carmel McCormick. They were joined by Sister Mary O'Toole, an Irish Sister of Mercy.

By 2002 the decision had been made by the Mercy community that involvement in Peshawar was no longer feasible. Lack of volunteers meant that there were insufficient sisters to form a viable community and it was judged more appropriate to support the work of local people in the schools rather than attempt what was clearly impossible. It seemed as if the sisters had completed the work they went there to do.³² The GulBahar Project had been handed back to the Bishop who arranged for some of the works to be continued. Sister Mary O'Toole returned to Ireland having served the people of Pakistan for over two decades.

Rawalpindi

Over a period of about six years the focus of ministry in the Northern Frontier Province had shifted from Peshawar to Rawalpindi. The House of Prayer, entailing spiritual direction, retreats and prayer days, especially to support priests, located on the campus of St Mary's Academy at Lalazar, brought the first Sister of Mercy to Rawalpindi.³³ Others followed. Following the decision in December 1998 to accept Pakistani women into a formal formation programme, a house of formation was needed.³⁴ However, sisters were also carrying out the roles of principal at St Mary's Academy with associated administrative duties throughout the diocese and, for a time, principal of St Joseph's Boys' School. Rawalpindi thus became the hub of education and formation, with the sisters in formation also taking on a teaching role there. The contribution

of these sisters to education in the diocese is incalculable. Win McManus, the first sister in Rawalpindi, was later joined by Eileen Ann Daffy, Elizabeth O'Connell, Carmel McCormick, Gaye Lennon, Mary Lewis, Audette Mansour, Patrice Orchard, Kathy Ryan, Kaye Evans, Beverley Whitton and Moira Truelson. By 2006, however, Mercy presence in the diocese of Rawalpindi was reduced to four professed sisters and the two Pakistani women in formation, Gulnaz Alfred and Anila Isaac.

Notre Dame Institute of Education

The initiative to establish Notre Dame Institute of Education (NDIE), coming from Bishop Lobo, chair of the Episcopal Education Committee and secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, was recognised as a possible answer to an urgent need in Pakistan. With regard to education in that country it had been pointed out that

*... the content of courses lacked breadth and depth, lecturing was directed to providing answers to exams without any attempt at understanding, bribery was widespread, libraries non-existent, student methods of research and enquiry are not encouraged. There is a significant problem of non-attendance of teachers in classrooms, of discrimination in appointments often based on the ability to purchase patronage, there are difficulties encountered by disadvantaged groups. Overall there is a lack of commitment to teaching ... The status of teachers is low.*³⁵

Bishop Lobo enlisted the assistance of Sister Deirdre Jordan who, in 1989, in her capacity as chancellor of Flinders University, gave a series of lectures in Pakistan at universities and colleges of teacher education, bringing her into contact with most of the educational leaders and giving her an insight into the educational situation.³⁶ Deirdre found that while the first priority was for teacher training, there was also need for formation to foster a committed teaching force. In addition, parents and students had to be taught to value education and school attendance. She recommended that, given the availability of buildings in Karachi and the strong support of the Bishop, a

person with expertise in teacher training be missioned to set up programmes which would deliver a 'properly-run two-year BA with a concurrent teacher education component with degrees granted by the University of Karachi'.³⁷ She undertook to recruit Australian staff to form a nucleus and soon had gained four Australian volunteers.³⁸

In October 1991, Notre Dame Institute of Education (NDIE) commenced operating with an initial intake of sixteen students. It was the first Catholic tertiary institution to be opened in Pakistan since the nationalisation of church colleges and schools thirty years previously. Sister Gabrielle Jennings was appointed the foundation Director and Bernadette Marks her deputy. Over the years several other sisters served at NDIE. Sisters Annette Schneider and Margaret Madden were directors, Catharine Ahern for a time was Deputy Director and Cynthia Griffin, Jan Geason, Carmel Carroll, Cathy Solano and



Sister Margaret Madden at Notre Dame Institute of Education.

Ann Thomson were involved in lecturing and pastoral activities while Patricia Fitzgibbon, Loyola Crowe, Anne O'Regan and Carmel Martin took on 'short term' assignments. Within a year NDIE had become an affiliated college of Karachi University. What commenced as a Bachelor of Primary Education course developed over time into a Master of Education programme with

affiliation to the Australian Catholic University. NDIE had been, in the words of one observer,

*an influential means of contributing to real self-determination of some of the poorest people in Pakistan.*³⁹

As well, under the auspices of NDIE, several small learning centres were set up in the most deprived areas of Karachi.

Administration

This brief overview of the various ministries in which, over two decades, the sisters engaged, does justice neither to the extent of their endeavours nor to their impact on the people to whom they ministered. While those in Pakistan were searching for the most appropriate ways to show the face of God's mercy, at home members of the National Plenary Council were searching for ways to find the most appropriate administrative structures to support them. To Melbourne, as authorising congregation, fell most of the responsibilities of selecting personnel, arranging finances, liaising with the Bishop, communicating with the sisters and keeping Institute personnel informed of developments. While Gujrat, Peshawar and Rawalpindi were collectively recognised as an Institute Project, it was Melbourne who bore the initial costs with a foundation grant and it was Melbourne who managed donations and administered accounts.

After consultation within the Institute it was decided that an appropriate authority structure would be for a local leader to make whatever decisions were needed within the country. These could then be communicated to and ratified by either the authorising congregation or the Institute as was appropriate. Arrangements were made for the Melbourne leader to confirm the election of the Pakistan leader, to visit annually and to take care of the pastoral needs of the sisters. Elizabeth Cloonan was chosen by the group as their first leader.

After four years three matters in need of attention had surfaced: the implementation of a programme of teacher education, the establishment of

appropriate structures for governance of mission and the question of admitting Pakistani women into formation. These could be addressed adequately only in the light of answers to questions which explored the Institute's overall commitment to Pakistan.⁴⁰ Teacher education was subsequently the subject of a report by Sister Deirdre Jordan which led to the establishment of Notre Dame Institute of Education. The other two issues were more closely linked. When Sister Patricia Pak Poy visited the communities in 1994 to ascertain their readiness to accept women into formation she advised that, prior to this occurring, there were some essential organisational details which needed to be put into place. A local formation programme, for example, presupposed closer links between the communities. As well, the ambiguous position of the sisters in Karachi needed to be clarified.⁴¹ As a result, the sisters both in Pakistan and in Australia began to seek out suitable governance structures to support the mission.

Leadership

As a first step, the communities in Pakistan were encouraged to hold gatherings at which they could give serious study to their mission, vision and purpose, and from this to suggest possible governance structures. Part of their brief was to establish policies, practices and procedures to enable the group to be more self-directed, cohesive and focused. As well, they were asked to clarify and develop the role of a national contact person and to establish some form of appropriate leadership and organisational structure which would cater for on-going formation, ministry evaluation and personal development. Regular communication and interaction between communities needed to be formalised and structures for communication with the Institute needed to be established. While planning formation for Pakistani candidates was not removed from the agenda, implementation was to be deferred until these other organisational and directional matters had been attended to.⁴²

In 1995 the first National Assembly of Mercy Pakistan was held in Karachi. The vision statement which resulted from this assembly affirmed that

*in solidarity with the Pakistan people [the Sisters of Mercy] listen, identify and discern where [they] can work in partnership with them.*⁴³

The assembly unanimously agreed to explore forms of membership suitable for Pakistan and appointed a task force to do so. Significantly, Bernadette Marks from the Karachi community was chosen as the leader of Mercy Pakistan, thus integrating that community into the group. Administrative cohesion was further strengthened by a decision of the National Plenary Council in April that year to consider Pakistan as a 'semi-autonomous region' and to designate the three foundations collectively as an Institute Project. The logical outcome of this decision was the proposal to the Fourth National Chapter to admit the leader of the Sisters of Mercy of Pakistan as an ex-officio delegate. Following the fifth Institute Chapter the Constitutions were altered to reflect the inclusion of the leader of the Sisters of Mercy of Pakistan as a member of the Institute Plenary Council.⁴⁴



Rawalpindi: L-R Sisters Anila Isaac, Audette Mansour, Kathy Ryan, Bev Whitton, Mary Lewis, Gulnaz Alfred.

Mercy Membership

Ever since the sisters had arrived in Pakistan there had been requests from Pakistani women to join them in ministry. Anxious to honour their desire but also aware of the complexities of the matter, the sisters spent many years discussing, discerning and consulting as to how best to express the call to live mercy in a Pakistani context. From the outset the question of sustainability was debated but also raised was the wisdom of preventing what seemed to be the action of God's Spirit. The position taken was that if Pakistani women felt

they were called they would be encouraged to pursue a way of life in accord with their Pakistani culture and in the spirit of the Mercy Constitutions.⁴⁵ By 1993 it was felt that since the group in Pakistan was moving towards a more stable stage in its history - Peshawar and Rawalpindi were firmly established and NDIE was functioning well – it was time to address this question of recruiting local women.⁴⁶ The Third National Chapter took up the challenge by accepting a recommendation ‘to give serious consideration to the long-term membership possibilities for Mercy Pakistan’.

First, Sister Patricia Pak Poy was commissioned to make an assessment of the local situation for the National Executive Council. She perceived encouraging signs in the desires of young Pakistani women to serve their people but cautioned that the administrative and pastoral implications needed careful discernment.⁴⁷ In her judgement, what was being proposed was in essence the foundation of a Pakistani group of Mercies. This, to be true to the spirit of Catherine McAuley, would need to be well-grounded in the local church.⁴⁸

The underlying principles as well as the practicalities of this matter were carefully considered. From the decision to explore membership at that first Assembly, the plan gradually took definite shape. At the Mercy Assembly in Rawalpindi two years later it was decided to proceed with a request to the National Plenary Council for Pakistani women to be accepted for vowed membership with the Sisters of Mercy, and a committee agreed to draft a formation policy. At the 1998 Assembly a formal vote ratified the acceptance of Pakistani women into the Sisters of Mercy. On Foundation Day that year, Gulnaz Alfred, a member of the Diocesan Board of Education’s in-service team and a graduate of NDIE began her pre-novitiate.

A great deal of reflection preceded this decision. Sisters were definite about what they believed were the principles underlying it. Formation was to be for an emerging congregation, they stated. This was not to be considered an appendix to an Australian congregation. While there was to be partnership between the Pakistani women and their ‘ex-pat’ sisters, these women were to be formed as leaders in their own country, to ‘make a creative contribution to the mission of the Church in Pakistan through their sharing of the mercy



Mughalabad: Sister Anila Isaac.

charism.⁴⁹ Some administrative matters needed clarification, of course. Financial security was important, as was clarity on which decisions needed authorising from Australia. Obligations to women who left formation having discerned that this way of life was not for them needed to be spelled out as did the official status of the venture - whether or not this was an Institute project. One particular matter,

namely consideration of what would happen if all 'foreigners' were to be expelled from Pakistan, was to become particularly relevant, for, although this did not actually happen, world events of September 11, 2001 were to play a major role in the subsequent history of Mercy Pakistan. By that time another Pakistani woman had begun her pre-novitiate.⁵⁰

'Nine Eleven'

The 21st century brought unexpected changes to the lives of the sisters in Pakistan. In the wake of the September 11 bombings in New York and Washington, the sisters, on the advice of the Australian High Commission, evacuated Pakistan, having organised for the sisters in formation to return to their families. The precarious nature of their existence was highlighted in an email communication to the Institute:

*We have made the decision that Gulnaz and Anila will return to their families ... It will not be helpful for [them] to be associated with foreigners if things get nasty.*⁵¹

Ultimately, all the sisters chose to return to their places of ministry but the Pakistan they returned to had changed irrevocably.

*The decision was made in consultation with the Sisters and the Leaders and taking advice from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Bishop Anthony Lobo [and] the people within Pakistan,*⁵²

and, despite continued risk, it was supported fully by congregation leaders and the Institute Leadership Team. The position of the sisters in formation was one of the key factors in the decision. The communiqué stated:

We believe it best for the mission and for the formation programme for the sisters to return.⁵³

New questions began to surface, however, questions concerning the ultimate future of the formation programme. First was its long-term sustainability in the face of diminishing numbers of Australian sisters in the country and fewer Pakistani women expressing an interest in joining them. More fundamental questions concerned the underpinnings of the mission and how it could be evaluated in the light of changing circumstances and changing theologies of mission. Despite many efforts to attract personnel to serve in Pakistan, volunteers were not forthcoming.



Sister Bev Whitton with a group of children from the Rah-e Amal school.

These and similar questions prompted the Institute Plenary Council, through the leader of the Melbourne congregation, to commission a review which would appraise the current realities of mercy life and ministry in Pakistan, identify the purpose of the mission, examine the effectiveness of internal structures and authority line, and encourage a re-imagining of possibilities in support of the Pakistan

foundation. In her report Gabrielle Kelly OP described the situation as ‘the end of the line’ and called for decisive action.⁵⁴ Having consulted at various levels, she concluded that ‘the future of Mercy in Pakistan is with Pakistanis’. It was clear that ‘the needs of the mission within Pakistan must take the lead’. What was not clear was how this might best be achieved. For the two Pakistani sisters, neither of whom was finally professed, the future appeared uncertain. The report proposed two solutions, one contingent on the Pakistani ‘shoot’ becoming more fruitful; the other involved phasing out the presence of the

Australian sisters and offering alternative arrangements to the two Pakistani sisters. Ultimately, one of these returned to her family effectively requiring the Institute to adopt the second solution.

Acting on the recommendations of the review, a special committee - the Pakistan Pastoral Planning Transition Group - was established to monitor the situation and provide advice to Institute leadership. In 2008 it was decided that the Institute President would henceforth be the leader of the sisters in Pakistan, that she would delegate leadership to the Transition Coordinator in the country and that Melbourne would be responsible only for formation for membership. Finally, plans were made to conclude the formation programme, to withdraw from Rawalpindi and eventually from NDIE which was considered ready for Pakistani leadership. Anila Isaac, the only Pakistani Sister of Mercy, currently lives and ministers in Melbourne.⁵⁵

In retrospect, the involvement of the sisters in Pakistan has been the object of questioning and soul-searching. It has taken paths which the Institute and the founding group of sisters never imagined possible. Twenty five years of ministry cannot be dismissed lightly nor can the impact of this response to what was undeniably 'the cry of the poor' in educational, pastoral and health-related ministries. One might ask how Catherine would have responded to the call of the people of Pakistan expressed through Bishop Pereira. We have no certainty of knowing but we can be sure that it was the needs of the poor which called the sisters and it was to the needs of the poor that they ministered. In her initial assessment of the situation in Pakistan Sister Elizabeth Cloonan referred to the 'new' constitutions of the Institute which declared

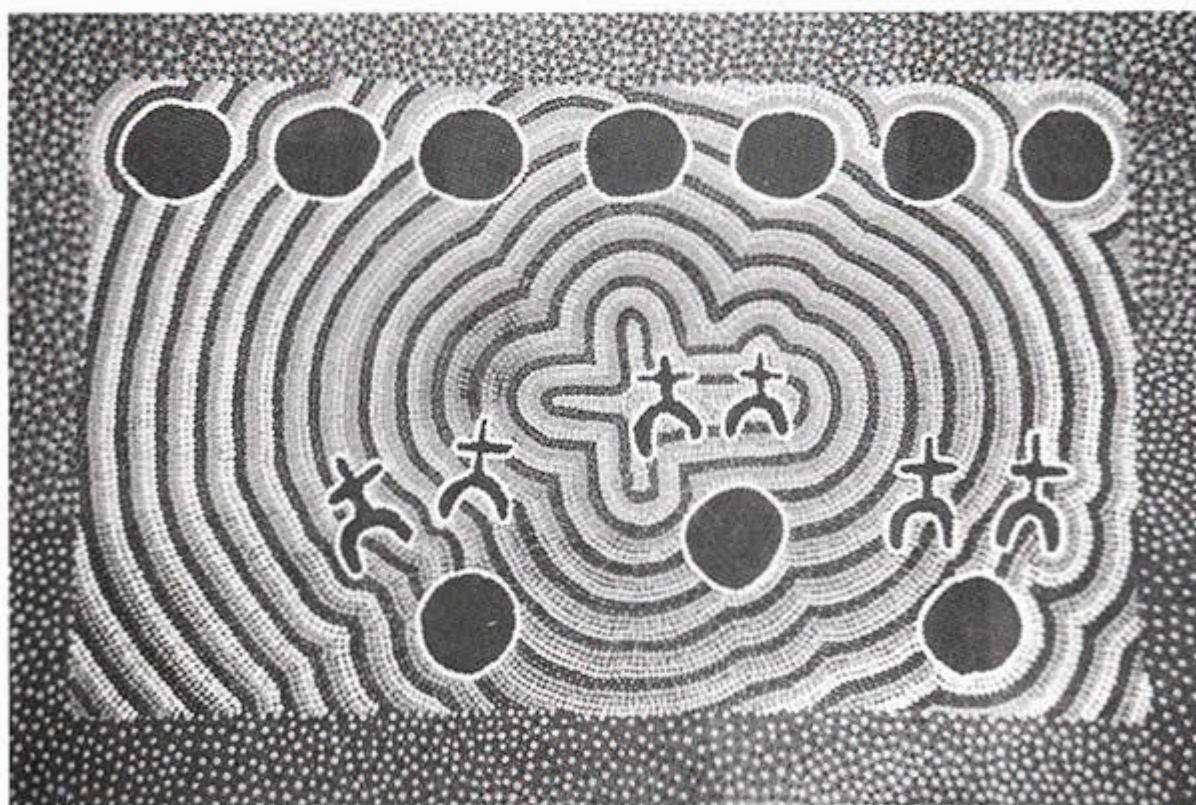
*The first Sisters of Mercy knew the missionary call inherent in our vocation and crossed the oceans and continents.*⁵⁶

To her that call was as cogent in 1984 as it had been in the 1840s. At the same time she pointed out that there were inherent difficulties, not least from the prevailing culture. The sisters who responded to the missionary call to Pakistan in 1984 went with the same missionary zeal as did those first Irish sisters coming to Australia. Catherine went where she could when she could,

and when sisters were no longer available she withdrew. Is this not a summary of Mercy involvement in Pakistan? In 1984 the political realities of the early 21st century could not possibly have been envisaged. Even if they could have been, would it have made a difference?

3. The Kimberley⁵⁷

Balgo Hills, Lake Gregory and Billiluna form a triangle of tiny settlements in the north east of Western Australia. Balgo is 3,400 kilometres from Perth and 905 kilometres from Broome. The indigenous people living in the region have a rich cultural and religious inheritance, with a relationship to the land which is integral to their lives. Their interaction with white society is through the medium of English, their second, third or sometimes even their fourth language and their wellbeing is hampered by poor health and the effects of excessive use of alcohol.



Painting by Helen Nagomara representing the presence and ministry of the Sisters of Mercy in the Balgo region.

Since the 1970s the Sisters of Mercy have been involved with the Aboriginal people of this region. Sisters from Adelaide regularly ran holiday programmes to relieve the St John of God sisters who ministered there, but it was not until

the second half of the 70s that they began to be involved in education. Some of the Aboriginal families had moved away from the mission at Balgo and established camps at both Lake Gregory and Billiluna, each some distance from the mission and in opposite directions. At the request of these communities, many members of which had received a Catholic education themselves, the Bishop of Broome, Bishop Jobst, agreed to search for sisters who would be willing to come and minister in this remote area of his diocese.⁵⁸

Lake Gregory and Billiluna



Sister Dorothy Campion with Sister Colleen Kleinschafer.

Their requests were formalised in 1978 and stated specifically that the communities wanted the schools to commence in 1979.⁵⁹ Negotiations between the Bishop and the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia and the Sisters of Mercy Singleton resulted in the appointment of two sisters to the region. Sister Colleen Kleinschafer became the

first principal at Mulan, establishing a school with the help of two indigenous assistants. At the same time Sister Bernadette Mills agreed to the request of the community at Billiluna Station to be their school teacher.⁶⁰ Subsequently, two other sisters, Margaret Adams from Adelaide and Dolores Coffee from Perth, accepted the call to minister in the region. Ultimately it was agreed that Bernadette and Colleen would live at Mulan and Margaret and Dolores at Billiluna. At weekends they came together at the convent in Balgo.

Balgo

Soon the Elders at Balgo began requesting the Bishop for a Catholic school at Balgo, making official representations to the Western Australian Department of Education to transfer the existing State school to Catholic authorities. Anticipating that the Elders' request would be granted, the Bishop approached the De La Salle Brothers and three Mercy Provincials hoping that they could provide suitable staff.

This was in 1981: the Institute was just coming into being. Thus it was representatives of the Institute who entered into negotiations with the De La Salle Brothers with regard to responsibility for the school and it was the National Plenary Council which decided unanimously, in May 1982, to give consent in principle for the Balgo venture to be accepted as a 'national project'.⁶¹ Interestingly, at this stage no one was really sure of the implications of this decision but in the spirit of Catherine a commitment was made to making the school 'a more effective instrument for the development of the whole aboriginal community of Balgo'.⁶²

By January 1983 it had been decided that a brother would be appointed as school principal with one of the sisters as his deputy. Two sisters had been chosen: Janet Lowe from Adelaide and Michelle Farrugia from Bathurst, to engage in secondary and primary education respectively.⁶³ A working party was established to further the negotiations and to conduct research and planning for the school.⁶⁴



Back at Balgo after 25 years. L-R Back: Ernie Azzopardi, Peter Cavelo. Geri Azzopardi, Br Leo Scollen. Front: Fr Ray Hevern, Sister Janet Lowe, Sister Michelle Farrugia, Br Doug O'Reilly.

Undertaking to manage the staffing at the other two stations as well, this group circularised to all congregations what was entailed in ministry in this region.

The schools, built with Commonwealth grant money, were described as 'good building[s] suitable to climate conditions and with appropriate services.'⁶⁵ In terms of accommodation at Lake Gregory and Billiluna, there were

next to the schools ... three caravans: one for each of the sisters and a smaller one which serves as an oratory... The sisters live here from Monday to Friday evening, when they travel into Balgo Mission for the weekend. Here they share a five-bedroom convent which is comfortable and air conditioned.

Then, somewhat ingenuously, the circular stated:

*The special circumstances call for some additional capacities over and above the ability to teach.*⁶⁶



Sisters' accommodation in the Kimberley.

Missionary spirit was strong in the newly-established Institute and by August two sisters had been appointed to work in the Kimberley, Paula O'Connell and Margarita Duffy. However, while the human resources aspect of the Mission seemed well organised the members of the working party realised that it would be in the best interests of everyone concerned if the Institute assumed responsibility for the Lake Gregory and Billiluna schools as well.⁶⁷ The obvious reason for this decision was that the distance between the three sites as well

as the close relationships between the tribal groups called for a collaborative venture. Furthermore, if the sisters there were to share community at the weekends, it made eminent sense to treat this as one venture, the responsibility for which was with one entity.⁶⁸ In addition, there were more subtle forces at work. In a letter to the National President, Dorothy Campion, Sister Patricia Lake stressed the need to 'ensure that the work gets off to a good start as a truly national project'. She explained that

*there will now be six Mercy Congregations involved: Adelaide, Bathurst, Goulburn, Melbourne, Perth and Singleton. Some of the tensions and difficulties in the situation seem to have arisen out of the fact that both Lake Gregory and Billiluna commenced as Singleton Missions, and it would be a pity if this were to become a complication for the bigger project.*⁶⁹

Once agreed to, this meant, in effect, that the National Plenary Council (NPC) took responsibility for ensuring finance and personnel for the project and the National Executive Council (NEC) for promoting it.⁷⁰ Lines of authority were thus changed. Dorothy Campion explained to all sisters on the mission that henceforth they were under the authority of the National President for the period of their appointment.

It will mean that each forgoes her 'home' customs and submits to decisions that are made by the Balgo community to satisfy the needs of the apostolate there and the living conditions peculiar to this mission ... Accountability will be to the NEC and through us to ISMA.

*... Each sister retains membership of her own congregation ... However, the congregation is not the court of appeal when difficulties arise within the community or the apostolate.*⁷¹

Making sure that each understood the implications of the new arrangement, Dorothy was explicit in stating that if they did not accept the change of authority 'the alternative would be not to return to Balgo in 1984'.⁷²

The process of arranging to transfer the existing school at Balgo into the WA Catholic system of schools began immediately. Brother Leo Scollen was appointed principal with two other brothers assigned to assist him. Contracts were signed with the De La Salle Brothers and the Diocese of Broome and the sisters were enrolled in appropriate orientation programmes. The specific mandate for the school was to help Aboriginal children gain skills in literacy, numeracy, oral English and other areas which can be considered [essential] tools of communication, to teach a wide variety of practical skills useful in a remote community, to do this in a culturally relevant manner, in the spirit of the good news of the Gospel and in a general framework of community self-management and self-determination.⁷³ The pre-school at Balgo and the adult education ministries conducted by the Sisters of St John of God were untouched by the new arrangements and remained under a separate jurisdiction.

The Early Years

Initially the NEC planned to take responsibility for the Balgo project for one or two years after which it was to be transferred to one of the Congregations, ideally Perth or West Perth. In the meantime Sister Margaret McGovern was appointed as liaison person. She visited the community in January 1984 to assist them in setting up community structures. At the end of that year she assisted the community in evaluating itself as part of a more extensive evaluation of the entire project.⁷⁴ Reports from Margaret as well as others who visited during those early years give a picture of a group of women who, despite the hardship occasioned by remoteness, isolation and less than optimal living conditions, were committed to their ministry and showed great respect to and encouragement of the aboriginal people. Spiritually they were reasonably well-catered for but it was thought advisable to set up definite structures for personal renewal for any sisters seeking to renew their contracts.⁷⁵ In short, as one observed, 'this Mission centre was in good order and was being well-managed'.⁷⁶

A formal report presented to the NEC in 1986 detailed the increased facilities in Balgo, Billiluna and Mulan (Lake Gregory) and noted that

*the numbers of the children in each of the schools has increased and the level of attendance is more regular.*⁷⁷

As well, an evaluation performed by Sister Deirdre Jordan during 1986 reported that

*there was absolute respect for the will of the people to preserve their identity, their culture, their language while learning the skills necessary to interact with white society ... The people clearly 'own' the school and 'own' the religious. There is good communion between the school and the people ... the schools are seen as 'happy places'.*⁷⁸

Moreover the NEC had decided in 1986 that it would retain management of the project, leading to the signing of new contracts.

The Wider Context

1986 was important for a second reason. That year Pope John Paul II addressed the 'Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders of Australia' informing them that

*The message of Jesus Christ can lift up your lives to new heights, reinforce all your positive values and add many others, which only the Gospel in its originality proposes. Take this Gospel into your own language and way of speaking; let its spirit penetrate your communities and determine your behaviour towards each other, let it bring new strength to your stories and your ceremonies. Let the Gospel come into your hearts and renew your personal lives. The Church invites you to express the living word of Jesus in ways that speak to your Aboriginal minds and hearts.*⁷⁹

This message resonated in the hearts of delegates to the second National Chapter who issued a mandate to the Institute to cooperate with others to reverse the injustices suffered by the Aboriginal people and to promote actively a better understanding of Aboriginal history, religion and culture.

By the time of the Second National Chapter (1988) a total of ten sisters had ministered for periods from one to four years in the region under the new administrative arrangements.⁸⁰ Bishop Jobst made a request for two additional sisters: one to co-ordinate the adult education centre, another to take charge of the health clinic as the St John of God Sisters were withdrawing from both of these positions. In view of the withdrawal of this congregation from ministry in the Kimberley the Institute was forced to evaluate its commitment to the region. Ultimately it was decided that the Institute would continue to staff Balgo for the next five years with a decision to be taken in 1992 concerning continuation or withdrawal. Commitment to the project was thus determined not so much over an indefinite or abiding presence as in terms of a period of consolidation then gradual relinquishment.

In view of the isolation and the rigours of life in this region one may be led to wonder about the women who ministered there. That they were imbued with the spirit of Catherine and committed to serving the poor and uneducated is beyond doubt. In the report on 'The Balgo Project' prepared for the Second National Chapter it is stated:

They have developed new skills as fast as new needs appeared; they have adapted their teaching to quite different levels and expectations. For example, all are able to speak something of the local language and to teach partly in that language. They are respectful of the Aboriginal culture and traditions and ensure it is protected in the school life. They work over and above every norm to contribute to the total religious, social and cultural life of the people who are their hosts. They continue the mercy tradition of visiting and knowing the families of the children they teach and of attending to the old and sick people. They are respected by the staff and loved by the people.⁸¹

Shortly after that Chapter, in 1989, inspired no doubt by both the Pope's address and the Chapter mandate, a gathering was held in Alice Springs of forty eight Mercy Sisters engaged in Aboriginal ministry. Admittedly, it is difficult to attribute cause and effect, but it is nonetheless significant that in the early

nineties some serious questions began to emerge with regard to involvement in the Balgo project. Sister Kath Burke expressed some of them in her report to the Third National Chapter. She considered that



Sister Helen Kerins prepares to lead a theological reflection exercise.

the most critical questions facing our whole nation as we learn to live beside our Aboriginal brothers and sisters are daily lived out in the three small isolated communities of Balgo, Billiluna and Mulan.⁸³

Her report noted the inherent contradictions in this ministry.

Below the surface there is a need to note the demands of living in a situation calling for sensitivity to being both 'outsider' and one of the 'dominant white oppressors' yet also 'helper' and 'needed resource'.

While our original invitation to these nominal Catholic communities was quite specifically to assist them in their education and faith-development, our presence today demands a shift in consciousness and understanding of the task.

We are especially gifted ... in being able to be part of the slow and painful yet vigorous reawakening of these people to the riches of their Aboriginal culture and spirituality

Finally Kath put words on the fundamental issue:

We need to keep carefully attuned to both the how and the why of our presence.⁸⁴

Wirrimanu Adult Education and Training Centre

By the time of the Third National Chapter the 'how' of mercy presence had been expanded. Sister Barbara Broad had taken the role of administrator of the Wirrimanu Adult Education and Training Centre in Balgo, had established an Aboriginal Advisory Council to run the Centre and was delivering courses to prepare Teacher Assistants and Health Workers for accreditation in their respective professions. Community Access classes enabled the women to learn dressmaking skills. These developments were means of empowering the local community to determine its future.

Mercy Balgo Health Service

A decision at the national Mercy gathering at Alice Springs was to write letters of complaint to State and Federal Ministers of Health about the inadequate health services in the Balgo region. As a result of these letters, representatives of the Institute were invited to submit a tender for the delivery of services and were awarded the contract in October 1989. While the establishment and ongoing implementation of Mercy Balgo Health Service was not without its difficulties, it is true to say that this ministry received a wealth of Institute support, involving as it did personnel from the Mater Hospital, North Sydney, the Mercy Foundation of the North Sydney congregation, the Mercy Hospital for Women in Melbourne and St Anne's Mercy Hospital in Perth. A central tenet in the provision of the health service in these communities was always the promotion of the local Aboriginal health workers. The long term aim was ultimately to enable them to organise and operate their own health service in the future.⁸⁵ A third manifestation of the 'how' was the decision to offer a Sister of Mercy (Margarita Duffy) as a part-time pastoral care associate in the region.

As regards the 'why', after eight years of Institute involvement with the Aboriginal communities of the region, and in view of the impending decision concerning future involvement, in 1991 the nine sisters in the region began to engage in a process of theological reflection and discussion on some key questions. Over a series of meetings they considered the extent to which mercy presence announced the Good News of liberation, the level of commitment to self-determination for the Aboriginal people, the extent to which the

Aboriginal people were empowered to take control of their own lives, the hope and joy evident in relationships with the Aboriginal people, and, in a broader context, the implications of the Royal Commission report on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody for future mercy presence in traditional Aboriginal communities.

Despite significant problems, especially the ongoing abuse of alcohol and the resultant violence, the Mercy community wholeheartedly endorsed the recommendations made to the NPC meeting in 1992, namely:

If appropriate Mercy personnel, both religious and lay, can be recruited and prepared for work in the Balgo region, then [the Institute] should maintain a commitment to education and health in Balgo, Billiluna and Mulan, until at least 1995 and investigate involvement in community development work;

with the caveat that

this commitment of appropriate personnel would continue only at the on-going request of the Aboriginal communities of Balgo, Billiluna and Mulan.⁸⁶

Decisions of the Third National Chapter held in January 1993 reaffirmed the Institute commitment to the Balgo region but examined it in the wider framework of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia. The Chapter authorised the NEC to appoint a co-ordinator of Mercy Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministry and to continue to give high priority to the process of education for reconciliation between Aboriginal and other Australians.⁸⁷ As a result, during 1993 the agreement between the Institute and Bishop Jobst was renewed, committing the Institute to providing where possible, until the end of 1995, two sisters for each of the schools at Balgo, Billiluna and Mulan.

Expansion of Services

Continuing their commitment to supporting self-determination on the part of the local Aboriginal people, the sisters sought to respond flexibly to immediate

and newly emerging needs. By 1995 it could be reported that, as well as their engagement in education and pastoral ministry, resources had been channelled into social and community services. Joan Osmotherly conducted a pilot programme to establish community-based aged care services under the auspices of the Home and Community Care office at Halls Creek and Kathleen Kettle engaged in a project to explore community development needs in the region. The continuation of Mercy Balgo Health Service, despite its success in improving primary health care in the region, was dependent on an official request by the Health Committee representing the local Aboriginal communities.

While clearly the reservoir of recruits from the Institute was at a low level, inter-congregational networks were put to good use and Jacqui Miles, a member of the Auckland Mercy congregation was recruited for the health service. As well, an Ursuline sister and two Josephites made themselves available for education in the region.

During this time the church in the Kimberley, as did the church throughout Australia, was forced to come to terms with its involvement in the separation of Aboriginal children from their families. In response, the sisters strengthened their resolve to keep reconciliation as a specific focus for their ministries. Striving to build a stronger sense of community and motivated by the expectation that it would increase the capacity to develop more effective relationships with regionally-based bodies such as ATSIC, the sisters and the parish were able to assure the use of the term 'Kutjungka' to describe their regional community identity.⁸⁸

By the beginning of 1993 all schools in the region had been fully incorporated into the WA Catholic Education System. This meant that resourcing improved and access to quality education and professional development was assured. One notable area of innovation was the development of the adult learning centres at Malarn (Mulan) and Billiluna as well as the Wirrimanu Adult Education and Training Centre in Balgo. All three centres were equipped with communications technology, enabling community members to take advantage of a growing range of adult education and tertiary study programmes and courses.

Self-determination

At the beginning of 1993, the Year for the World's Indigenous People, the only project under direct sponsorship of the Institute was the Mercy Community Health Service. In that year the Mercy Balgo Heath Service was extended to Yagga Yagga and renamed the Mercy Community Heath Service. The following year the Palyalatju Maparnpa Aboriginal Corporation Health Committee, comprising representatives of the four communities, was registered, significant testimony to the efforts of mercy support for community self-management.

Integral to the approach of Sisters of Mercy in the Kutjungka region had always been the goal of empowering the community for self-determination in all its dimensions. Within the parish context the focus was on providing study and training opportunities for church leaders from the different communities on- and off-site. In the area of health care, sisters had striven, with the Aboriginal population of the region, to establish a community-controlled health service. Thus, the establishment of community-based aged care facilities in Balgo, Billiluna and Malarn under a regional Home and Community Care programme was hailed as a positive step. A similar success was the involvement of some of the Malarn women in a Kimberley-wide project on women and violence. As is frequently the case, however, conflicts emerged between the goals of mercy ministry and the targets of government programmes. There have been consistent efforts to involve aboriginal health care workers in the service and to identify training programmes responsive to the needs of candidates from remote traditional communities. The overall aim was to provide qualifications which would be recognised in the Western Australian health system. Throughout, the mercy position was unambiguous.

In this setting, facilitating the empowerment of individuals for leadership in a variety of roles and towards community self-management, however long-term this may be, continues to be the dominant motif in the vision animating the Mercy group, ... along with the recognition that this is perhaps the most significant contribution they can make to the national reconciliation process.⁸⁹

Steps towards achieving this goal included the strengthening of the adult education centres and consolidating the training programmes offered through affiliation with Notre Dame University.

With provision made for full-time live-in nurses at Billiluna and Mulan as well as Balgo, the quality of health care delivered in the region improved dramatically and other communities made requests to join. As a consequence the name was changed to 'Mercy Community Health Service'. Strong statements from the people that they wanted the sisters to remain in the region gave the impetus to enter into a new contract with the Health Department of WA but bureaucratic wrangling and cost cutting made it difficult to meet the needs and wishes of the people. During the course of the negotiations it became evident that stronger management and support structures were needed to ensure the continuity of the service, stronger than what the Institute was able to provide. Margaret McGovern was commissioned to carry out a review of the service, with special reference to Institute sponsorship and the management and support structures.

In response to Margaret's recommendations the NEC began to explore means of linking the service to mainstream Mercy health care systems. By July 1996 the first stages of sub-contracting the management of ISMA's contract with the Health Department of Western Australia to Mercy Hospital Mt Lawley, Perth, had been implemented. In 1998 the Institute initiated, funded and supported a project by which the Mercy Community Health Service could be transferred to the responsibility of Mercy Health Care Australia. By July 1998 the NEC had received a firm expression of willingness on the part of Mercy Health Care Australia to assume sponsorship should it be able to tender successfully for and negotiate a new contract with the Health Department. The optimism engendered by these proposals was short lived, however. It became evident in 2000 that the arrangements with Mercy Health Care Australia were not going to proceed, and overtures were made to Mercy Health Care, Perth and Mercy Hospital Mt Lawley for transfer of sponsorship. This was formalised and completed in 2001, thereby enhancing the capacity of the service to access resources and to promote training and community self-management.

The transfer of sponsorship to Mercy Health Care Perth brought to an end the official involvement of the Institute in the Kutjungka region. Ultimately, in the face of a need for sustainable, strategic change all parties achieved 'an authentic mercy response to a vulnerable situation'. This does not mean, of course, that mercy involvement per se has ceased. This project, responding to the pressing needs of some of the most disadvantaged Australians, continues to belong within the framework of a long tradition of Mercy Health Care, a tradition begun in 1832 when Catherine and her companions nursed the victims of the cholera epidemic.

¹ Address of His Excellency the Most Reverend Romolo Carboni, Apostolic Delegate in Australia, New Zealand and Oceania, to the First Meeting of the Australian Federation of the Sisters of Mercy at Ballarat, Victoria, on 19th January, 1957, AISMA F204.

² They were Sisters M Paul (Singleton), Ireneaus (Bathurst) Julian (Perth) and Elizabeth (Adelaide); the Bishop was Adolf Noser SVD.

³ Sisters M Isobel, Carthage, Cephas, Francis Regis, Margarita, Philip and Marietta Riedy.

⁴ Flaherty, T., 'Surprised and Sustained by the spirit in Melanesia, 1956-1980: Reconfiguring movements in Papua New Guinea', *Listen*, 24, i (2006), p.21.

⁵ This is explored in greater depth in Flaherty, T, *loc. cit.*

⁶ *ibid.*, p.25.

⁷ This is the opinion of Sr. Dorothy Campion. Interview 18/02/10.

⁸ The Sisters were Margaret Ryan, Vicki Dean and Therese Quinlivan; the lay missionary was Margaret Moran.

⁹ Flaherty, T., *Crossings in Mercy: the Story of the Sisters of Mercy, Papua New Guinea 1956-2006* (St Mary's S.A. 2009), p.260 and Interview with Sr. Dorothy Campion 18/02/10.

¹⁰ See Diagram 8, p.76. The authorising congregations gave the PNG group legal status.

¹¹ They were Sisters Margaret Bubb (Goroka), Val Cervetto (Wewak), Clare Gilchrist (Mount Hagen) and Julie Anne Ryan (Aitape).

¹² *Historical Record of Developments towards the Autonomous Congregation of Papua New Guinea*, prepared for the 1987 Chapter of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia, AISMA 102-2,ii.

¹³ Interview with Dorothy Campion 18/02/10; Dorothy claims that these women had begun asking 'Aren't we good enough for the Sisters of Mercy?'

¹⁴ *Historical Record of Developments towards the Autonomous Congregation of Papua New Guinea*, *op.cit.*

¹⁵ *Report to the Third National Chapter (1993) by the National Superior of Sisters of Mercy of Papua New Guinea*, p.1. AISMA 101.3, ii.

¹⁶ Ratification of statutes meant that that the group accepted the Constitutions of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia as their rule of life. The national sisters

strongly felt the need to have a home that belonged to them and from which they could not be evicted. *ibid.*

¹⁷ Report, KB p.8.

¹⁸ ISMA, *Reports to the Fourth National Chapter, 1998. Sisters of Mercy of Papua New Guinea Report*. AISMA 101.4.

¹⁹ Minutes, NPC 2004/1 AISMA 204.1/42.

²⁰ ISMA, *Reports to the Sixth National Chapter, 2010*, pp.3-4. AISMA 101.6.

²¹ Cloonan, E. *Pakistan History*, unpublished paper, 1998. AISMA 302.37.9/2.

²² The criteria for selection of Inter-Congregational Apostolic Missions (later to be termed 'National Projects') were decided on at the first National Chapter. See Minutes ISMA/M5/81/5, AISMA 101.1

²³ The first Sister of Mercy to minister in Pakistan was Sister Mary O'Toole, a sister of Mercy from Carlow, Ireland, who in 1981 began working and living with the Dominican Sisters in Multan. She returned to Ireland in April 2002. In 1979 Bishop Trindade from Lahore had appealed to the Conference of Sisters of Mercy to send some sisters to his diocese but it was pointed out to him that the structures of this body were such that it had no authority over the placement of personnel, an interesting observation in view of the already-established mission in the diocese of Aitape, PNG. His request eventually came to the First National Chapter in 1981.

²⁴ *Acts and Proceedings of the First National Chapter of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia*, # 3.73, AISMA 101.1.

²⁵ Meeting of NPC October 13 1983. AISMA 201.1/2.

²⁶ Brother Ambrose Kelly fms had arranged for teachers from Mercy Institute of Catholic Education to assist teachers in Rawalpindi.

²⁷ *Report to NPC*, June 1985. AISMA, 302.37/4/1.

²⁸ May 31, 1984 at the NPC meeting in Melbourne.

²⁹ *Report to NPC*, June, 1985. AISMA 302.37/4/1. During Lent 1984 members of Melbourne congregation were invited to participate in a discernment regarding involvement in Pakistan. As a result several Melbourne sisters volunteered.

³⁰ ISMA News 3, iii, 1984.

³¹ The sisters chosen for Peshawar were Abina Looney, Colleen Livermore, Winifred McManus and Frances Gillis from Brisbane, Goulburn, Melbourne and Bathurst respectively. Previous experience in mission and/or missiology studies was made one of the selection criteria because of the high quality of applicants. At same time Maureen Sexton, a qualified nursing administrator, was accepted for Gujrat to work in Rosary hospital.

³² Letter to Sister Patricia Fox from Sister Patrice Orchard, 5/12/2002 AISMA 302.37.1/6.

³³ Sister Win McManus.

³⁴ Letter to Sister Patricia Fox from Sister Patrice Orchard, 5/12/2002 AISMA 302.37.1/6.

³⁵ *An Australian Endeavour to help a developing country – Pakistan*, author unknown, dated 4/5/92. See AISMA 302.37.10.

³⁶ The visit was sponsored by Muslim philanthropist and educator Hakim Mohammed Said. See Gabrielle Jennings in 'ISMA Current Issues' 19/02/2002. AISMA 302.37.1/6.

³⁷ AISMA 302.37.10 /1.

- ³⁸ Sisters Bernadette Marks (Adelaide), Gabrielle Jennings (Melbourne) and a married couple, Mary and Matthew Coffee (Adelaide) responded.
- ³⁹ Address by Sr Nerida Tinkler at the Mass to celebrate 25 years of the Institute's mission in Pakistan, September 24 2010, unpublished ms.
- ⁴⁰ AISMA 302.37.4 / 1.
- ⁴¹ NDIE was a joint Adelaide/Melbourne venture and not an Institute project as such.
- ⁴² These were, in essence, the recommendations of the report of Sr Patricia Pak Poy AISMA 302.37.4/2.
- ⁴³ AISMA 302.37.2/2.
- ⁴⁴ ISMA, *Constitutions and Directory* (Revised, April 2006), Part 2, Juridical, J6.40; J6.43.
- ⁴⁵ Mercy Formation in Pakistan, AISMA 302.37.12 /1.
- ⁴⁶ *Acts and Proceedings of ISMA Third National Chapter 1993*. # 6.6 p. 23. AISMA 101.3.
- ⁴⁷ *Report to NEC by Patricia Pak Poy RSM November 1994*, AISMA 302.37.4/2. She also recommended that some other forms of association be explored.
- ⁴⁸ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ AISMA 302.37.11.
- ⁵⁰ *ibid.*
- ⁵¹ Anila Isaac commenced her formation programme in August 2001.
- ⁵² Communiqué of 18 /09/2001, AISMA 302.37/1/6.
- ⁵³ Facsimile transmission, 23/10/2001 AISMA 302.37/1.
- ⁵⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ Kelly, Gabrielle, OP., *Review of Mercy Life and Ministry in Pakistan* January- March 2006, IPC papers 2006/2 Agenda 8, AISMA 302.37.4/2.
- ⁵⁶ ISMA, *Reports to the Sixth Institute Chapter, September 17-25, 2010*, pp.6-7. AISMA 101.6.
- ⁵⁷ Cloonan, E., loc. cit.
- ⁵⁸ The ministry of the Sisters of Mercy in the Kimberley is beautifully illustrated in the painting reproduced here. Helen Nagomara, the artist, describes the painting as follows: *This painting is about the Sisters of Mercy going out to the Aboriginal communities to help the people there. The circles across the top are the places they come from: Adelaide, Melbourne, Perth, Ballarat, Goulburn, Singleton, Wilcannia-Forbes and Townsville. The three circles at the bottom are Balgo, Billiluna and Mulan and the symbol with the cross is the sisters sitting down with the people.*
- ⁵⁹ See ISMA 'Our People in the Kimberleys', *Shemar*, iii, 2, December 1984, p.8. This article by an unknown author gives a comprehensive account of the beginning of mercy ministry in the region.
- ⁶⁰ The meetings were held on October 15 (Mulan) and 16 (Billiluna), 1978. Records of all negotiations and outcomes can be found at AISMA 304.2.1.
- ⁶¹ Minutes of general meeting Billiluna 26/2/79 AISMA 304.2.1.
- ⁶² Guidelines for National Projects had been established at the First National Chapter. AISMA 101.1.
- ⁶³ See letters of National Executive Secretary Sr Pauline Smith to Sisters Catherine

Matthews and Bernadette Mills (09/06/82) and also to Bishop Jobst (12/06/82) AISMA 304.2.1.

⁶⁴ Letter of Sr Dorothy Campion to the Chair of the Catholic Education Commission of WA (27/01/83) AISMA 304.2.1.

⁶⁵ The Working Party consisted of Sisters Elizabeth Devine, Patricia Fox, Patricia Lake and Dorothy Campion.

⁶⁶ *Mercy Mission, Kimberleys, WA, ISMA Project, Positions Vacant 1984*, AISMA 304.2.1.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ At the time these were the responsibility of the Singleton, Perth and Adelaide congregations.

⁶⁹ See notes from a community meeting (undated) which raised issues 'needing resolution before the incoming members of the community in January. AISMA 304.2.1.

⁷⁰ Letter of Sr Patricia Lake (for the ISMA committee) to Sr Dorothy Campion, 16/10/1983. AISMA 304.2.1.

⁷¹ These bodies and the relationship between them are explained on p. 3 and illustrated at Appendix 1, pp. 195, 196.

⁷² Letter of 28/10/1983 AISMA 304.2.1.

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Gaskell, J., *Report to Plenary Council of ISMA on Visit and Consultation at Balgo*, September 1982. AISMA 304.2.1.

⁷⁵ This was in keeping with the contract between the Sisters of Mercy and the De La Salle Brothers which stated: At the end of each year the project will be evaluated. This evaluation will be carried out by a competent person ... appointed by the major superiors. AISMA 304.2.1.

⁷⁶ For example, during 1984 Fr Keis Bijman, MSC visited the community and provided lectures in mission direction. As well sisters attended orientation courses in Aboriginal culture and missiology, education seminars offered by the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia and retreats in Broome. ISMA News October 1985.

⁷⁷ Reports by Sisters Amy Hearne, Beverley Stott and Mary Harrington. AISMA 304.2.5.

⁷⁸ McGovern, M., *Report to the NEC on the visit to the Balgo Mission Project* August 1986 AISMA 304.2.5.

⁷⁹ Jordan, D., *The work of Sisters of Mercy and De La Salle Brothers in the Balgo, Billiluna and Mulan Communities in the Eastern Kimberleys of Western Australia: Report to the institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and De La Salle Brothers* (Australian Province), AISMA 304.2.6. (i) 2.1.2.

⁸⁰ The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, *Address of John Paul II to the Aborigines & Torres Strait Islanders in Blatherskite Park Alice Springs* (Australia), 29th November 1986, # 12.

⁸¹ They were Sisters Janet Lowe, Michelle Farrugia, Colleen Kleinschafer, Paula O'Connell, Kathryn O'Callaghan, Carmel Arnold, Margaret Adams, Josephine Dillon, Margarita Duffy and Margaret McGrath. Sister Margaret Broadbent was ready to

commence a four-year contract at the beginning of 1988.

⁸² Report on Balgo prepared for the Second National Chapter January 1988, AISMA 304.2.5.

⁸³ Report KB p.8.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ ISMA News June 1990.

⁸⁶ *Report to National Plenary Council of Mercy Presence in the Balgo Region and Recommendations Regarding Future Involvement*, May 1992, AISMA 304.2.5. It is recorded on this report that 'there was general approval given to the recommendations ... There was agreement to extending the year to 1996'.

⁸⁷ ISMA, *Challenges to Mercy Australia: Third National Chapter, Statements and Proposals, Formal Proceedings*, pp.15, 16. The first of these decisions was in direct response to a request from the Recognition and Reconciliation Conference of 1992. *Balgo Report to the Third National Chapter*, AISMA, 301.3.

⁸⁸ 'one people' in the Kukatja language.

⁸⁹ *Kutjungka Region Project: Report to the NPC*, October 1997. AISMA 304.2.5.

CHAPTER 6: MERCY OUTREACH

1. MERCY REFUGEE SERVICE

Mercy Refugee Service (MRS) can trace its beginnings to 1983 when the Australian Red Cross requested the Melbourne Congregation to send nurses, teachers and other helpers to the refugee camps in Thailand and Malaysia.¹ At that time Mercy Sisters from other parts of Australia were also investigating ways to respond to the needs of refugees fleeing the various conflicts in South East Asia.² In 1984, at the October meeting of the National Plenary Council and in response to a paper outlining the plight of refugees, it was decided that there indeed was a call to respond to the directive of the First National Chapter that

*in both our traditional and new apostolates we become more significantly involved with the most needy, disadvantaged and oppressed people in our contemporary Australian society.*³



Srs Mary Densley and Bernardine Evens,
Collinson Camp, Hong Kong, 1985.

The NPC, seeking to make a comprehensive response, began by identifying a variety of ways in which sisters at home might become more directly involved with refugees. As well they appointed a sister to establish links with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) with a view to establishing a similar service with a mercy base.⁴ Years later, one of the directors of MRS provided the rationale for that decision.

*Among us we had the skills to bring to the task of accompanying refugees and the work was down to earth and relational. As religious we were available to go; we were not tied to family or place.*⁵

Directors of JRS, however, pointed out that MRS needed to establish an identity for itself and not be simply an adjunct of that body.

Mercy Sisters were welcome to join JRS but first they should be clear about how they can serve the refugees according to their charism. They should not simply be absorbed into JRS as individuals but rather they should ask how, as a body, they could join forces with JRS.⁶



Sister Anne McDonnell, Palawan Camp, Philippines, 1989.

Inspired by the Chapter call and the decision of the NPC, sisters came forward to become involved in the work. Since the two sisters already working in camps were classified JRS workers, links between the Mercies and JRS were firmly in place.⁷ Thus when the first meeting of the Mercy Refugee Service Committee was held in April 1985 with Sister Mary Densley as national coordinator, an agenda

item for discussion was how Mercies could collaborate with and learn from JRS.⁸ The service which developed from those initial meetings has enabled sisters and volunteers to respond in mercy to some of the most critical needs of our time both overseas and within Australia.

The response called for was not one based on romantic idealism. One observer noted that while in the early 80s the refugee cause was popular and many initiatives were taken, by the mid years of that decade, things were not as clear-cut.⁹ From the outset it was necessary to have in place specific procedures and processes. These were developed by Mary Densley and were of such a high standard that they became exemplars of future MRS-JRS collaboration.

The rationale and procedures that JRS and MRS developed in those years have become the model for JRS' partnerships with at least 50 other congregations around the world ... These

procedures ensure that we work more effectively and happily together, that field people are better supported and that each knows what is expected of them and on whom they can rely.¹⁰

In early 1986 seventeen Sisters of Mercy were among those who joined with Celso Romanin SJ, the coordinator of JRS in Australia, in a workshop specifically devoted to refugees. Here networks were established between people working in the camps and those involved in resettlement programmes in Australia. They were kept in contact by a regular newsletter. From this workshop, too, came the initiative, sponsored by MRS, whereby sisters agreed to act as tutors-by-correspondence for Khmer students studying English. Such was the take-up of this ministry that by November that year, twenty one sisters from nine separate congregations were involved in the work. As well as correcting the work of these students from the Site Two Refugee Camp on the Thai-Kampuchean border, sisters exchanged letters with them encouraging them to persevere in their studies - truly Mercy in action!



JRS-MRS Annual Conference Thailand 1998. L-R Srs Patricia Pak Poy, Denise Coghlan, Maureen Lohrey, Margaret Moore.

Financial Security

A successful application for funding to Australian Catholic Relief in 1986 enabled MRS to promote education and healthcare in refugee camps by setting up processes for the placement and support of additional workers. Funds were also used to educate Australians about refugees, their countries of origin, the camps and countries of resettlement. A third area of activity was to assist refugee resettlement in Australia. Ministering to the pastoral and educational needs of resettled refugees was growing more important. Catholic schools in the major cities enrolled refugee students. Brisbane, Melbourne,

Parramatta and Townsville Congregations sponsored families, providing friendship, social contact and language assistance.¹¹



Sister Maryanne Loughry with refugees in Hong Kong.

With structures defined and a source of funding secured, it was reported at the Second National Chapter, that the initial phase of MRS was complete. Once the identity of MRS was affirmed, its functions could be clearly defined. They were establishing and servicing the Mercy Refugee Worker network in Australia, developing links with other networks of refugee workers, working with refugees in camps, educating the mercy network and wider Australian community, developing resources and advocating in Australia on behalf of refugees. The chapter, fully aware that this was an extensive brief, ratified the establishment of MRS and made the position of coordinator full-time.

From this new position of strength, MRS assumed greater responsibility for the preparation and briefing of camp workers. Volunteers who returned to Australia were encouraged to visit schools and community groups, explaining the work and promoting understanding and support. The number of volunteers grew. There were nine sisters in refugee camps and seventy involved in the correspondence programme. Contacts were established in each congregation to heighten the profile of the service and its ministry. With increased exposure, it was possible to elicit more grants and donations. One important source of funds was Mercy Endeavour Australia. Established in 1989 as a network of women and men with mercy affiliations, this group made a special appeal

at their annual meeting, usually around the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, to support refugee work.¹² On the advocacy front a submission was made to the Fitzgerald inquiry into Australia's immigration policy.¹³

Widening Horizons

The sphere of influence of MRS widened the following year when the NPC requested the committee to investigate the possibility of ministry in PNG to refugees from West Papua. Next the committee was asked to explore the implications of having lay workers in the field under the auspices of MRS rather than JRS. Then a request was received for a sister to work with refugees along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. This last was to illustrate the fragility of refugee work. Sister Irie Duane tried for months to establish a programme for Afghan people returning to Afghanistan in Peshawar and further north along the border. In 1988 she estimated that there were three million Afghan refugees in need of assistance. However, despite the urgency of the situation, for a variety of reasons, efforts to establish a presence there were unsuccessful.¹⁴

Cambodia



Sister Denise Coghlan returning to Cambodia with essential supplies.

The joint MRS-JRS venture in the Thai-Kampuchean border came to a crisis point in 1989 with the end of the civil war and the declaration of the State of Cambodia. People in the field and their supporters at home were unsure whether they should stay and work in the camps or leave and denounce the all-too-evident exploitation of the people by the warring political factions. Finally it was decided to send Sister Denise Coghlan with a JRS team to direct ministry there, working in reconciliation, reuniting families and collaborating with United Nations personnel to achieve the safe repatriation of people.

Not knowing which government would ultimately win power in Cambodia, but sure that the poorest would always need care, [the team] opted to work with the war wounded, the land mine survivors, the illiterate peasant people.¹⁵



Sister Denise Coghlan in Cambodia.

An offshoot of that decision was the International Campaign for Banning Landmines. In 1997 this body was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and the man who received the prize on behalf of the group was Tun Channareth. Denise had appointed Tun as one of the leaders of her local group of men and women who called themselves 'Meta Karuna', the Cambodian term for 'mercy'.¹⁶

In the neighbouring country of Vietnam the 'Comprehensive Plan of Action' was put in place to 'deal with' asylum seekers. Without detailing this policy for the 'voluntary' repatriation of Vietnamese refugees, it resulted in thousands of Vietnamese refugees living in camps in South East Asia. There they remained hoping for resettlement in a third country, and desperately in need of the ministry which MRS provided.



Sister Irie Duane with TB patients, Ethiopia, 1993.

Africa

A further development was the involvement of sisters in Africa. In October 1991 Sister Lizzie Finnerty went to Ethiopia, to be followed by Sisters Irie Duane and Anne McDonnell. With their nursing skills these sisters could attend to the medical needs of the displaced

people in this area of Africa as well working towards their reintegration as they returned after the war.



Sister Loreto Conroy in 'Sik Hiu' camp, Thailand, 1991.

In 1992 Sister Bernadine Evens assumed the role of MRS coordinator and Sister Loreto Conroy was appointed Asia Field Assistant. In the report to the National Chapter at the beginning of 1993, it was noted that MRS personnel had taken stands 'modestly but confidently' in addressing issues such as policies



Sister Gaye Lennon, Thailand 2004.

on the definition, screening and repatriation of refugees, immigration and refugee quotas and resettlement programmes in Australia. They also turned their attention to counselling victims of trauma and cultural dislocation, reconciliation between factions and the rehabilitation of war-torn countries such as Cambodia and Ethiopia.

A significant achievement was the establishment of a basis for inter-faith dialogue by the lived experience of sisters and co-workers amongst refugee peoples in Australia and abroad.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, it was recommended to the third Chapter that MRS continue as a national project and also that its practice continue to be based on theological reflection. Lay involvement in MRS continued to be encouraged.



Sister Nikki Artery, Kenya.

Closure of the Camps

Sister Margaret Moore began work as the new MRS coordinator in 1995. Many camps were closing by this time as host countries engaged in the final stages of repatriating asylum seekers. The majority of camp workers were thus concluding their work. New avenues of presence for MRS workers were, however, opening. The Institute sponsored a project to explore and advise on an ongoing relationship with the people of Vietnam, including those residing or studying in Australia. Furthermore the hardening of attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers on

the part of Western governments meant that the number of refugees held in detention centres was increasing. MRS established a monitoring presence in Port Hedland and continued to seek ways to support families while they waited for a determination of their case.¹⁸ As was noted:

MRS provides the opportunity for sisters and their associates to live out the mercy charism according to their different gifts – some abroad, some at home, some teaching, some researching, some in the public forum, others very much in their own sphere of influence.¹⁹



Sister Lizzie Finnerty and friends.

At the turn of the this century there were approximately 26 million refugees and displaced people in the world. While numbers in detention centres were increasing, in most situations the conditions in which people were being held raised serious

questions about human rights.²⁰ The report to the Fourth National Chapter showed that under the banner of MRS and in partnership with other agencies, sisters were ministering in Thailand (Maureen Lohrey), Nepal (Margaret Tallon and Carole McDonald), Cambodia (Denise Coghlan), Angola (Elizabeth Finnerty and Sandra Smolinski),



Sister Patricia Pak Poy at a Landmines conference 1996.

Uganda (Catherine Corbett, Nikki Artery and Joan Kelleher) and Ethiopia (Anne McDonnell). On the international scene Maryanne Loughry was tutoring with Oxford Refugee Education and Patricia Pak Poy was a consultant for the Landmines Campaign. Many sisters were working with resettled refugees in schools, parishes, hospitals and counselling centres. Loreto Conroy was director for the refugee ministry for the National Council of Churches in NSW, Helen Barnes and Marea Roberts were in full-time ministry with asylum seekers and refugees especially those in the Villawood Detention Centre.



MRS Conference 2002. L-R Back: Srs Mary Densley, Cathy Corbert, Carole McDonald, Anne Foale, Maureen Lohrey, Lizzie Finnerty. Front: Srs Margaret Moore, Anne McDonnell, Mary Keely, Marleen Flaherty, Joan Campbell, Patricia Lynch, Maryanne Loughry, Bernadine Evens, Irie Duane.

Resettlement of Refugees

In response to encouragement 'to re-ignite a spirit that will allow us to be a compassionate and caring society', the work of MRS in Australia took on many shapes.²¹ A Community Links Voluntary Resettlement Scheme in NSW and similar programmes in Victoria and Queensland assisted hundreds of families to make their home in Australia. Visitation of detention centres, advocacy on behalf of the inmates and setting up half-way houses to assist those whose claims for refugee status had been recognised, were other ways in which sisters became involved. Support houses were established in Perth and Launceston. Strong communication networks were established. Articles were published in magazines. In collaboration with JRS, membership was gained on strategic councils and committees. Educational materials were developed to further the work of raising awareness of the plight of refugees and displaced people. In the early years of this century two conferences were conducted.



Kiunga, PNG St Gerard's Women's Centre.

In November 2002 Sister Margaret Moore organised a conference in Melbourne at which hundreds of participants learned of and reflected on the asylum seeker crisis throughout the world. Margaret's imperative to her sisters was uncompromising:

As Mercy women committed to stand with those most vulnerable we have a special role in bringing that spirit [of compassion] to life in the hearts of those we work with and for in Australia and in society as a whole.²²

The following year an international conference was held in Johannesburg, providing Mercies from several countries the opportunity to discuss and observe the situations in those countries where they were involved in refugee work.

A significant development in recent years has been the contract between MRS and the diocese of Daru-Kiunga in the western region of Papua New Guinea by which two sisters provide community development and pastoral assistance programmes to the West Papuans who live there.

Structures

In the face of this expansion of ministry it became evident that the management structures in place for MRS were inadequate. A review in 2001 led to the MRS Advisory Committee requesting the NPC to set up a new management structure. This was completed in 2003 when the management of MRS was passed to Mercy Works Inc. At its inception and for the following nineteen years MRS was under the governance of the leadership of the Institute. When, in 2003, it came under the management of Mercy Works Inc., the latter, a public association incorporated in NSW assumed total responsibility. The MRS strategic plan for 2005-6, therefore, dovetailed with that of Mercy Works, but had a specific refugee focus. It continued to be the unifying body for the Sisters of Mercy on matters relating to refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons. Working collaboratively and in partnership with local and international associations, it continued in advocacy and in promoting projects to assist these people. Within the overarching structure of Mercy Works, MRS established sound strategy, policy and procedures to govern and guide its functions, including strategies for seeking funds to support and sustain its projects.²³

Conclusion

In the first five years of its existence the Institute made a commitment to respond to the growing global issue of refugees by the establishment of MRS. According to its Mission Statement,

Mercy Refugee Service was entrusted by the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia to serve without discrimination the uprooted and oppressed people who seek a life of safety and dignity. We understand as our fundamental purpose the commitment to asylum seekers, to the internally displaced and refugees and therefore strive to firmly advocate human rights and promote justice and compassion abroad and in Australia.²⁴

As a result a significant body of sisters has served in refugee camps in Asia and Africa. Over the years sisters have ministered directly to refugees in Australia and have come to understand the pain and uncertainty of the refugee person. Others have become schooled in human rights and in international and Australian law as applied to refugees. Several sisters have worked within detention centres at Port Hedland, Christmas Island, Curtin, Villawood, Maribyrnong and Baxter. MRS has provided access to sound information, education, analysis and resources for theological reflection to equip sisters and their co-workers for lobbying and advocacy. Many have found ways of meeting with asylum seekers who have been released on temporary protection visas to offer friendship and hospitality and to hear their stories. Most have been changed by these encounters.

Sisters and lay volunteers have thus been enabled to follow the mercy call to mission among the displaced and uprooted in the world. This ministry, close to the founding charism of our congregation, will, no doubt, remain vibrant as long as the issue of refugees remains.

2. MERCY WORKS INCORPORATED

Traditionally Sisters of Mercy have worked both individually and corporately, to bring about a more just and compassionate world. Since its establishment, the Institute has actively engaged in ministries among Aboriginal communities, refugees and people in developing countries. This engagement, dependent in the main on financial contributions from the various Mercy congregations, has generally been effected by direct service in areas such as education, health care, community development and advocacy. Over time, these aspects of Institute ministry have been known collectively by titles such as 'Mercy Overseas Aid' and 'Mercy Cross Cultural Ministries'. However, in 2000 a single entity, Mercy Works Incorporated, was established as the umbrella for all such activity.²⁵

Mercy Overseas Aid

Mercy Overseas Aid was established in 1993 for the Institute to fund the overseas missions and ministries for which it was responsible, chiefly the missions in Papua New Guinea and Pakistan and the ministry of Mercy Refugee Service. The sole reason for its existence was to support activities expressing the Institute's vision and mission. Thus it was said:

The impetus that gave rise to the establishment of Mercy Overseas Aid was financial, as it was obvious that the Sisters of Mercy of Australia would not be able to be the sole supporters of [Institute] National Projects indefinitely. A vehicle was established to enable the seeking of funds from the wider community, and it was decided to go down the route of gaining tax-deductible status.²⁶

From the outset it gave priority to programmes focusing on relief and promoting empowerment and self-reliance. In particular it directed its ministry towards refugees and other displaced persons, groups disempowered by lack of education and access to resources, women disempowered by cultural factors and indigenous Australians.

Incorporated under the Associations Incorporation Act in January 1993, Mercy Overseas Aid was gazetted as a tax-exempt Association under the Income Tax Assessment Act in June 1997. These two factors had attendant requirements for accountability, more extensive than had hitherto been required by the reporting mechanisms of the Institute. The need for improved practice with regard to development, as well as for a more adequate infrastructure to support this ministry led to the NEC's appointing a National Projects Review Committee to submit a report to the Fourth National Chapter.



Australia Mercy Connect - Refugee Mentoring Programme.

Members of this committee,²⁷ faithful to their brief, spent considerable time reviewing the involvement of the Institute in inter-congregational ministries. They concluded that it was vitally important to develop a rationale and some operating principles for nationally-sponsored ministries both in Australia and overseas. Ministries needed to be evaluated. The relationship between ministries and the Institute, congregations and other partners needed clarification with regard to decision-making, finance, personnel, and contracts. From a broader perspective, it appeared that global issues and the potential for local, national and international advocacy needed some exploration to raise the sisters' awareness of possibilities for ministry. Additionally, processes for discerning the appropriateness of beginning, continuing and concluding a

particular placement needed to be developed. Strategies for preparation for and orientation in a particular ministry also needed attention. Underlying all these conclusions was the conviction that the Institute as a whole needed to be aware of national projects and what was happening with and in them.



East Timor Water Project.

Mercy Works Inc.

Using this report as a basis for reflection and action, the Institute Leadership Team embarked on a process which had far-reaching results. Firstly, Mercy Overseas Aid was renamed Mercy Works Inc., and a Board of Directors was established to take responsibility for its governance and management. In addition, judging it inappropriate for the foundations of Papua New Guinea and Pakistan to continue to be funded by Mercy Works, the Team decided that the Institute would take full responsibility for these. Recognition by Institute leadership that the two groups, Sisters

of Mercy of Papua New Guinea and Sisters of Mercy of Pakistan, as foundations of the Institute, were Institute responsibilities was a major breakthrough. Freed from the obligation to support the foundations, as opposed to the ministries in which the sisters engaged, Mercy Works was able to concentrate more on development work and to include onshore programmes, especially projects for indigenous peoples, within its scope. Of this changed structure Sister Patricia Pak Poy, chair of the Management Committee of Mercy Works wrote:

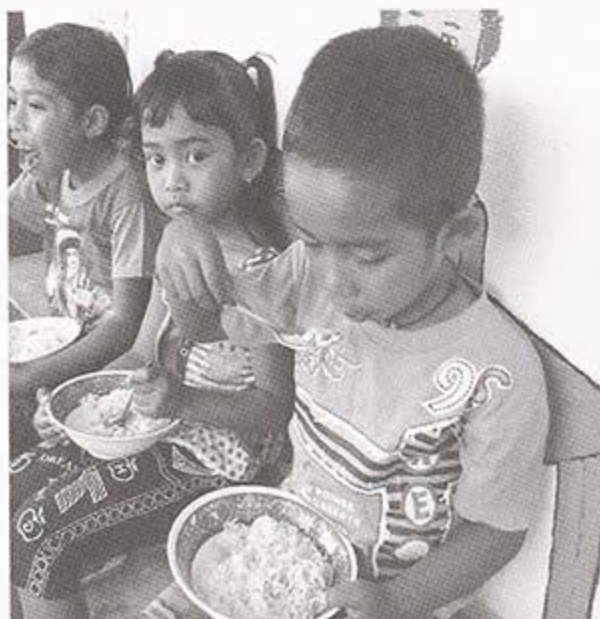
The name change from 'Mercy Overseas Aid Inc.' to 'Mercy Works Inc.' reflected the need to have our work with indigenous communities in Australia included in the mercy organisation that was set up earlier primarily to cover our work overseas ... The whole was looking to assist and support the work of our

*sisters in Papua New Guinea, Pakistan, in the Mercy Refugee Service and those working with Aboriginal communities in Australia.*²⁸



Sister Theresia Boyek in Goroka.

Sister Helen Nolen was appointed as the executive officer of Mercy Works in 2000, assuming at the same time, the role of coordinator of Cross-cultural Ministries.²⁹ Since the two were closely related, structures for association were developed by the management committee of Mercy Works and its newly-appointed chair, Sister Patricia Pak Poy. As structures were reviewed weaknesses in the management structures of Mercy Works became apparent. Immediately a consultant was appointed to develop, in conjunction with a working party established for that purpose, more effective and efficient structures.³⁰



East Timor Nutrition Programme.

The process engaged in was possibly different from that which was generally expected. At Plenary Council level they began by considering the question: *What vision does the Institute hold for Mercy Works Inc.?* Material generated by this reflection became the basis of a newly-articulated focus: the promotion of a 'growing collective response to the national and international situation'.³¹ This focus was unanimously endorsed.

Structures to support the focus were then developed and necessary changes to the constitution proposed. To underpin the structure the NPC urged an education programme for all members of the Institute

to promote a sound understanding of development, of human rights and of justice in [their] everyday lives. ³²

At the 2003 Annual General Meeting of Mercy Works Inc., it was agreed to establish a Board of Directors responsible for governance and management, for projects with indigenous people and for ministry projects of Sisters of Mercy in Papua New Guinea and Pakistan.³³ Mary Densley was elected as Chair and immediately began selecting a new executive officer. Maryanne Loughry was appointed to this position in 2004. It was at this time that the activities associated with Mercy Refugee Service were brought under the management of Mercy Works Inc.

Programmes

Programmes sponsored by Mercy Works focus on partnerships with communities to promote justice and self-reliance and to support displaced people and communities without access to basic resources such as education, health care and social welfare. In Australia these programmes underwrite community education in world development issues, provide assistance with refugees and foster partnership with indigenous people. Overseas, the primary focus is on the Asia-Pacific where, programmes formulated in collaboration with local partners, concentrated on the education, health care, and social and spiritual well-being of poor or displaced persons.

Papua New Guinea

To combat serious social issues in their country, the Sisters of Mercy of Papua New Guinea, in partnership with Mercy Works launched in 2006 a major community development project. Known as Mercy Works PNG, the project assists people in the Eastern and Western Highlands Provinces to address the increasing problems of unemployment, domestic violence and HIV-AIDS. The Mercy Works PNG project funds drop-in and referral centres at Goroka and Mt Hagen which offer skill development workshops, support groups,

individual advocacy and referral services. An outreach service is also available to the more remote villages. Services include human rights awareness, health education, violence prevention, parenting skills, as well as cooking, sewing, budgeting and income-generating activities.



West Papua: Sister Maureen Sexton on the Fly River.

In collaboration with other local partner groups in PNG, Mercy Works is supporting a range of community development projects, in the remote Western Province where large numbers of West Papuan refugees have been living for about thirty years. These projects include maternal and child health care, women’s leadership and skill development, education and training support and skill development for young men at-risk.



Water Project, Fohorem, East Timor.

East Timor

Programmes in East Timor have been concentrated in the remote and mountainous area of Fohorem in the country's south-west, near the West Timor border. A major focus has been to support primary and secondary education and the professional development of teachers. In recent years, Mercy Works Inc., in

partnership with other groups in Australia, has engaged in other community development and infrastructure projects with the local community. Recently a permanent and safe water system was installed significantly improving living conditions and health outcomes for Fohorem and surrounding villages.³⁴

Pakistan



Tertiary education support, Karachi.

Operating on the principle that education is central to creating positive change in Pakistan, Mercy Works supports primary, secondary and tertiary education in Karachi and Rawalpindi with an emphasis on the needs of women, children, and ethnic and religious minority groups. All projects are managed in a multi-faith environment.

Refugees

In recent years, Mercy Works has concentrated its support on newly-arrived refugees in Australia. A recent development has been 'Classroom Connect', a project to recruit, train and support volunteers who welcome refugee students settling in Australia. Once trained, they assist the students in a variety of educational settings.



Water Project, Fohorem, East Timor.

Structural Changes

In the past six years there have been further changes to the structures of Mercy Works Inc. To ensure the ministry's financial viability the IPC guaranteed its administrative costs for five years with the reciprocal agreement for Mercy Works to put serious efforts into promotion. In 2008, to enhance communication about Mercy Works and its activities, a bi-annual publication, *The Bilum*, was launched. Sent to members, donors and partners of Mercy Works this provides the information on the people involved in the many projects supported by Mercy Works

In July 2010 a special General Meeting accepted a totally new structure for Mercy Works Inc. The increasing number of offshore projects which attracted tax-deductible funding meant that it was advisable to seek status as a Public Benevolent Institution. As a consequence the corporate structure needed to be changed from an Incorporated Structure to a Company Limited by Guarantee. It is hoped that these changes will take Mercy Works into the future as an effective means of furthering the justice, human rights and development work of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea.

Mercy Works has been and continues to be the Institute's chief means for strategically implementing the collective commitment of congregations to justice, human rights and development among the poor of the world. Sisters and their partners in ministry particularly appreciate the capacity of Mercy Works to extend the mission of Catherine McAuley among some of the world's most vulnerable people, and show, as she did, a special care for women and children.

3. INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The Aboriginal peoples of this country have been an outreach of Sisters of Mercy from the time that Ursula Frayne began ministering to them in Perth in 1846. A great number of Mercy women have responded to their needs and to the injustices they have suffered. Sisters have formed warm and enduring relationships with Aboriginal people, some over many years and across several generations. Many have been involved in full-time ministry with Aboriginal people. With regard to call to minister to these people it has been stated:

*involvement in the support for indigenous people is not an option for a Mercy - it is part of the vocation. There is a place for every Mercy in this ministry even if it is only in her attitude.*³⁵

1988

In the bicentennial year the Second National Chapter issued a press release supporting the call for reconciliation and calling on the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition to take public and united action for reconciliation and justice between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. The Statement affirmed the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage and the entitlement of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders to self-management and self-determination. Delegates favoured a compact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens, claiming that it could serve as the basis for a new chapter of justice in Australia's history.³⁶

In that same year the sisters in the Kutjungka region hosted a gathering to which all Mercy women in the Centre, the Central North and the Northwest were invited. They explored the potential of forming a 'Mercy Circle' based on a common commitment to the concerns of indigenous Australians and of networking for nurture and support across the vast distances that separate them. This group expressed a firm commitment to the concerns of indigenous Australians by using funds from the Mercy community in the Kutjungka region to put in place the Mercy Aboriginal Justice Network. In addition they issued a statement publicly aligning themselves with Aboriginal people, seeking reconciliation and pledging to support them in fighting injustice.³⁷

In October 1991 the NPC made the following decision.

*In line with the movement towards a Treaty of Reconciliation
... we take as a national mercy priority reconciliation between
Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians,*³⁸

The following year more than a hundred Mercy Sisters, their Aboriginal friends and co-workers, church, community and political leaders, gathered at Alice Springs to explore the theme 'Recognition and Reconciliation between

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians'. Momentum from this gathering found expression in a recommendation to the Fourth National Chapter and the subsequent Chapter statement that

we will strengthen our commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia,³⁹

Coordination at Institute Level

As a result Sister Libby Jordan was appointed to coordinate Institute involvement with indigenous people. The role included resourcing the network of sisters involved in Aboriginal ministry, liaising with indigenous organisations and related church and government bodies, supporting Mercies involved in reconciliation and being responsible for public communication of a national mercy viewpoint on current issues. A consultative committee began meeting in 1995 with the task of developing, resourcing and activating the inter-connecting networks of sisters involved in direct ministry with indigenous people and in reconciliation. One important achievement of this committee was to ensure that recognition and acknowledgement were given to Traditional Owners at all mercy gatherings and in all mercy institutions.



Attendees at the Perth workshop on Aboriginal issues: Sisters Jilyan Dingle and Janina Pascoe.

The National Projects Review report to the Fourth National Chapter referred explicitly to the Institute's ministry to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, recommending that it be considered among the Institute Collaborative Ministries. It was proposed that the ministry be known as the Mercy Aboriginal Justice Network and include involvement in reconciliation processes including political advocacy and sisters in direct ministry with Aboriginal people. A third aspect of the Mercy Aboriginal Justice Network was facilitating

the placement and support of personnel for ministry with the Aboriginal communities of the Kutjungka region.⁴⁰

Review of Institute Involvement with Aboriginal People

In the early months of 2001 a series of meetings was held to assess the changing nature of Institute involvement with the Aboriginal people.⁴¹ Cross-cultural issues with refugees and asylum seekers, while vitally important, seemed to be putting Aboriginal issues in the background of national news and thinking. Leadership was concerned that a number of sisters who had worked for several years in full-time ministry with Aboriginal people were retiring or withdrawing from their ministry. They feared there could have been a tendency for others to hide behind the commitment of these women.⁴² This was the time when the restructuring of Mercy Works was taking place. It was decided to place the focal point of the Mercy Aboriginal Justice Network in each congregation, emphasising the involvement of local indigenous people, thereby ensuring local ownership. An important aspect of the review was that it urged sisters to accept the radical challenge to 'own and address [their] own racist relationships'⁴³



Aboriginal Workshop, Perth, 2003, Sisters Catherine O'Connor, Marie Fitzgerald, Paula McAdam.



Katrina Wridgeway-Davis, participant in the Mercy Works Inc. Indigenous Safe House Project, Kempsey.

From 2003 funding of projects among indigenous people has been managed by Mercy Works Inc. The conviction that educational opportunities are fundamental to improving the well-being of indigenous Australians is behind the many projects that have been set up in partnership with indigenous communities. Their objective is to overcome poverty and disadvantage through education and training initiatives.

A long-term result of the review of Institute involvement with indigenous peoples was a submission to the Inquiry into the Progress Towards National Reconciliation, lodged in 2003. On a local level an education process to address the meaning and purpose of 'treaty' as a vehicle for furthering reconciliation was initiated. Each phase of the review called for a reaffirmation of Institute commitment to Aboriginal peoples. In a further development, Sister Berneice Loch was employed to organise a series of workshops in Perth, Cairns, and Bathurst to consult with field workers and Aboriginal people, to discern directions in ministry and provide material for reflection.⁴⁴ The ultimate aim was to confirm and establish enduring, respectful and loving relationships between sisters and their indigenous partners.⁴⁵ The contribution made to gatherings by the indigenous people who attended as participants or resource people was inestimable. From the workshops came an endorsement that indigenous spirituality is a gift to the whole of the Australian church and hence to the mercy world.

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- ¹ Moore, M., 'We Speak from Where We Stand', *Listen*, 20, i (2002) p.6.
- ² In 1984 a team from Mercy Hospital Melbourne was working in the camps. As well, Sr Bernardine Evens was at Panat Nikhom in Thailand and Sr Joan Campbell at Palau Bidong in Malaysia, both of them working with the Jesuit Refugee Service. Joan had been sent to Malaysia by the Red Cross but after six months switched to JRS.
- ³ Directive from the First National Chapter. See AISMA 101.1.
- ⁴ Mark Raper remembers *Patricia Pak Pay [who] came to Bangkok in 1984 for one of [the] first regional meetings of JRS in Asia, tasked by the fledgling Institute of Sisters of Mercy in Australia to explore and suggest ways in which the Mercies could also serve the refugees*. Raper, M., 'Mercy and the National Interest', Keynote address for the National Conference of Mercy Refugee Service, 2002. AISMA 306.11.2.
- ⁵ Moore, M., *loc cit*.
- ⁶ Raper, M., *loc.cit*.
- ⁷ Sr Carole McDonald was accepted as a JRS volunteer in March 1985.
- ⁸ At an earlier meeting with Celso Romanin (coordinator of JRS in Australia) and Mark Raper (coordinator in Asia) advice had been sought as to how the MRS might function in conjunction with JRS). See *Report of Coordinator of MRS to NPC Meeting October 1985*. AISMA 306.9.
- ⁹ Raper, M., *loc.cit*.
- ¹⁰ *ibid*.
- ¹¹ *ISMA News* June 1987.
- ¹² On Mercy Endeavour, see below p.158.
- ¹³ MRS Timeline. AISMA 306.5/1.
- ¹⁴ Raper, M., *loc.cit*.
- ¹⁵ *ibid*.
- ¹⁶ See the official website of ICBL <http://www.icbl.org/index.php/icbl/About-Us/Ambassadors/reth>
- ¹⁷ Report KB, p.7.
- ¹⁸ See Moore, *op.cit.*, p.9.
- ¹⁹ ISMA, *Report to Fourth National Chapter*, 1998. AISMA 101.4
- ²⁰ *ibid.*, MRS Report.
- ²¹ See Moore, *op.cit.*, p.9
- ²² *ibid*.
- ²³ See *Mercy Refugee Service, Strategic Plan 2005-6*, AISMA 306.1.
- ²⁴ Mercy Works Inc., *Mercy Refugee Service Specific Program Policy and Criteria*, p.1 AISMA 306.1.
- ²⁵ For a more extensive coverage of the ministries engaged in by Mercy Works, see the Institute website <http://www.mercy.org.au/mercyworks/default.cfm?loadref=198>
- ²⁶ ISMA, *Reports to Fourth National Chapter, Mercy Overseas Aid Report*. AISMA 101.4.
- ²⁷ Sisters Mary Densley, Bernadine Evens, Wendy Flannery, Jan Geason, Margaret Ryan and Mary Tinney.
- ²⁸ Pak Poy, P, 'Reflections on Mercy Works Inc.: From Overseas Aid to Mercy Works', *Listen*, 21, ii, 2003, p.36.

- ²⁹ National Projects were re-named 'Cross Cultural Ministries' as a result of the Review of National Projects. See ISMA, *Reports to Fifth National Chapter*, 2004, p. 101. AISMA 101.5.
- ³⁰ Paul Bullen of *Management Alternatives* was appointed as consultant, *ibid.*, p. 102. AISMA 101.5.
- ³¹ *ibid.*
- ³² *ibid.*
- ³³ as opposed to the viability of the foundations.
- ³⁴ This was developed in partnership with the Fohorem Water Commission, Rotary Mosman (NSW) and Rotary Dili.
- ³⁵ Report of Berneice Loch to the NPC, *Mercy Gatherings: Ministry with Indigenous Partners*, p.2. AISMA 204.1/40.
- ³⁶ Media release from Second National Chapter, 13/01/1988, AISMA 101.2.
- ³⁷ In a report to the Chapter in December 1998 it was noted that 95% of the costs associated with the position and activities of the Mercy Aboriginal Justice Network Coordinator had been met from that source. AISMA 101.4.
- ³⁸ See AISMA 201/.1/10.
- ³⁹ ISMA, *Third National Chapter, Statements and Proposals, Formal Proceedings*, 4.3 # 8, p.16. AISMA 101.3
- ⁴⁰ ISMA, *Reports to the Fourth National Chapter, December 1998, National Projects' Review Report*.
- ⁴¹ A Task Force consisting of Sisters Maura Kelleher, Moira Truelson and Paula Smith was responsible for the process. ISMA, *Reports to Fifth National Chapter*, p.107. AISMA 101.5.
- ⁴² *ibid.*, p.107.
- ⁴³ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ Loch, B., *Mercy Gatherings: Ministry with Indigenous Partners*, Report to NPC 2003, p.3 and n.7. AISMA 204.1/40.

CHAPTER 7: COMMITTEES AND NETWORKS

Committees

Committees were established as part of the administrative services offered by and to the Institute to promote vitality and unity across the diversity of missionary activity in which sisters were engaged. National committees were organised to develop policy, to research and to plan, to offer critical and creative advice to leadership and Chapter, to represent the interests of the sisters in the apostolate and to promote initiatives on behalf of the Institute.

Networks

The Second National Chapter described networks as

less formal linking of persons with their particular talents, resources and relationships, in order to enhance possibilities for service and for the achievement of individual/group goals.¹

Throughout the history of the Institute, the development of networks and committees follows a series of patterns in which networks commence and are formalised into committees, or, conversely, committees are established and, to engage with a wider audience, set up networks.

What follows is a summary of the achievements of some of the key Institute committees and networks. It is impossible to treat each group formed during the lifetime of the Institute. Furthermore there is insufficient space to treat any of them in depth. A few broad brushstrokes is all that can be provided, in the hope that they give an illustration of the extent of ministry accomplished through them.

1. SOCIAL JUSTICE

At the National Assembly in 1977 a request was made for a formal structure to facilitate involvement in social justice issues. From that request developed the Institute Social Justice Committee.² By the completion of the Second National Chapter a 'Justice Desk' had been established at the Institute and

focus areas for action for justice had been identified and endorsed. These were fourfold, namely recognition of Aboriginal rights and reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, support and advocacy for refugees both overseas and within Australia, a wide range of women's issues and peace and disarmament especially in the Pacific.³ Activity during the years leading to the Third National Chapter centred on establishing sound principles and processes for social change from Gospel and mercy perspectives. Reporting on action for justice during her term of office Sister Kath Burke wrote:

Rather than opting for dependence on policy statements handed down from the top or centre, efforts have been directed towards effecting change in ourselves and in those issues and areas where we have natural insertion, in-touchness (sic) and recognised competence.⁴

Education and consciousness-raising were given first priority, to be effected through theological reflection and action.

In February 1999, immediately following the Fourth National Chapter, Sister Shirley Garland was appointed to the position of Institute Mercy Justice Coordinator. A resource committee supported her.⁵ This group strove to integrate mercy and justice within the mercy culture and was responsible for significant initiatives such as setting up justice contacts in each congregation, utilising technology for contact with all sisters, implementing the approach of 'experience and advocacy' and establishing links with the Mercy International Justice Network.⁶ It soon was realised that Institute justice structures needed to change. Sisters were becoming increasingly aware that injustice is encountered daily in every ministry and that consequently they needed to operate equally from an experiential and an advocacy perspective.

In 2000 the IPC called the Institute to embrace action on behalf of justice, declaring that

Justice is recognised ... as a constitutive dimension of ... mercy life and ministries.⁷

In recognition that

*effective mercy justice networks for collaborative action [were]
in place and operational,*

the IPC established a Core Justice Network to monitor, map and encourage initiatives for justice education in key areas of mission and to assist in the establishment of ministry networks.⁸ All sisters and their co-workers were invited to explore, in whatever ministry they were involved, the various dimensions of justice. Meetings across Australia affirmed that the call for justice is present in everyday ministry and that making an appropriate response is an ongoing challenge at the heart of the Institute commitment to justice.

Conference 2001

A wider perspective on national justice was gained by sisters who attended the international Conference in 2001 in Bronkhorstspuit, South Africa. At the conference the wealth of experience possessed by Sisters of Mercy world-wide in regard to those rendered powerless by societal structures was constantly brought to the fore. This validated Institute mercy and justice approach which, from the outset, had emphasised the importance of political action being centred on actual experience. Basing its decision on resolutions of the conference, the Institute Justice Network took as their objective from 2001 onwards

*to focus analysis, solidarity and action on all forms of
violence against women and children and on racism in all its
manifestations.⁹*

Participants returned with renewed awareness of the need for a deeper understanding of the global, social, economic, political and cultural structures which oppress peoples, nations and the earth.

Institute Justice Model

In October 2001 the mandate of the Justice Core Group was confirmed by the IPC and it was given the task of developing a model for Institute Justice which would reflect the learnings from the recent international conference. Implemented in 2006, the model based all activity on sound theological principles and Gospel values. It used electronic media as its main source of communication. Fortnightly dissemination to all the sisters of the Institute of articles relevant to the four specific areas for justice action aimed at raising awareness of justice issues and educating sisters in action for justice.¹⁰ To integrate action for justice throughout Institute ministries, the Institute Justice Network was set up in early 2002 with links to the coordinators of Mercy Works, Mercy Refugee Service, Mercy Aboriginal Justice, Papua New Guinea, Pakistan and the Mercy International Justice Network. The last, a network within Mercy International Association set up in 1996, linked members in specific geographic areas to work together to effect transformation for mercy and justice in the world.¹¹

Members of the Institute Justice Network have investigated ways of using their group for interaction, sharing of information and reflection leading to action. A workshop was held in February 2004 to strengthen relationships, share happenings in ministries and action for justice and to consider some aspects of the human rights approach to justice work. The Network has continued to highlight the four focus areas - asylum seekers and refugees, eco-justice, indigenous concerns and women in poverty.

Together the various justice networks and the Institute Justice Committee have initiated skilled research. They have highlighted issues of justice both locally and globally and have encouraged further reflection and action for justice through readings in *Mercy M@tters* and the various articles published in *Listen*. The four elements of information, education, reflection and action are basic to the articles which continually invite readers into deeper exploration of justice. Keeping the four focus areas on both the mercy and the public agenda is a vital work of the Institute.

Mercy Justice Conference

In 2009 with the full support of the Institute a conference was held in Queanbeyan entitled 'Embrace the Other and Welcome Difference'. A process consisting of keynote speakers and open space technology enabled the exploration of issues through research, stories, questions and experience. Participants committed themselves to continue working through these complex issues to achieve greater understanding at local, national and global levels.

Conclusion

Faithful to Catherine's spirit and vision, Sisters of Mercy in the past thirty years have implemented justice models characterised by partnerships with people disempowered by society and a realisation of the centrality of theology to justice work.

2. Education

In 1984, three years after the Institute began, Sisters of Mercy were involved in forty Institute-owned educational institutions and in more than three hundred and fifty which were mainly parish-owned. Two hundred and forty five sisters were involved in administering these institutions, another six hundred and twenty nine were staff members. Seventy seven sisters worked in educational institutions other than schools and over a hundred were involved in educational apostolates independent of institutions.¹² These are not simply statistics for the sake of statistics. They illustrate the breadth of commitment of congregations to this traditional work of mercy, a commitment taking its inspiration from the foundress' maxim that

*no work of charity can be more productive of good to society or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women.*¹³

Following the establishment of the Mercy Education Commission to examine the status and extent of Mercy Education in Australia, ten sisters met in Adelaide to explore ways of sharing the mercy ethos between Melbourne, Ballarat and Adelaide congregational schools.¹⁴



Participants at the inaugural National Secondary Schools Conference, Sydney 1990.

The enthusiasm stemming from this venture resulted in the inaugural National Secondary Schools Conference of the Institute, held in Sydney in 1990.¹⁵ Delivering the keynote address, Sister Gabrielle Jennings reflected on the

philosophical shift that is occurring in Australian education and of the pervasive dominance of consumerism, competition, ambition, 'human capital' theory and economic rationalism,

values which she saw as the greatest challenge to Christian educators and 'in stark contrast to those nurtured by mercy educators'.¹⁶

Resolutions from this conference included setting up a support system for those in administrative positions in 'Mercy' schools, establishing networks to support the articulation of mercy values and traditions, forming a National Association of Mercy Secondary Schools to act as a catalyst for change and facilitate staff formation, political lobbying and curriculum sharing.¹⁷

The question of forming an association was raised again at the 1992 Conference. Following discussion it was prepared for formal presentation at the Brisbane Conference two years later. In the meantime the third National Chapter endorsed the initiative, encouraged the Association to pursue its aims and invited representatives to dialogue with Institute personnel.¹⁸ In Brisbane

the name and the purpose of the association were clarified and Sister Maureen McGuirk was elected first President.¹⁹

For almost twenty years this Association has continued to bring educators of note to its biennial meeting and to search for ways to face with energy and creativity the challenges encountered by educators in the twenty-first century.

*Our challenge is to find the new structures which will enable Catherine's work to continue. In our schools we are challenged to educate young people to develop a self strongly rooted in Christian faith and committed to the values of mercy.*²⁰

3. Health Care

A Mercy Hospitals Association was established as early as 1973. It was independent of the National Conference of Sisters of Mercy but a request came to the First National Chapter for its acceptance as a national committee. In 1993 the First National Conference of Mercy Health Care Linkages was held in Brisbane. Its stated objectives were to

*deepen ... appreciation of the mercy approach to Catholic health care; and look at ways of carrying the tradition forward. To link people connected with the provision of Mercy Health Care. To affirm the resources in Mercy health care. To celebrate our identity as women and men of mercy.*²¹

Inspired by the success of this conference, at the Third National Chapter it was reported

*The committee believes that the time is right for linkages. Expectations are high. Good things have already begun to happen. People are gaining confidence, issues are being discussed, networking is being promoted and there is acknowledgement that the future with its ongoing benefits and resourcing rests with each one. Linkages are happening at grass roots level. Our reading of the climate is that Mercy Health Linkages is supported.*²²

Mercy Health Care Australia

Following this Chapter Mercy Health Care Australia was inaugurated. The member-congregations were Brisbane, Goulburn, Melbourne, North Sydney, Perth and Rockhampton. The Institute as a whole was also a member. Together members decided

*to act as a united body to assist the Members and their health care facilities in the promotion and development of the Mercy Health Care Ministry across Australia with particular reference to mission, governance/sponsorship, policy, management, information and public awareness, networking and evaluation.*²³

A Board of Management was established to administer and manage the company. However, given that the member health institutions had varying governance structures it soon became obvious that the Board's capacity to administer and manage was limited.

In 1999 members addressed their concerns. They invited the two congregations which owned hospitals but who had not joined Mercy Health Care Australia to do so.²⁴ Townsville accepted the invitation. However, in the meantime, given difficulties caused mainly by distance, Perth had withdrawn.

Each congregation submitted to the process a list of health and/or aged care institutions which it wished to be included in Mercy Health Care Australia and a due diligence process was carried out for each of these. While this was valuable to the institutions themselves and for each of the owner-congregations it demonstrated that it was not feasible to continue in Mercy Health Care Australia. In April 2000 a decision was taken to cancel the process and disband the company. All issues were finalised and Mercy Health Care Australia ceased to exist in July 2003.²⁵

4. Institute Archivists' Network

In February 1995 Mercy archivists met in Adelaide to explore ways of interacting more effectively and to develop a common archival policy for congregations. Organised by Sisters Deirdre O'Connor, Mary Ryan and Margaret Barry, the meeting resolved to found the Mercy Archivists' Network



Sisters Mary Ryan and Deirdre O'Connor.

Since then archivists have organised workshops on relevant issues, published a regular newsletter and held a biennial conference.²⁶ In particular, the last has been an avenue for archivists to meet and support each other in their ministry, to network at both the professional and personal level and to share inspirational and useful information.

Workshops sponsored by the network have treated matters such as common archival policies, database programs, digitisation of records, storage and preservation of photographs, conservation and preservation methods and means of recording, transcribing and storing oral history. Meeting requirements to provide material to the Mercy International Centre and Mercy International Association has also been given high priority.²⁷

Since forming the network a number of Mercy archivists have attended the International conferences, in Dublin in 1996 and 2003 and in Burlingame USA in 2009.



Archivists' Conference, Brisbane 2007.

Institute Archivists' Committee

Following the Archivists' meeting in Brisbane in 2007 the Institute Archivists' Committee was established. Behind the request for this committee was the hope to encourage peer support, networking and discussion amongst Mercy archivists in Australia and to promote the dissemination of information on developments and initiatives in record keeping and archive management. This committee assumed responsibility for initiating professional development for archivists, including the biennial Australasian Mercy Archivists' Conference. The establishment of this committee formalised the relationship between the Mercy Archivists' network and the Institute and has facilitated decision-making at an Institute level.

5. Communications

The primary purpose of the Institute Communications Committee, a committee of the IPC, is to ensure that systems, policies and practices are in place to enable effective communication throughout the Institute.

Institute Leadership had resolved that mercy mission in the twenty first century depended on a communication network enabling maximum possibilities for developing relationships, sharing knowledge and information and acting cohesively with colleagues and associates. A contract was given to Fraynetwork Multimedia to expand the former Institute website to accommodate a content repository, a linked data base, an interactive news source, a place for discussion and a source of information on the Sisters of Mercy in Australia.²⁸ The approaching fifth Institute Chapter of 2004 provided an incentive to develop a members' area which would enhance preparation and provide a platform for information and participation for sisters who were not elected delegates.

The Institute and individual congregations have invested significant resources to establish and maintain the communications network. Since 2003 communications has been an established item of the Institute budget. Each congregation appointed a contact person to operate locally and nationally to facilitate communication. Fraynetwork as part of its contract has conducted regular training.

In 2005 the IPC requested a review of the Institute's electronic communications and publications, with reference to current and anticipated needs. From this review came the decision to appoint a Local Communications Facilitator in each congregation. Her brief included promoting the mercy mission, developing relationships among the sisters, co-workers and friends and creating and responding to material such as reflections on religious life or updates on the affairs of the Institute. As well as the communications facilitator in each congregation, Institute 'works', for example the Formation Council and Mercy Works Inc., were asked to designate a person to this work.

In mid-2006 a new website was commissioned from Fraynetwork. This enabled the Institute to engage the wider world in theological reflection about and make a practical response to critical issues emerging from the four areas chosen by the previous Chapter for a particular mercy focus, namely asylum seekers and refugees, women and poverty, eco-justice and indigenous concerns.

The new website is an entire system of communication, integral to the life and mission of the Institute. The members' section has a capacity to offer sisters a means to share their own reflections and has the potential for enlivening communication among us. It also invites daily prayer for deceased sisters through the obituary section. All sisters can communicate through a common email system and receive the electronic newsletters *Mercy M@tters* as well as *Mercy World E-News*.

6. Mercy International Association

Mercy International Association came into being on September 23, 1992 as a legal entity in Irish law. Company members are the leaders of Australia, Great Britain, Ireland, Aotearoa New Zealand, the Philippines the Americas. Its primary purposes are

to stimulate and inspire the Sisters of Mercy, their associates and colleagues in ministry, to continue the work of Catherine McAuley ... in ways which are both creative and appropriate to the needs of the world; [and] to foster unity of heart and

mind among Sisters of Mercy worldwide and to enable people from the different parts of the world to share in the experience of the mercy charism as it is lived out in different cultures and settings.²⁹

In 1994 the Mercy International Centre opened in Baggot Street, Dublin. Inspired by the dream of Sister Mary Trainor of the Americas and directed from 1989 to 1991 by Sister Mary Quinn of the Grafton congregation, the project to develop the centre enabled Sisters of Mercy worldwide to reclaim their founding place as an international centre of hospitality, heritage and renewal. Many sisters from various congregations of the Institute have worked on the staff and as volunteers. Many have visited for renewal, retreats and other programmes. The Institute has made a significant contribution to the life and ministry of the centre. Sisters Kath Burke and Jan Geason were involved in the development of the proposal. Sister Rosemary Carroll was centre director



International Steering Committee for the Baggot Street Project: L-R Sisters Regina Kelly (Mercy Ireland), Catherine Quane (Institute England), Margaret Mary Kennedy (Union London), Kath Burke (ISMA), Mary Trainor (US Federation) and Mary Gleeson (Federation New Zealand).

from 2001 to 2005. Sisters Christine Belling, Ursula Gilbert, Agnes Gleeson, Faith Jones, Mary McEneaney, Marita Mullins, Margaret Tallon, Patricia Tully, Patricia Wood, Helen White and Silvia Williams all served as members of the Team, and more than fifty sisters have volunteered for work at the centre.

Some of the achievements of the Mercy International Association have been Mercy International Archives, Mercy International Justice Network, Mercy Global Concern, and Mercy International Association Communications.³⁰ Membership in the Mercy International Association has helped expand the identity of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia. No longer can the Institute be construed as belonging solely in the southern hemisphere. Relating and working with sisters across the world has drawn the Institute into a new reality.³¹

7. Committee for the Cause for the Canonisation of Catherine McAuley

In response to a recommendation from the International Committee for the Cause for Canonisation of Catherine McAuley, this committee was established in 2007 to support the vice-postulator and local contact persons in encouraging and developing programmes and resources to promote the story of Catherine McAuley in Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines.

As well as offering support and advice on the organisation of special gatherings, the Committee has been responsible for planning and presenting the biennial Catherine McAuley symposium. The inaugural symposium, held at All Hallows School, Brisbane, in September 2008, had as its theme 'Mercy: Transforming the Soul of Australia'. The keynote address was delivered by the Honourable Maxine McKew, MP, a former student at the school. In 2010 the symposium was held at Monte Sant' Angelo Mercy College North Sydney, with Mrs Anne Frawley-Mangan as keynote speaker. In association with this symposium secondary students at Mercy colleges and schools were invited to submit works to an art exhibition based on the symposium's theme, 'Mercy Animating the Soul of Australia'.

Programmes and retreats based on Catherine's story and on mercy spirituality continue to be offered to sisters and their partners in ministry. Pilgrimages to the Mercy International Centre, offered to sisters and colleagues ensure that Catherine's founding inspiration continues to be appreciated by those who are called to live God's mercy in the twenty-first century³²

8. Mercy Pacific

At the Second National Chapter in 1998, on the initiative of the four member groups of the New Zealand Mercy Federation, a tentative step was taken to formalise links between Mercy bodies in Australia and New Zealand.³³ Named 'Mercy Pacific', this association had as its objectives to expand mercy consciousness in the Pacific region, to develop a 'Pacific Mercy' identity, to establish solidarity in the region while acknowledging diversity, to promote and support justice, peace and development in the region and to work toward mutual enrichment and the deepening of existing bonds.³⁴

In the ensuing five years a number of informal networking experiences between Australian and New Zealand sisters provided opportunities for appreciation of a common heritage. These led to greater consciousness of the possibilities for mutual learnings. Some of the projects which were put in place were the Pacific Forum - a cultural exchange and consciousness raising experience, the invitation for participants from New Zealand and Tonga to attend the inaugural Mercy Secondary Education Conference in Sydney in 1990 and continued participation of New Zealand formation personnel in Institute formation events. Australian sisters attended seminars by the US theologian Sister Sandra Schneiders who was sponsored by the New Zealand Mercy Federation. When the Mercy Secondary Education Association was formed, it included New Zealand and the Pacific Islands among its members. Moreover, New Zealand Mercy Federation members were invited as observers to the third National Chapter in Melbourne.

Three themes for action emerged from the interaction of sisters in Mercy Pacific, namely stronger networking in action for justice, the possibility of sharing resources and a common commitment to respect for and appreciation of local cultures. Links between New Zealand and the Institute were further

strengthened by the commencement of annual meetings between the Institute Leadership Team and the four leaders of the New Zealand Federation.³⁵ Unfortunately, however, the dream of strong mercy networks throughout the Pacific region faded. In her report to the fifth Institute Chapter, Sister Patricia Fox wrote:

*Since the forum hosted by Aotearoa New Zealand in January 1999 there has been a hiatus in the former ways of networking within 'Mercy Pacific'. Despite many attempts to remedy this, none has been sustained.*³⁶

Even though informal contact has continued through justice networks and new members' gatherings, on a formal level, Mercy Pacific remains an ideal which did not come to fruition.

9. Associates

*Our partnership with [our associates], in mercy, is not only a working partnership, as in administering our mercy institutions, but it is also a sharing of our insights into the charism which is our common gift and the way that charism impacts on our daily life ... Primarily we are about listening to one another, lay and religious, as we delve into the treasure chests of faith and experience that we bring to our working/praying together.*³⁷

In these words Sister Dorothy Campion, the Institute's first President, illustrates the richness which Mercy Associates have brought to the Institute. Despite a long history in the church, within the Institute the associate movement is a fairly recent phenomenon.

Associates of the Sisters of Mercy are women and men inspired by the life and work of Catherine McAuley who seek to share in an explicit way the mission of God's mercy. They work in direct partnership with the sisters. The movement has taken shape in different ways in various congregations. For some, the association may be expressed formally, while for others, it is less formal, expressed through prayer, as colleagues in ministry or through

friendship. Formal or informal, these relationships emphasising partnership and mutuality have the potential to 'make each other blossom'³⁸

*Clearly the mission begun by Catherine does not belong to the Sisters of Mercy alone. Her story and her charism exercise a power among women and men both Catholics and those of other Christian faiths.*³⁹

10. Mercy Endeavour Australia

In 1989 two ex-students of All Hallows Brisbane, classmates of Denise Coghlan, together with several friends in Queensland and New South Wales, were inspired to hear of the work of Mercy Refugee Service. They decided to form a group which they named 'Mercy Endeavour Australia' to provide support and monetary assistance to MRS fieldworkers. Their efforts have inspired other mercy ex-students, men and women Australia-wide, to join them in their activities.⁴⁰ Their approach is to encourage mercy ex-students to join together in prayer for the feast of Our Lady of Mercy and to make a small donation towards the sisters' work with refugees. The group has been well-supported by mercy ex-students who are pleased to have a particular work of the sisters on which to focus.⁴¹

Theological Reflection Process

Underpinning the activity of the Institute during the past thirty years and at the heart of all networking and committee activity has been the determination to develop and articulate mercy spirituality in a way that is both responsive to contemporary needs and faithful to the spirit of Catherine. In general this has been achieved through a process of theological reflection. By evaluating critically the experience of lived mercy in a variety of contexts in the light of Gospel values and the wisdom traditions of women of mercy in the contemporary church, sisters and their partners in mission have engaged in a process for transformative action in the world. Matters such as articulating a mission direction, shared leadership and the enculturation of mercy have been explored through this process⁴².

Conclusion

Networks and committees can be viewed as the mechanics of the Institute, the systems by which members have been able to carry out Catherine McAuley's vision for mercy involvement in the world. Some have operated for thirty years and more, some were short-lived, some have appeared only recently. All, however, have facilitated the flow of energy from the administrative centre to the working extremities, offering every member of the Institute an opportunity to accomplish her role in the dynamic of mission.

¹ ISMA, *Reports to the Second National Chapter*, AISMA 101.2.

² They were the Mercy and Justice Committee and the Education for Justice Committee. *ISMA News*. 2, i, April/May 1983, p.2.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Report KB p.11.

⁵ Consisting of Sisters Catherine Heffernan, Regina McInerney, Beverley Malcolm, Elizabeth Rothe and Helen Owens.

⁶ This was located within Mercy International Association. ISMA, *Reports to Fifth National Chapter*, p. 73. AISMA 101.5. On Mercy International Association, see p.152.

⁷ Report PF, p.35.

⁸ *ibid.* The Justice Core Group consisted of Sisters Christine Belling, Beverley Noonan, Helen Owens and Paula Smith. In 2003 Sr Celestine Pooley replaced Bev Noonan.

⁹ ISMA, *Reports to Fifth National Chapter*, p. 76. AISMA 101.5.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Since the establishment of the model there has been a restructuring of the Mercy International Association resulting in the conclusion of the Mercy International Justice Network Project. This led to the Institute Justice Coordinator assuming the role of contact person for the Institute in relation to matters of international concern and for Mercy Global Concern.

¹² 'Profile of Sisters in Education, 1984', *Shma*, 3, i, p.18.

¹³ Mullan, D. (ed.), *The Little Book of Catherine of Dublin* (Dublin, 2005), p.102.

¹⁴ *President's Report*, Fourth National Mercy Secondary Education Conference, Perth, September 1996, *Listen*, 14, iii, 1996, p.34.

¹⁵ A record of proceedings can be found in *Listen*, 9, ii. The organisers were Sisters Maureen McGuirk, Anne O'Farrell and Frances Baker.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ 'Final Statements and Recommendations', *Listen* 9, ii, p.14

¹⁸ 'Australasian Mercy Secondary Schools Association, Inaugural Meeting', *Listen*, 13, i, 1994, p.20.

¹⁹ The Australasian Mercy Secondary Schools Association. Among its aims are: to develop the mercy ethos and tradition for secondary education, to help translate them into an expression that addresses the needs of our times, and to assist

educational institutions to model justice and promote appropriate systemic change.
ibid.

²⁰ Ozolins, J., 'After the Millennium – Mercy Schools in a Post-Modern World', *Listen*, 16, ii, 1998, p.24.

²¹ Proceedings of the First National Conference of Mercy Health Care Linkages, *Listen*, 12, ii, 1993, p.3.

²² *Report of Mercy Health Care Linkages to Third National Chapter*. AISMA 101.3.

²³ *Memorandum and Articles of Association of Mercy Health Care Australia Limited*, # 2, AISMA 732.1(A).

²⁴ Singleton and Townsville

²⁵ See ISMA, *Reports to Fifth National Chapter*, July 2004. AISMA 101.5

²⁶ Since 1997 archivists from Papua New Guinea and New Zealand have been members of the Network. ISMA, *Reports to Fifth Institute Chapter*, p.121. AISMA 101.5.

²⁷ ISMA, *Reports to Sixth Institute Chapter*, AISMA 101.6 pp.20-23

²⁸ At the time of writing Fraynework is wholly owned by the Sisters of Mercy, Melbourne. Other arrangements are in place for its structure within the new entity.

²⁹ Mercy International Association, *Memorandum of Association*, 1994, quoted in Report NT, p.14.

³⁰ Sisters involved in these initiatives have been Agnes Gleeson (Archives), Helen Owens (Mercy International Justice Network), Wendy Flannery (Mercy Global Concern) and Adele Howard (Mercy International Communications).

³¹ Report PF p.16.

³² ISMA, *Reports to Sixth Institute Chapter*, AISMA 101.6 pp.24-25. Currently Sr Mary Duffy is the local contact person for matters related to Catherine's canonisation.

³³ Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin and Wellington.

³⁴ Report on *Mercy Pacific to Third National Chapter*, AISMA 101.3

³⁵ Report JG, p.13.

³⁶ Report, PF, p.17.

³⁷ Campion D., 'Associate Movements – new wine/new wineskins', *Listen*, 20, ii, 2002 p.23.

³⁸ See Flood, J., 'Mercy Associates in Australia', *Listen*, 20, ii, 2002 p.24.

³⁹ Report PF p.14.

⁴⁰ *ISMA News* September 1989, p.4.

⁴¹ *ISMA News* December 1989, p.8.

⁴² Perhaps one of the best outcomes of the theological reflection process has been the production of the resource *mercy and Justice Shall Meet*, which stimulates reflection and action on the four focus areas of mercy endeavour, in a Gospel and Mercy context

Chapter 8: FORMATION



Sisters Anila Isaac and Ali Roach.

The National Standing Committee for Formation, one of the committees of the Conference of Sisters of Mercy, arose from the need expressed by those engaged in formation for mutual support and a forum to exchange ideas. Its activities included biennial seminars and a news bulletin. Once the Institute was formed, the NEC drew up a charter for committees which provided for a National Formation Committee, to cover all aspects of mercy formation.

These events coincided with the further development of the theology of religious life, calling for radical

changes to the formation process, and radical re-learnings on the part of formation personnel. Anxious to inculcate the new theology, the committee organised conferences for novices, for young professed and for formators and a programme was written for those preparing for final profession. The conferences

reflected the [new] model of formation, that of journeying together, of allowing shared experiences to challenge and energise the group so that both novices and 'formators' went home equally enriched.¹

Strong commitment to initial formation among the seventeen Australians congregations as well as Christchurch, resulted in shared learning, effective networking and maturing of personal relationships. Despite this, it must be said that the reality of young women choosing to join religious life in the 80s called for creative responses which were not always forthcoming.²



National Formation Committee, 1983, L-R Sisters Janette Gray, Mary Harrington, Kate Connolly, Stancia Cawte, Sandra Lupi.

To establish a definite direction for formation, participants at the 1989 National Formation Conference in Yamba, to which the NPC Formation Task Force was invited, set themselves the task of defining 'core' or 'canonical' membership of religious life, the importance of other forms of association notwithstanding.³ They sought to specify those principles which Mercy congregations throughout Australia could hold as fundamental to incorporating women into canonical membership. A year later, formation personnel from Australia, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Christchurch gathered in Sydney where they discussed the draft principles, affirmed their own commitment to religious life and made three recommendations to the NPC. First they proposed a national initial formation experience to be held in a mission context among marginalised peoples and based on an action-reflection process. Following on from this they urged congregation leaders to be attentive to the stage of temporary profession, emphasising its critical nature. As well they highlighted the need for mutual support among formation personnel. In general the recommendations were accepted.⁴



Formation Conference 1991: Former and new Committee members: L-R Back: Sisters Mary Lowcock, Meredith Evans, Cheryl Camp; Front: Margaret Madden, Carmel Dignam, Gerardine Cooney.

The exploration of possibilities for association other than by vowed membership coincided with the NEC's plans for the 'Tracking our Mercy Future' event, aimed at a more contemporary articulation of the meaning of religious life and ways of living the mercy charism.⁵ This event, and the growing recognition of changing societal attitudes to long-term commitment, led those sisters whose role it was to accompany young members, to call for a transformation in all sisters. They exhorted them to re-ignite their commitment to the mission of mercy and to support new members in their living of the charism. Sisters were challenged

to relinquish the exclusive holding onto our mercy charism and encourage others to own it in ways other than by vowed life membership.⁶

However, while they were conscious of 'an abundance of women and men who want to participate in a mercy way of life', they understood that

whatever shape the new types of membership take, the mercy charism will only be a reality when together vowed life members and other members assume mutual responsibility and accountability in enabling its future to emerge.⁷

This was also a period when formation personnel were realising the implications of the reality that some of the women seeking to join Mercy congregations were not from a white Anglo-Celtic background. While these women brought a rich diversity to the congregations they chose to join, their presence required sensitivity and a level of cultural awareness hitherto uncalled for, not only from those who accompanied them but from all sisters. Many new members were living in communities where their needs for peer support were not being adequately met.

These matters highlighted a healthy tension among candidates and new members between their growing national identity and their insertion in their respective congregations, a tension, which was not confined to them. One member of the National Formation Committee observed

it is perhaps at the national level that these new members will discover companionship, find support to work in ministries that take them to the edges of our society and devise structures that will strengthen bonds that link them together now and into the future.⁸

In terms of membership the Third National Chapter issued some ground-



Sisters Ali Roach, Emmerentiana Awehi and Nguyen Thi Ny Duyen.

breaking statements. It began by

acknowledging that the existing canonical structure for mercy life does not adequately contain or support new and emerging forms of membership.

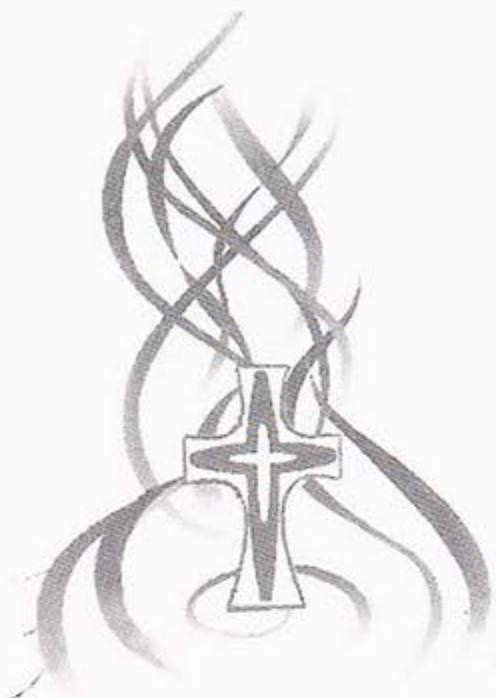
It approved a '*new foundation* encompassing a variety of forms of membership', and encouraged the NEC to 'initiate across congregations a study of and reflection on vowed life and its social dimensions'.⁹ The National Formation Committee was renamed the National Membership Committee and formal links were established between it and the Theological Reflection Committee. It was evident that the Institute was extending its vision beyond national boundaries. Links between the National Membership Committee and Papua New Guinea and Mercy Pacific were ratified and serious consideration was given to long-term membership possibilities for Mercy Pakistan.¹⁰



Membership Committee, 2001. L-R Sisters Patricia Nugent, Elizabeth O'Keeffe, Carole Carmody, Rosemary Day, Mary-Louise Petro.

The steady momentum of collaboration among the congregations in significant aspects of initial formation found expression in the recommendation to the ILT in October 2000 that the same terms be used throughout the Institute to refer to the distinct stages of formation from Enquiry to Perpetual Profession. That this request came from the candidates and new members was significant. It was they who wanted consistency at a national level. Ultimately, their request had far-reaching consequences. What seemed a simple pragmatic desire for a common lexicon became in effect, a catalyst for the ILT to realise that the time had come to attend to some of the rudimentary elements of formation. They identified the need to articulate a common vision for initial formation,

to provide guiding principles for its implementation and to acknowledge the need for each candidate to have appropriate opportunities to understand and experience her local congregational identity within the context of a national institute.



Formation logo

An Interim Task Group was set up to address these issues and by 2003 the final draft of the National Initial Formation Policy was ready to be approved by the IPC at Ballarat.¹¹ An historic moment in the life of the Institute was reached. As well as being a national policy it was relevant to all sisters of all ages and stages of religious life since it encouraged them to explore the meaning of an authentic expression of religious life as a Sister of Mercy within the Australian Institute.¹²

While having a policy was no doubt an achievement, implementing it required strategic planning. Responsibility for carrying out the policy was given to a National Initial Formation Council and a National Initial Formation Coordinator.¹³



Sisters Cathy Jambet and Kaye Evans.

The Institute Formation Council was given the brief of furthering formation across the Institute by supporting the Institute Formation Coordinator, developing a common programme of formation and monitoring the implementation of the Institute Initial Formation Policy and its Programme.¹⁴ Work commenced on mapping existing data in relation to candidates and new members and ensuring consistency between and the policies of the member congregations and that of the Institute. In recent years support has been given to Papua New Guinea and Pakistan in terms of programmes and personnel. Each year there has been a combined programme for those in initial formation. Meeting together, they explore aspects of mercy theology and spirituality. On two occasions, candidates throughout the Institute have gathered, first in Papua New Guinea, then in Sydney, to take part in a common month-long programme, the first on vowed life, the second on mission.

In 2009, the Institute Formation Council, in collaboration with local formation personnel and the IPC produced a formation programme which complements the policy, providing a solid foundation for initial and ongoing formation throughout Australia and Papua New Guinea.



Newer Members: Sister Bernardine Kavi, Rachael Waisman, Helen Glasheen.

Promotion of Mercy Vowed Life

Initiated by the NPC in 1997 in response to a proposal from the National Membership Conference, the project to promote mercy vowed life involved networking on a national level with various mercy ministry groups and included elements of promotion and marketing. With Sister Joan Smith appointed as promoter, various strategies were utilised to

situate the mercy story in a contemporary context. Professional approaches to promotion were employed and close liaison was established with the National Membership Conference. Several workshops were held throughout the Institute and kits of printed material were developed treating such topics as Catherine's story, mercy spirituality, mercy life and ministries and a world-view

of mercy. On completion of the project the links which had been established were useful in allowing the congregations and the Institute to continue networking, especially through Catholic Vocations Ministry Australia.¹⁵ During World Youth Day in 2009, the Mercy booth was prominent in the vocations Expo, with newer members assisting in its running.

Local Formation Animators

When the Institute Formation Policy was launched it was decided to appoint a Local Formation Animator in each congregation to be responsible for educating congregational membership about the ongoing implications of the policy. The Formation Council initiated programmes in the theology of religious life. At the congregational level the Local Formation Animators were expected to inform, educate and inspire the sisters using the prepared material. Thus an instrument of formative reflection and an effective model of ongoing formation have been developed.

Conclusion

The development of an Institute Formation Policy and Programme have been significant in generating new life and renewed purpose throughout the Institute. Initial formation, at one time the sole preserve of each congregation, has shifted its focus to become Institute-centred. At the same time the scope of formation has broadened to embrace the whole of religious life. Emphasis is currently on continuous formation in the context of living the mercy charism throughout the entirety of vowed life.

¹ ISMA, *Reports to the Second National Chapter*, 1987, AISMA 101.2.

² See ISMA, *Reports to the Third National Chapter*, 1992, AISMA, 101.3.

³ Members of this Task Force were Sisters Adele Howard, Maryanne Loughry, Veronica Lawson and Beverley Stott.

⁴ ISMA, *Reports to the Third National Chapter*, 1992, AISMA, 101.3.

⁵ *Tracking our Mercy Future* is discussed on pp.178 ff.

⁶ ISMA, *Reports to the Third National Chapter*, 1992, AISMA, 101.3.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ ISMA, *Challenges to Mercy Australia: Third National Chapter, Statements and Proposals, Formal Proceedings*, pp.20-21.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ The members of the Interim Task Group were Sisters Rosemary Day, Karon Donnellon, Ann-Marie O'Beirne, Caroline Ong, Mary-Louise Petro, and Susan Smith.

¹² See Sr Patricia Fox's communication to each sister on launching the policy in August 2003, quoted in *ISMA Reports to Fifth National Chapter*, July 2004, p.96. AISMA 101.5.

¹³ The inaugural members of the National Initial Formation Council were Sisters Karon Donnellon, Kaye Evans, Janette Gray, Caroline Ryan, Susan Smith, and Beverley Whitton. The first Institute Formation Coordinator was Sr Christine Belling; currently Sr Kaye Evans has the role.

¹⁴ *ISMA, Reports to the Sixth Institute Chapter*, p.41. AISMA 101.6.

¹⁵ <http://www.catholicozvocations.org.au>

CHAPTER 9 – STRUCTURES

1. FINANCIAL

At the first chapter of the Institute measures were put in place to ensure that the financial base on which it was established was both firm and sustainable. Part of the brief of the National Plenary Council was the administration of financial affairs, including the examination and approval of an annual budget for the NEC and the approval of per capita contributions. Although a capital fund had been established to finance initial capital costs and to offset recurrent expenses in the early years, it was judged necessary to impose a special levy on member congregations to provide a furnished house for the members of the NEC and other sisters working at the Ryde secretariat. Furthermore, the support of National Projects, Balgo, Papua New Guinea and Pakistan as well as Mercy Refugee Service posed financial problems which demanded some creative and viable solutions.¹

Finance Committee

In 1988 the NEC established a Finance Committee with the brief to advise on financial matters, develop a fiscal policy for Institute mission projects and make recommendations with regard to the establishment of an Institute data bank.² One of the first achievements of the committee was to streamline financial management. Accounts were computerised, a Chart of Accounts was developed for both Institute and National Projects funds and an annual audit of accounts was set in place.³

As funds for the recurrent operation of the Institute were derived from an annual per capita levy and as the number of 'heads' in most congregations was steadily declining, an effective means of maintaining a reliable income base had to be found. First, strict budget controls were adopted, then a levy over and above the CPI increase was approved. Next, in 1991, the committee proposed that an investment fund be established and that the interest be used to offset the deficit in the annual Institute budget. It was anticipated that this would yield approximately \$800,000 through congregational contributions. Congregations were encouraged to make direct donations, interest-free loans or unit trust investments.

Developing a fiscal policy for National Projects was another avenue for the Finance Committee to explore. There was a certain lack of clarity regarding the fund to support these projects, as from the beginning, it had depended on an annual contribution per sister. In fact, there was no way of guaranteeing that this contribution had been made. To guarantee some certainty the committee established a reserve fund, the interest from which would supplement the annual donations. As well, each project was required to submit an annual budget, achieving more realistic planning.

By the time of the Third National Chapter (1993) the Institute possessed quite a substantial asset base. Sale of property, purchase of offices at Lewisham and a holiday house at Broome – paid for with the surplus from the stipends of the sisters working in the Balgo region – gave the Institute a firm asset base which could be realised at any time.⁴

The incoming administration maintained the practice of appointing a finance committee. As previously, the duties of this committee were to advise the National Executive Council, to prepare an annual financial report and budget, to recommend an auditor, to monitor accounts, to supervise the investment of funds, to advise on strategy for the long-term financing of the Institute, to conduct national workshops on financial issues and to monitor, analyse and plan responses to shifts in the Institute's financial base.⁵ At the end of their time two particular issues had come to the fore. One was declining numbers without a corresponding lessening in the demand for services.⁶ The second was the mandate from the Fourth National Chapter to engage in

*a critical re-thinking of priorities regarding human, material and financial resources for the sake of mission.*⁷

Attention to these resulted in the development of a more equitable method of calculating the levy, a simplification of management and reporting processes and the fostering of enhanced networking opportunities among congregation finance officers through an annual Finance Conference.

Financing the Institute

During the six years prior the fourth Chapter it had become obvious that the method of funding the Institute was no longer practicable.⁸ With a decreasing interest base the annual income set by Chapter for the Institute fund was far from adequate. Decline in membership was placing a heavy burden on congregations to maintain their income with no consideration being given to their capacity to meet the levy. Inequities were evident. Moreover, in the meantime, reserve funds were rapidly diminishing. In the face of these difficulties the Institute Leadership Team charged the Finance Committee with the task of developing a new method of funding the Institute. Two stipulations were made: the annual income needed to be adequate to fund the works of the National Centre and the process needed to be equitable for all congregations.

In February 2001 the 'Future Finance Sub-committee' was convened.⁹ After meeting with congregation leaders and finance officers and obtaining a clearer idea of the finances of each congregation, the members developed a formula which was accepted by the Institute Plenary Council in October 2001. The formula determined that

the manner of calculating the levy be changed to the following formula

50% from the number of sisters in a congregation

50% from the value of a congregation's realisable assets

to be paid twice yearly.¹⁰

On accepting this proposal some congregations agreed to forward their levy in advance, some donated the loans which the Institute had held from them for a number of years and some decided to extend their loans. These actions had the immediate effect of adding to the investment potential of the Institute and gave a further boost to annual income. They also signalled a shift in consciousness whereby congregations were becoming more attuned to the good of the Institute as a whole and were willing to invest in it to maintain its viability.

The practice of holding annual conferences for finance personnel helped them to become conscious of their role as a ministry to the congregations and to the Institute. Sharing financial information across congregations was encouraged, enabling benchmarks to be set up within and across congregations and allowing common purchasing. Above all it enhanced the negotiation of the new method of fixing the congregational levy to the Institute. Thus participants came to recognise their role in the Institute as well as in their local congregations.

The decisions made to address the matter of the levy enabled planning and decisions during the following six years to be undertaken with clarity and confidence. Moreover, the path to fuller transparency vis-à-vis congregational finances paved the way for decisions concerning the new entity to be made in an atmosphere of trust.

Long-range Planning Committee

Allied to the work of the Finance Committee has been that of the Long-range Planning Committee which, when it was established in 1985, was given the task of exploring the establishment of an Institute data bank to include both statistical and operational data in order to facilitate governance and planning.¹¹ Planning was by definition to be long range and strategic and the areas identified for exploration were personnel, finances and institutions.

One of the earliest undertakings of the committee was to develop a financial planning instrument involving an actuarial study of membership projections for each congregation and for the Institute as a whole. The demographic profile thus generated provided information on future personnel resources. An area that was proposed for immediate attention was insurance. It was suggested that rationalisation of policies in areas such as public liability, professional indemnity, voluntary workers and health insurance could prove advantageous to congregations.¹² As it became increasingly obvious that current assets of congregations were inadequate to meet projected retirement costs, planning commenced immediately to ensure suitable retirement provision.

It was this committee which recommended to the Second National Chapter that a permanent finance committee be established, specifying its terms of

reference, its role and responsibilities. It also recommended the establishing of a tax-deductible mission fund to attract donations for mission work from outside the congregations, that bursars and financial advisers be given the opportunity to meet biannually, that a committee of experts investigate the feasibility of common insurance policies for all member congregations of the Institute as well as congregation-owned institutions and affiliated bodies.¹³ The list illustrates the extent to which this committee influenced the financial viability of the Institute and the expertise with which it discharged its mandate.

Following the Second National Chapter a new committee was established and given the specific task of developing an Institute data bank.¹⁴ The difficulties the committee encountered in carrying out its duties served as a constant illustration of the inadequacy of Institute structures to support an exercise of this nature. To begin with, in terms of personnel, there was the fundamental question of what information should be made available to the Institute and what was confidential to each congregation. With regard to financial data, there was even more uncertainty as to what should be shared but also ambiguity concerning the requirement for equity in calculating levies. After considerable discussion the NEC clarified matters by deciding that a common Chart of Accounts would be used as well as a common format for the data bank and for financial data. This would remain with the each congregation. When and if information concerning the Institute was needed it could be readily accessed, given this common format.¹⁵

Without delay the committee designed a base which would assist individual congregations, enabling them to store data in such a way that simplified the provision of accurate information to the Institute when it was required. Next a personnel data base suitable for use by any congregation, irrespective of size or location, was developed. Following this a common Chart of Accounts was finalised. In this case it was obvious from the beginning that producing a Chart of Accounts uniformly suitable to all congregations was impossible. However, despite the diversity, congregations were encouraged to develop procedures and systems which would facilitate common reporting. By 1991, thanks to the work of this committee and subsequently of Finance Committees, commonality has been achieved to a significant degree.

2. GOVERNANCE

When, on 10 September 1953, Father H Jordan MSC, addressed the gathering of superiors at Rosanna on the matter of union, he observed with some prescience that if an effective form of unity was not decided on at that meeting, the issue would be left to future generations to grapple with.¹⁶

It may be claimed that some of those present at the meeting did decide on an effective form of unity, and that later others decided on another form which to them was equally effective. It is nevertheless beyond doubt that, since 1953, the issue of unity has been grappled with by successive generations of mercy leaders and in a very real sense, continues to be. The decisions made in 1979 concerning the nature of the governance structures of the new Institute were influenced by the legacy of the fifties. Furthermore, since that time Institute leaders have been grappling with those structures in an effort to make them more efficient and effective.

True, Father Jordan's statement was made in the context of common constitutions. Fortunately, following common constitutions has not been an issue in recent mercy history. The constitutions in fact have been a unifying force. In 1953, as in 1979 the sticking point was local autonomy and the authority of the leader, be she Provincial or President. Although a solution was ultimately reached, what initially appeared to be small fault-lines gradually widened over the ensuing years to major gaps, which, despite repeated attempts, were not able to be bridged successfully.

When the draft constitution on governance was presented to the authorities in Rome, Archbishop Mayer, a Benedictine monk, gave the Australian contingent a key piece of advice. Rather than requiring them to shore up some of the ambiguities which were obvious in the structures, the Archbishop counselled Sisters Dorothy and Valda and the canonists to 'leave it flexible and let it grow'.¹⁷ The story of the governance of the Institute is thus the story of leadership's having 'let it grow'. Over twenty five years growth occurred, sometimes in rapid spurts, sometimes slowly. There were times when growth was imperceptible or it seemed that the plant was in need of radical pruning. It soon became evident, however, that in its current form the plant did not

really suit conditions in Australia and Papua New Guinea in the early twenty first century. The quest began to find an offshoot which would not only grow but thrive and produce abundant fruit.

Governance Structures

What exactly were these structures and why were they ultimately unworkable? The values on which the Institute was founded were unquestionably unity among all Australian Sisters of Mercy and freedom for each congregation to make decisions relating to its proper situation.¹⁸ Estimable as these may be and fundamental to the founding charism, there remains the question as to whether, in practice, the two are not mutually exclusive. One description of Institute governance is that it is 'an expanded and slightly strengthened federation-like structure'.¹⁹ Operationally, governance rests with the Institute Chapter when it is in session. In between chapters, authority resides in the President and her Council. The Institute Leadership Team acts within the policies formulated by the Institute Chapter and carries out tasks committed to it by the Institute Chapter or arising from deliberations of the Institute Plenary Council.²⁰ The President serves the Institute as animator and spiritual leader. Her authority is expressed in terms of service to the whole. Authority to implement decisions resides at the congregational level, with the Congregation Leader and her Council. The operation of the Institute Plenary council is defined as

*a process of mutual consultation, joint discernment and decision making and ... provides leadership at both institute and congregation levels in the interpretation, development and implementation of the policies of the Institute Chapter, as well as giving opportunity for more creative responses to new needs and challenges.*²¹

Inherent in this description of the structures of the Institute is the reality that at the time of their development they did not fit any of the existing models of governance of religious institutes. The intention was to express a particularly 'mercy' tradition of governance in a form adapted to current realities in Australian society and the Australian church.²²

The pattern is neither that of a centralised form of government, with supreme authority vested in Superior General and General Chapter ... nor is that of a federation of independent, completely autonomous congregations.

In essence the model was

based on the concept that essential authority with regard to the internal government of each unit remains with that unit in its own general chapter and through its own major superior, but that the national body ... is given a unique role of formulating national policy for Sisters of Mercy as women at the service of the church, living to a distinctive mercy charism.²³

Ideally it was a form of governance which allowed for the continuity of the mercy tradition of responding to local needs and identifying with the local church. At the same time, unity would be promoted by the strengthening of mercy identity and greater awareness of charism. Decision-making was to happen, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, at the level where it belonged. The model aimed to provide 'simple efficient structures and an effective instrument for leadership' thus opening 'possibilities for Sisters of Mercy to have a creative and constructive role, at the national level, in witnessing to Gospel values'.²⁴ The authority of the National President, was described as genuine authority, but it did not impinge on the personal authority of a congregation leader with regard to her congregation. The President's role was to

call the sisters ... beyond the immediate concerns of their day to day involvements to a broader vision of the major needs and issues in church and society.²⁵

Local Autonomy

During the course of the development of these structures, specifically at the Gunnedah meeting in 1979, progress was frequently impeded by a lack of agreement on the retention of local autonomy or, viewed from another angle,

the extent of the president's authority.²⁶ Ultimately the matter was clarified. It was stated that the National President had no authority over sisters in their local situations. She was to be concerned solely with national matters. Whether or not this was a compromise is debatable. The structure agreed to at Gunnedah 'with its inherent governance ambiguities' has been described as

a 'do something or do nothing' capitulation to an untested notion of the non-negotiability of 'local autonomy'.²⁷

There are many who would agree.

The arrangement may have appeared workable on paper but once the Institute began facing real issues, in practice it was far from being so. Successive reports by Institute Presidents identified incongruities, most of them stemming from the tension between local and national priorities. After the first five years of the Institute's life, for example, Sister Dorothy Campion, observed, in relation to the working of the National Plenary Council:

When a choice is to be made, which takes precedence – the local or the national interest?²⁸



The five Institute Presidents: L-R Sisters Nerida Tinkler, Pat Fox, Kath Burke, Dorothy Campion, Jan Geason.

Members of the National Plenary Council, as well, struggled to find practicable ways forward. As early as 1986, questions were being asked concerning the extent to which the NEC could persuade congregations to support inter-congregational initiatives without overstepping the 'local autonomy' line. They cited in particular, long-term Institute planning projects as opposed to short-term independent decisions. They questioned, too, whether there were mutual obligations between congregations and the NEC that had not been realised. They wondered if there were some means for consultation with major superiors and councils especially when major policy decisions were being made.²⁹ In a statement which suggests the viability of the Institute was under threat, the NPC declared

*'The Institute is too precious to lose ... It enshrines the best of our hopes and dreams ... In it is support for our weakness, hope for our young.'*³⁰

Alternative Models

While the NPC was undoubtedly committed to the Institute, the contents of the 1986 NPC Report drew attention to the complexities which all too frequently appeared. Different leaders grappled with them in different ways. Sister Kath Burke, for example, considered whether there were alternative models of governance which might promote more effective ministry, quality of life and unity.³¹ She did concede that during her term of office, members of the Institute were still learning to 'live into' the new structures, but 'living into' them served to emphasise the fact that not far below the surface there were anomalies needing to be addressed.

At a *Tracking our Mercy Future* event held in 1991, several sisters posed searching questions and proposed some radical solutions. The 'strain' of trying to make the governance structures 'fit', was referred to. The question 'Can we see ourselves as one group of 2000 rather than seventeen groups?' was raised. The challenge was issued: 'As ISMA Mercies we want to see changes Australia-wide'.³²



Sisters Valda Dickenson and Catherine Ryan at *Tracking our Mercy Future*.

Material generated at this gathering, and at subsequent conversations and explorations led Kath formally to question whether, in fact, there was another way to govern, and to speculate that groupings other than the traditional foundations may be more effective.³³ After eleven years, and 'in view of the massive social and ecclesial changes of [the] era', she pondered

*whether any model of the seventies (and probably more truly a product of the fifties) is adequate for the nineties and beyond.*³⁴

Referring to the unifications effected in both Ireland and the Americas, Kath challenged sisters to consider

*whether [these were] a rupture in the long-cherished myth of Catherine's preference for local autonomy and central unity of spirit or a liberating step forward to a way of ensuring her ideal in today's context.*³⁵

To her way of thinking, the future viability and vitality of the Australian Institute depended on an honest assessment of the need for new models.³⁶

Formal Review of Structures

The Third National Chapter, in response to Kath's report, commissioned a formal review of structures. The statement issued by delegates stated explicitly that

the call for a review of the structure, functions and operations of the Institute arose strongly in all three phases of the Chapter, in specific proposals and in the President's report.³⁷

Conscious that some sisters experienced no sense at all of belonging to the Institute, the delegates mandated

the NEC to establish as a matter of priority, a task force to design and implement a process to review the functioning, operations and structures of ISMA and the relationships between the NPC, NEC and the Congregations.³⁸

On completion of the review the NPC was instructed to call, if necessary, an extraordinary National Chapter to implement its recommendations. However, the urgency evident in the chapter statement seemed to dissipate and in the short term nothing of note eventuated. The review did take place and the report, presented to the subsequent National Chapter, identified the issues as being threefold, namely the authority of the President, the leadership role of the Institute Plenary Council and the interdependence of individual congregations and the Institute.³⁹ In the interim, research undertaken by Sister Mary Tinney during her time as Institute Vice-president, into the Institute's attitude to change, gave rise to the alarming hypothesis that it may have lost any capacity to do so.⁴⁰ In 1997 Mary wrote:

The disconcerting part of the research is that the same issues were identified for the Sisters of Mercy in 1987 and again in 1990. The earlier research into the culture of the organisation identified that it was becoming dysfunctional, primarily because its dominant 'role' culture did not embrace change easily. The

*specific recommendations then were about developing mutual relationships within the group and with the marginalised, facing issues of power, and engaging in the structural change that was needed to address causes of injustice. It is now ten years later and the issues are the same ... The action that is required is still not clear but it is likely that it will be embraced by a minority, not by a majority.*⁴¹

Connected remotely with the review of structures and no doubt stimulating some thoughtful reflection on the future of the Institute were the *Mercy Alive* Gatherings held in association with the celebration of the sesqui-centenary of the arrival of the first Sisters of Mercy in Australia.

The Canberra gathering in 1996 attracted almost three hundred participants and provided the context not only for sisters to re-tell their story but to do it in such a way that they could identify essential strands which needed to be woven into the future. Led by presenters skilled in theology, scripture and social science, sisters were challenged to re-image the God of Mercy, to explore their traditions and to interpret the current social situation.

Reflection on these events showed that the future would be vastly different



Sisters Margie Abbot and Veronica Green at the *Mercy Alive* Gathering, Canberra 1996.

from the past, not only because of the age of the group but also because many of the life-style expressions, valid in the past had already lost much of their meaning. The questions that remained concerned the aspects of the past which informed the present and the elements of the past which sisters wished to take into the future.⁴²

Participation in *Mercy Alive* led sisters to consider what plans were in place for facing a transformational phase in religious life and what they needed to

relinquish or transform in order to set free the compassion at the heart of mercy identity.⁴³ Deliberations at the fourth Chapter resulted in a directive to change, in the hope, no doubt, that this time the majority of the Institute might embrace it. Members were asked to 'revision' shared leadership and to engage in processes of exploration and experimentation with regard to leadership structures.⁴⁴ Some congregations responded immediately. Bathurst, Gunnedah, Singleton and Wilcannia-Forbes rose to the challenge, deciding to

*work towards alternative forms of leadership and participation
in an inter-congregational leadership structure.*

Their aim was to create new possibilities for living the charism, to optimise the use of resources and to release new energy for mission.⁴⁵

Mercy Inerlink

Calling themselves 'Mercy Interlink' and describing their processes as 'a journey towards reconfiguration' the four congregations realised there were important theological underpinnings to structural change.⁴⁶ Sister Dorothy Campion, at the first meeting, urged the group to be original in its thinking, 'not to try to put new wine in old wineskins'.⁴⁷ At that meeting the group made a commitment to take practical steps on a way forward and to meet again in twelve months' time to confirm the growth of the new.⁴⁸ Grafton congregation joined the group in April 2004, further demonstrating that the



Interlink 'Sixty-five and Under' gathering, Yamba 2004.

call (to reconfiguring) is not primarily one of good management but much more fundamentally one about a journey in faith which leads us to be open to welcome the 'other'.⁴⁹

In practical terms Mercy Interlink led to such activities as providing common retreat opportunities, sharing holiday houses, establishing a task-force of finance personnel to explore best practice and share asset and financial management and resources, organisation of gatherings of sisters aged sixty-five and under to reflect on ministry with a view to establishing future priorities.

The 'Gunnedah Letter'

At the level of the Institute Plenary Council discussion and exploration of leadership and leadership structures continued. Their collective commitment to 'reshaping mercy life and mission' eventually found expression in a statement addressed to the fifth Institute Chapter. All leaders agreed to request that during the six years following that chapter, Institute leadership would 'actively pursue the reconfiguration of the Institute as a whole' and asked that this direction be formalised as a specific chapter mandate.⁵⁰

Prompting the decision was the desire of the IPC to give new purpose to mercy life and mission, to enable creative collaboration, to facilitate better ways to receive new members, to respond creatively to the signs and needs of the times, to embrace difference and to receive diminishment as a call to new life.⁵¹ It is significant that this direction came from the IPC meeting in Gunnedah in April 2004, exactly twenty five years after the acceptance of the initial draft of the proposed model for the Institute. Once more Gunnedah was the scene of an historic decision concerning the Institute's future.

Chapter Call to Reconfigure

In the spirit of this decision, the fifth Institute Chapter unanimously endorsed the statement that

reconfiguring is the call of God's Spirit to the Institute at this graced moment in history

and encouraged each sister to engage wholeheartedly in its movement.⁵² It is true that practical reasons contributed to the resolution. Demographics, for example, indicated that instead of operating as eighteen discrete units, each with its own very costly-to-run infrastructure, pooling of resources would result in economies of scale.⁵³ Survival, however, was not the fundamental aim. From the outset the call to reconfigure was about mission. And there was a warning lest this term be interpreted in a utilitarian sense. Reconfiguring was explained as follows:

*We do not reconfigure just for its mission advantages. Reconfiguring itself is mission for creating more communion instead of the breakdown in communities and nations so widespread in the world, for peace instead of warring over differences, for convergence and conversation instead of stand-offs and for more just distribution of resources rather than the exploitation promoted by economic globalisation. This requires of us a greater world consciousness than merely some in-turned structural change.*⁵⁴

The chapter recognised this aspect of reconfiguring and stated publicly that it would strengthen the Institute's capacity to minister to people and in places longing for God's mercy. It was in this context that the chapter committed the Institute to maintaining a preferential option for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, for refugees and asylum seekers.⁵⁶

In a sense this decision by the fifth Institute Chapter brought to completion the work begun in 1953 when, for the first time, Sisters of Mercy in Australia were called to unite. More specifically it brought to a logical conclusion

the deliberations of the Union and the Federation leaders who sought so painstakingly during the late 70s to create a suitable model of governance. Sister Dorothy Campion recalling the earlier time, stated:

*We did what we thought was most appropriate at that time to further our mission of mercy*⁵⁶

Indeed, this was so. The call to reconfigure was far from being a discrediting of the Institute as it was established in 1981. It was in fact a call to complete the circle, to join the final dots. Archbishop Mayer had suggested that the leaders 'let [the Institute] grow'. Father Jim Esler, had observed that in his opinion it [the Institute], 'was all [the Sisters of Mercy] could manage at that time'.⁵⁷ By 2004, however, they were capable of more radical decisions.⁵⁸ They could see that the governance structure of the Institute had, from the beginning, been inadequate. In the words of Sister Nerida Tinkler, fifth and current Institute President,

*its cumbersome governance ... [depleted] our combined capacity for responding to the needs of mission as they occurred, and for animating our commitment to religious life.*⁵⁹

At the chapter, delegates were careful not to specify new structures. They simply mandated

*a configuration that could give Catherine's founding inspiration a real chance to flourish anew, and that could facilitate the integrity with which we live vowed commitment to the God of Mercy and to each other.*⁶⁰

The path to actualising that directive will be traced in the following chapter.

¹ The holiday house at Broome was for the sisters working in the Kimberley. The Balgo project was always self-sufficient; in fact it was the only one of the Institute Mission Projects to generate money to support itself much less generate a surplus. With regard to the support of National Projects, there were considerable administrative difficulties occasioned by individual communities supporting particular missions thus

making equitable distribution of the central fund well-nigh impossible. See *Reports to the Second National Chapter*, AISMA 101.2.

² Members of the Finance Committee were Margaret Ryan, Sisters Gabrielle Foley, Eileen Ann Daffy and Nerida Tinkler. At a later date, when the committee was developing an investment fund schema, Sr Pauline Smith was appointed to assist.

³ Report of the Finance Committee to the Third National Chapter, September 1992. AISMA 101.3.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ At that stage membership of the Institute was declining between two and four per cent each year.

⁷ ISMA, *Fourth National Chapter, Acts and Proceedings*, p.5, AISMA 101.4.

⁸ The original Constitutions of the Institute state at J6.471. *To finance the operation at the national level, a per capita levy shall be determined.*

⁹ It consisted of Ms Margaret Ryan, Mr Philip Bauman, Mr Peter Cartwright, Mr John Greaves, Sisters Margaret Chaplin, Berice Livermore and Gwen Garland.

¹⁰ ISMA, *Reports to the Fifth National Chapter, July 2004, Finance Report*. AISMA 101.5

¹¹ Initially the members of the Long Range Planning Committee were Margaret Ryan, Sisters Gemma Burke, Eileen Ann Daffy, and Margaret McGovern. See ISMA, *Report of the Long Range Planning Committee to the Second National Chapter* AISMA 101.2.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Members were Margaret Ryan, Sisters Eileen Ann Daffy, Gabrielle Foley, Gabrielle Jennings and Nerida Tinkler. *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Address by Dr H Jordan MSC at Rosanna Melbourne, September 10 1953. AISMA U203.1.

¹⁷ Campion, D., 'The Mercy Institute: a journey in faith', *Listen*, 19, i, 2001, p.17.

¹⁸ Thesis VW, p.304.

¹⁹ Dissertation, HD, p.196.

²⁰ The Institute Leadership Team plus the Leader of each of the member Congregations.

²¹ ISMA, *Constitutions and Directory*, Part Two, Juridical, Revised April 2006, J6.40, J6.422, J6.426, J 6.432. A diagrammatic representation of governance structures can be found at Appendix 1, pp.196, 197.

²² *Proposed Model of the Australian Congregation of Sisters of Mercy*, 1979, accepted at the Special National Meeting on Conference Structures, Gunnedah, NSW, March 25-28, 1979, p.10.

²³ *ibid.*, pp.10-11.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*, pp.14-15.

²⁶ See above Chapter 4, pp.54 ff.

²⁷ Kerr, B., 'A Critique of the Structures of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia', ISMA Occasional Papers, *Reconfiguring: Exploring the Structure*, 2007,

pp.14-15.

²⁸ Report DC, p.5.

²⁹ *NPC Report*, October 1986. AISMA 201.1/5.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Report KB, pp. 7, 13, 14.

³² 'Who said What about What ...' *Listen*, 10, ii, 1991, p.8.

³³ One session at 'Tracking our Mercy Future' had been devoted to this question. *Listen*, 10, ii, 1991, p.3.

³⁴ Report KB, p.13.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*, p.14.

³⁷ ISMA, *Challenges to Mercy Australia: Third National Chapter, Statements and Proposals, Formal Proceedings*, p.26.

³⁸ ISMA, *Reports to the Fourth National Chapter, December 1998, Structures Review Report*. AISMA 101.4.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Mary was Vice-president from 1993 to 1998.

⁴¹ Thesis MT, p. 104.

⁴² See Report JG, p.4

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ ISMA, *Fourth National Chapter Sydney NSW, December 1988-January 1999, Acts and Proceedings*, p.5. AISMA 101.4. This mandate is quoted in full at Report PF, p.22.

⁴⁵ 'Mercy Interlink Vision 2002-2004' quoted in ISMA, *Reports to Fifth National Chapter*, July 2004, p.99. AISMA 101.5.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ McKeough, D., 'The River Flows on' *Listen*, 20, i, 2002, p.31. In this issue of *Listen* several sisters write their reflections on the *Interlink* gathering.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Report PF, p.10.

⁵⁰ ISMA, *Reports to Fifth National Chapter*, July 2004, Appendix 7, p.38. AISMA 101.5.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² ISMA, *Fifth National Chapter, Acts and Proceedings*, 2005, p.4, AISMA 101.5.

⁵³ Report NT p.3.

⁵⁴ Gray, Janette, 'Talking Together – About Obedience and Reconfiguring', *Listen*, 23, ii, 2005, p.38.

⁵⁵ Report NT p.3.

⁵⁶ Campion, D., 'If Not ... Why Not? The Future of Our Institute' ISMA Occasional Papers, *Reconfiguring: Exploring the Structure*, 2007, p.25.

⁵⁷ Ryan, C., *op.cit.*, p.8.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Report NT p.3.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

CHAPTER 10: THE NEW ENTITY



Prayer focus for the closing ritual, Gathering @ the Waters, Freemantle.

When the Irish Mercy Sisters began to discern how best to unite as a single congregation they examined the model of the Australian Institute and initially used this for 'Mercy Ireland' which was set up in 1985. It became clear, however, that in a country the size of Ireland, a more cohesive structure would be possible and would be more effective for mission.

The majority of Irish Sisters indicated a preference for a union model which will have within it the potential for the transformation of mercy life and mission. They wanted 'becoming one' to be a truly life-giving refounding experience.¹

First Consultation

When the Australian sisters began to look seriously at the process of reconfiguring they too wanted an experience which would be life-giving and generate energy for mission. On the completion of the fifth Institute Chapter the new leadership team, recognising the potential of the reconfiguring process

for enlivening the tradition of Mercy Religious Life entrusted to us by Catherine, for bringing us to new maturity in our mission and in our life of communion with one another,²

made a commitment to consult throughout the entire Institute to gauge the attitudes of the sisters. They were anxious to know how the call to reconfiguring was 'heard in every sister's heart', and what that call would 'ask of each congregation and foundation'.³ They began by visiting each congregation, listening to the sisters, analysing and synthesising the data they received and ensuring every sister received meaningful feedback. This was termed 'the first consultation'.

Reconfiguring Coordination Committee



The reconfiguring logo.

In recognition of the pivotal role reconfiguring was to take during its term of office, the Leadership Team in consultation with the IPC, established, in September 2005, a Reconfiguring Coordination Committee to work in partnership with it to sustain the momentum of the process. Initially the brief of this committee was to 'hold and articulate the Institute's commitment to reconfiguring'.⁴ To

demonstrate the centrality of reconfiguring, they designed a logo to be used on all documents and correspondence.

Gatherings @ the Waters

Next every sister was invited to attend a second consultation. This time there was an opportunity for sisters to mingle across state borders and congregational boundaries and to share their ideas and hopes about the future of the Institute.⁵ 'Gatherings @ the Waters' were held in Fremantle, Mildura, Cairns, Dubbo and Tweed Heads, and attracted more than seven hundred participants. Feedback from this consultation pointed strongly towards a significant number of sisters favouring 'being together in one canonical congregation'.⁶ However, to test the validity of this assumption, at the beginning of 2007, sisters met in inter-congregational groups to participate in an exercise eponymously termed 'Testing the Waters'. Strong support for 'one canonical congregation' was evident in the replies received from over nine hundred sisters. Some sisters, however, did not favour this direction.

Consultation continued, accompanied by dissemination of information on such matters as organisational change and investigation of pertinent canonical issues. A series of occasional papers, examining the 'why' of reconfiguring was prepared and sent to each sister. Carried out in conjunction with the writing of the occasional papers, a survey of the efficacy and efficiency of the governance structures of the Institute further confirmed the need for radical

change. Comments such as the following, received from several sisters who had experienced the structures first hand, illustrated a general frustration with the current situation and the desire for a more effectual, inclusive form of governance.

As the Institute has developed and as the history of religious life has evolved, the structures have become less appropriate. At the personal level we may be working quite well without interference but are we working on the aims of the Institute?

Let us not be afraid of trusting one another, resolving Institute wide conflicts together, committing ourselves to a new structure ... Our ministries are already at that frontier point. Why not our lives?

With a view to the demographics of our Institute, especially projected ten years into the future, I believe that we must rearrange governance structures so that the Institute Leadership Team has canonical authority, and that the rigid boundaries around the seventeen Congregations are dissolved. In effect, I see the most effective, appropriate and efficient form of governance as being one canonical congregation

Decentralisation and local autonomy should not become non-negotiable.⁷

Fourth Consultation

Nevertheless in consideration of the sisters who remained unconvinced that 'one canonical congregation' was the way forward, another consultation was arranged. An 'Infrastructure Task Group' had, in the interim, prepared some preliminary material for consideration, presenting two options for a reconfigured institute.⁸ This fourth consultation indicated that 62% of participating sisters favoured the option which in essence was one canonical congregation. Still there were misgivings. Two task groups, therefore, each prepared a model of a reconfigured institute, and in a full-day consultation, sisters were invited to choose which model they considered had the greater capacity to serve mercy life in areas such as good governance, partnership in mission, distribution of resources and community living.⁹

Fifth Consultation

Given the seriousness of this matter it was decided at IPC level that the criterion for determining whether or not reconfiguring was to proceed in any congregation would be a minimum of two-thirds in favour. Similarly with regard to the Institute, two thirds or more of its members needed to be in favour of a stated direction before it was accepted. The fifth consultation indicated that in thirteen of the eighteen congregations, at least two thirds of the sisters favoured one canonical congregation, thus indicating the way forward for the Institute as a whole.



Sister Laretta Baker RSJ and Kerry Brettell, facilitators at the Sixth Institute Chapter.

With the direction thus established the new entity needed to be given some shape. To situate the shaping in a context of theological reflection, resources for prayer were distributed and members were encouraged to utilise them. On the basis of their reflection, all were invited to participate in 'shaping the model'.

Congregation Leaders were advised of the canonical steps required of them and their councils and task groups were established to ensure all that the myriad administrative details were taken care of. Remote preparation began for submitting a petition to Rome requesting the dissolution of the Institute and the establishment of a new canonical entity. To ensure that all sisters were aware of the implications of the decision to form this entity, each was informed by letter that the formal vote on reconfiguring was to be taken at the forthcoming Institute Chapter. This letter provided information about the status of congregations choosing to remain autonomous, of the rights of individual sisters with regard to joining the new entity and of remote preparation for the first chapter of the new institute.



Logo of the Sixth Institute Chapter.

The Sixth Institute Chapter

The Sixth Institute Chapter, held in December 2010, called all members of the Institute, standing on the threshold of a new era, to personal and communal conversion. Delegates voted to petition the Holy See to dissolve the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia, established in 1981, and to form a new religious institute.¹⁰

Papal Approval

On August 3 2011, a positive response to the petition was received from Rome. The first chapter of the new institute was immediately convoked and December 12 2011 was chosen as the date for the commencement of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea. Once again that date so etched in mercy history – be it 1831, 1981 or 2011 – will mark a new era for the daughters of Catherine McAuley.



Institute Leadership Team 2011, L-R Sisters Caroline Ryan (Vice President), Nerida Tinkler (President), Karon Donnellon (Councillor) with the documents from Rome.

While the path to forming one canonical congregation appeared to the majority of sisters to be the right course, it must be acknowledged there have been some who, in good faith, were not convinced that this was the direction that the Institute should take. Coming to terms with the fact that not all congregations would join the new entity has not been easy for sisters and the pain experienced by many has dimmed the joy of embarking on this new venture. Throughout all the processes of reconfiguring, the admonition of our foundress to maintain the bonds of charity has been a guiding principle. Those bonds remain and will animate mutual relationships no matter where Sisters of Mercy live or minister.¹¹

Having considered the manner in which the decision to reconfigure was made and the extent of the consultation as to the ultimate shape of the new entity, it is useful to compare the processes of decision making as they have developed since 1953. When the Union and the Federation were formed, the average sister was largely ignorant of what was going on and was certainly not consulted as to how either of the bodies might be shaped. That was the task of the leaders and the canonists.¹² By the time the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia was established, religious life had become much more democratic and when decisions were made which affected their lives, rank and file expected to be consulted. In 1981 their expectations were honoured and it is interesting to remember that the approval for establishing the Institute was contingent on acceptance by the sisters.¹³ Thirty years on, in relation to the new entity, each sister was consulted, informed and urged to participate. Her feedback was sought, her input valued, her involvement in discussion encouraged. Thus it is that each can 'own' the new direction, whatever it may be, and give wholehearted allegiance to it.

Ends and Beginnings

In the foreword to this work it was proposed that the task of the historian is constantly to re-interpret and redefine a story and that identifying an endpoint to that story is well-nigh impossible. This is eminently true of this piece. Life, mercy life, is dynamic. It defies any attempt to impose on it strict parameters of place or time. In *East Coker*, T S Eliot speaks of ends and beginnings, suggesting that the two can at times be indistinguishable. It goes without saying that

when the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia is dissolved, it will not be the end of the mercy story or the Institute story or the story of vowed religious life. Resurrection belief proclaims a life that is changed, not ended. For the Sisters of Mercy in Australia there is no sharply-delineated future. There is simply a call. As in the case of Abraham the call is to leave behind the certainties and walk in faith, to trust that this is God's world and God's work and that God will show the way. As Eliot intimates, the here and the now are irrelevant when it comes to love; God is here or there or elsewhere.

*For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.*¹⁴

¹ ISMA News December 1989 p.7.

² *Statements from the Fifth Institute Chapter of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia* (2004) p.2, AISMA 101.5.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ The first Reconfiguring Coordinating Committee (2005-2009) consisting of Sisters Margaret Endicott, Janette, Gray, Anne Keim, Patricia Powell, and Joan Wilson was chaired by Sister Beverley Stott. Members of the second (2009-present), also chaired by Beverley Stott, were Sisters Leonie Crotty, Eileen Anne Daffy, Rose Marie Glennen, Elizabeth Hartley, Maryanne Loughry and Helen Mary Peters. In February 2008 Leonie Crotty was appointed Reconfiguring Executive Officer.

⁵ ISMA, *Reports to Sixth National Chapter, September 2010, Report of Reconfiguring Coordination Committee*, p.60. AISMA 101.6

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ These comments are a sample of those received in response to the survey. See Kerr, B., 'A Critique of the Structures of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia', ISMA Occasional Papers, *Reconfiguring: Exploring the Structure*, 2007, pp.14-15.

⁸ The members of this group were Sisters Leonie Crotty, Karon Donnellon, Frances Fitzpatrick, Maureen Gleeson, Patricia Powell and Caroline Ryan.

⁹ The group who prepared the model of 'One Canonical Congregation' consisted of Sisters Mary Densley, Bernardine Evens, Maureen Gleeson, Marie Keogh, Helen Mary Peters and Mary Tinney; those who prepared the model of 'The Evolving Institute' were Sisters Marie Butcher, Johanna Conway, Margaret Hickie, Anna Koeneman and Desley Robinson.

¹⁰ See ISMA, *Sixth Institute Chapter 2010, Acts of Chapter*, p.3. AISMA 101.6.

¹¹ See Report NT, p.2.

¹² See Essay JOT p.21 where Fr J Hogan is quoted as stating that many sisters admitted to him that they had no idea what 'union' or 'federation' really meant.

¹³ See above p.58 and n.17.

¹⁴ T S Eliot, *East Coker*, (No 2 of 'Four Quartets') <http://www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets/coker.html>

APPENDIX 1:
DIAGRAM 9: COMPOSITION OF INSTITUTE PLENARY COUNCIL
AND INSTITUTE LEADERSHIP TEAM

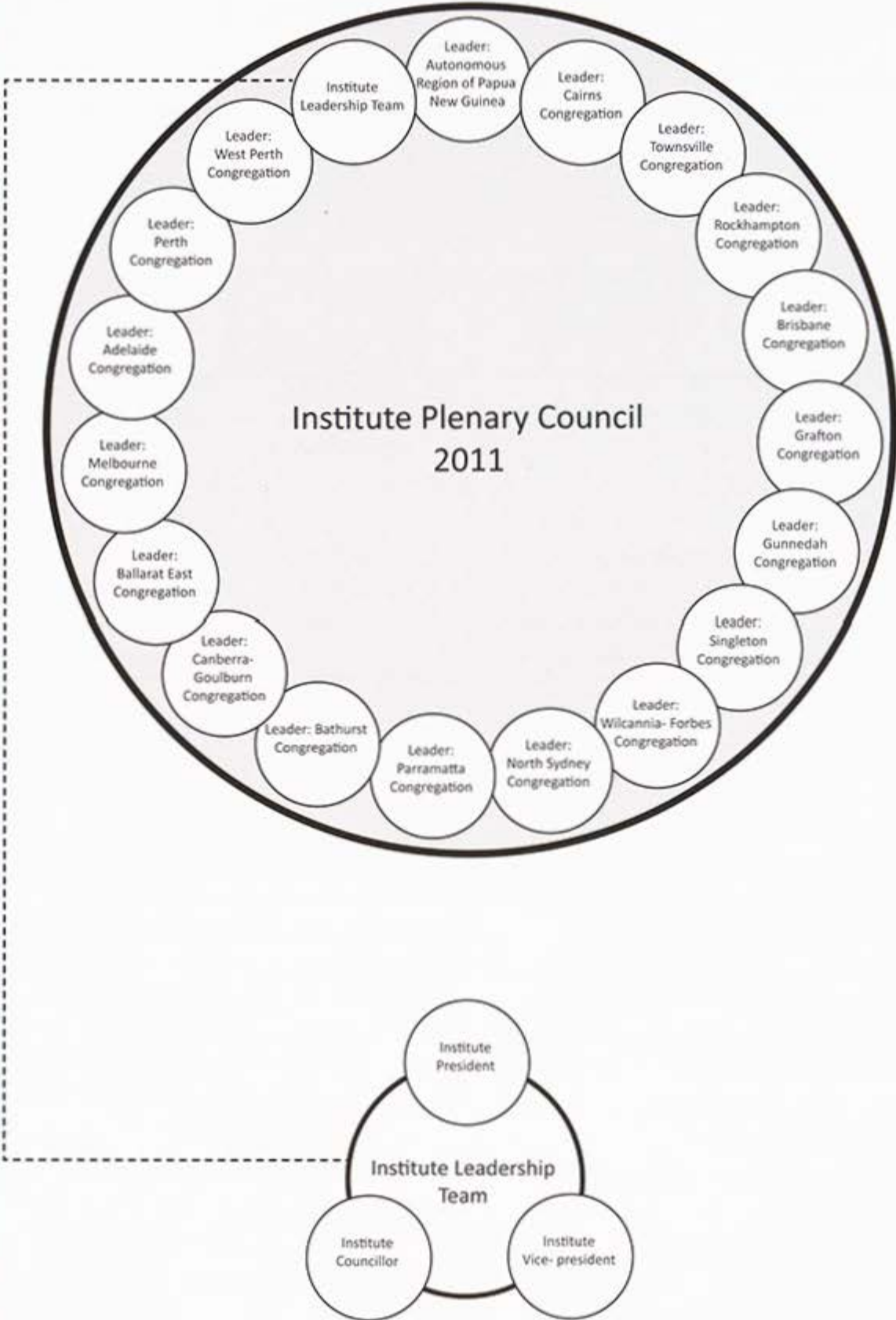
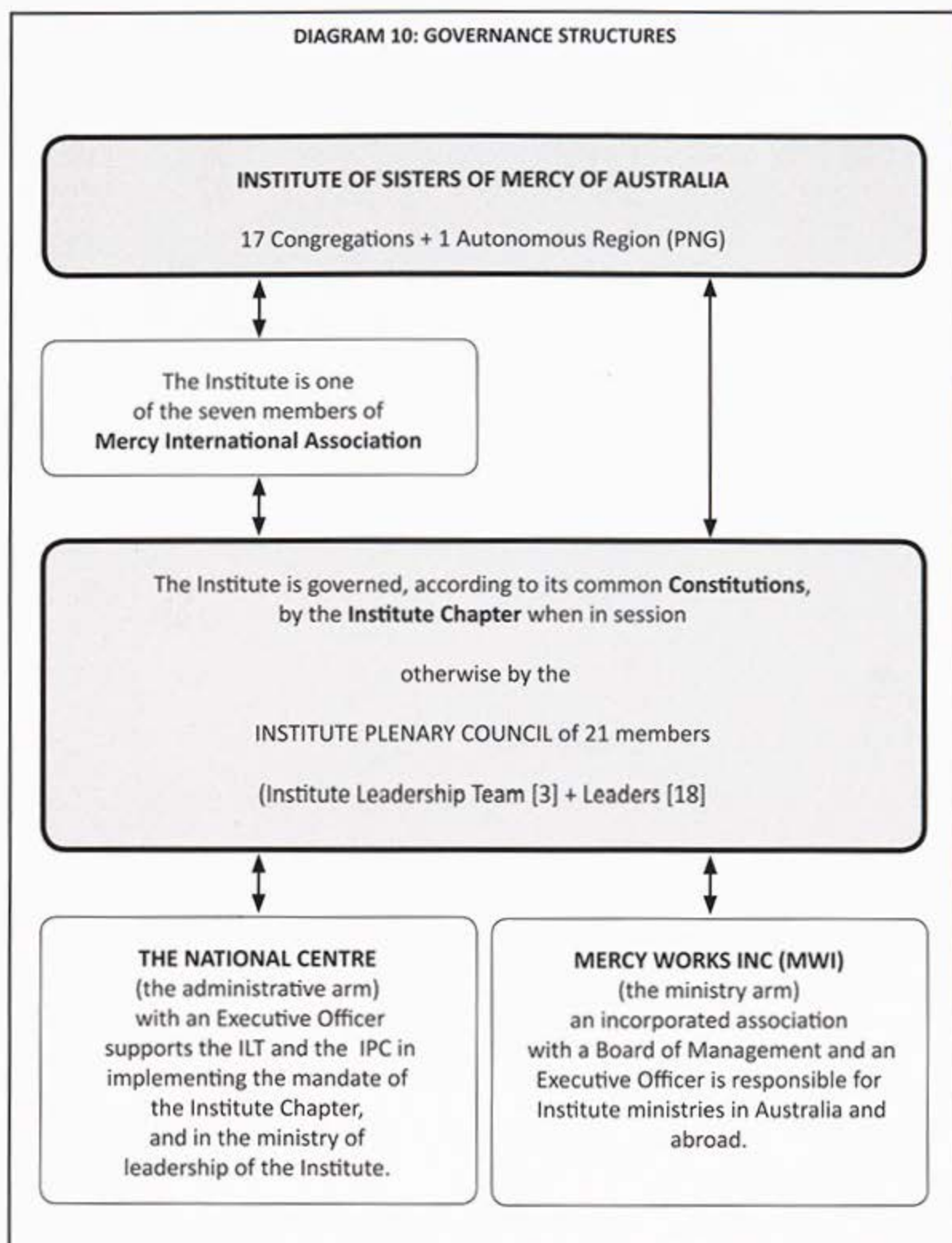


DIAGRAM 10: GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES



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