

NOVEMBER | DECEMBER 2020

Bimonthly publication for sisters, associates and companions of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

iviva!mercy

Mercy Education Meets a Crucible Moment

also in this issue:

**The Ministry of Leadership
in Unsettling Times**

**Filling the Gap:
Mercy Partnership Fund**

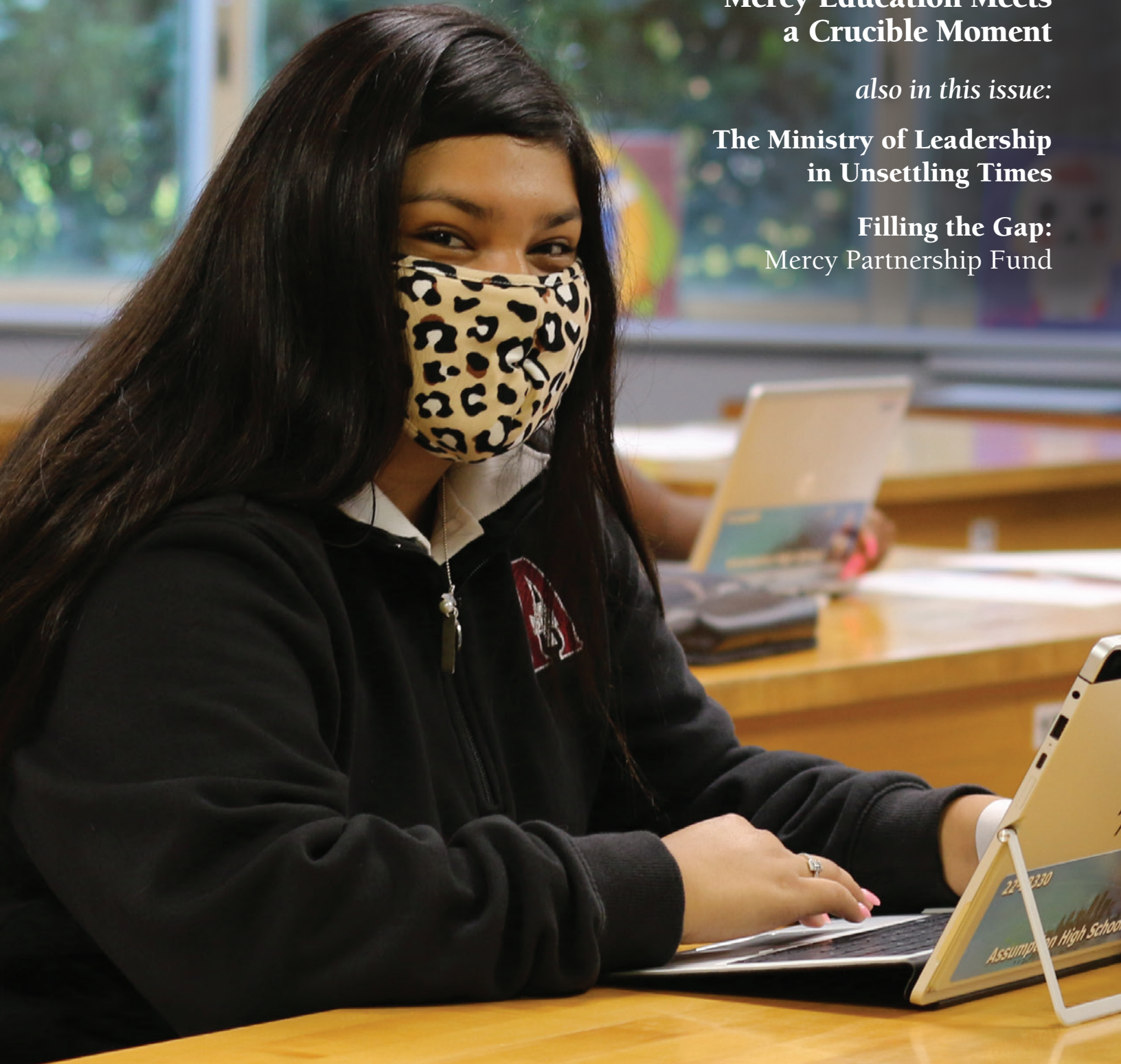


Table of Contents

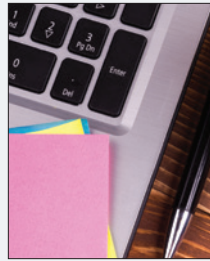
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Lydia, a junior at Assumption High School in Louisville, Kentucky, is one of many Mercy secondary school students back in the classroom at least part-time during the COVID-19 pandemic and social upheaval over racial injustice. **Read more on page 2.**



page 2



page 8



page 13

FEATURES

- 2** Mercy Education Meets a Crucible Moment
By Lauren Albright
- 8** The Ministry of Leadership in Unsettling Times
By Sister Joy Clough
- 13** Filling the Gap: Mercy Partnership Fund
By Sarah B. Smith

COLUMNS

- 7** Mercy Spirituality | *Comforting the Sorrowful, and Finding Hope in Days to Come*
By Tylia Barnes
- 11** Vocation and Incorporation | *Welcoming the Lessons of Community Life*
By Sister Marissa Butler
- 12** Justice | *Remembering the Beloved U.S. Missionary Martyrs in El Salvador*
By Sister Betty Campbell
- 17** Spice of Mercy Life | *A Minute of Your Time*
By Deborah Herz

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Sisters of Mercy  Hermanas de la Misericordia

From the Institute Leadership Team



THE INSTITUTE LEADERSHIP TEAM

(FROM LEFT) SISTERS ÁINE O'CONNOR, PATRICIA McDERMOTT, JUDITH FRIKKER, PATRICIA FLYNN AND ANNE MARIE MILLER.

Dear Sisters, Associates and Companions,

For those of us whose lives are measured not just by calendars but by liturgical seasons, the invitation to Advent this year—a year like no other!—is both grace and challenge. Our Advent companions—Isaiah, John the Baptist, Mary and Jesus—call us, as a people of Mercy, both to comfort and to confront. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its tragic loss of life and unprecedented disruption of everyday realities, cries out for the merciful relief of suffering, of loneliness, of anxiety. Meanwhile, the insidious virus of systemic racism, evidenced in the murder and maiming of persons of color, calls us, in justice, to confront our own complicity and to speak out for the full dignity of every human person. The wounds of both diseases are deep and not easily healed, but Advent is our season of hope and commitment.

This issue of *¡Viva! Mercy* touches on some of the ways that the Mercy family has been engaged in both comforting and confronting these challenges during recent months. Through the Mercy Education System of the Americas (MESA), our schools have reached out with compassion and courage. Throughout the Institute, leaders have found creative ways to connect us to one another and to our world. The Mercy Partnership Fund has brought release to those held captive by poverty and discrimination through its support of grassroots efforts.

Jan Richardson, in her reflections on this season, notes that Advent is a time for mending what has been broken, restoring wholeness to what has been torn apart and seeing as God sees what our world could become. She offers us this *Mending Blessing*:

Do not pray to be patient
but to persist.
Ask for the endurance
that helps us learn
to breathe
in the midst of fear,
to love
in the presence
of sorrow,
to dream
within the rending
of the world that might
be made.

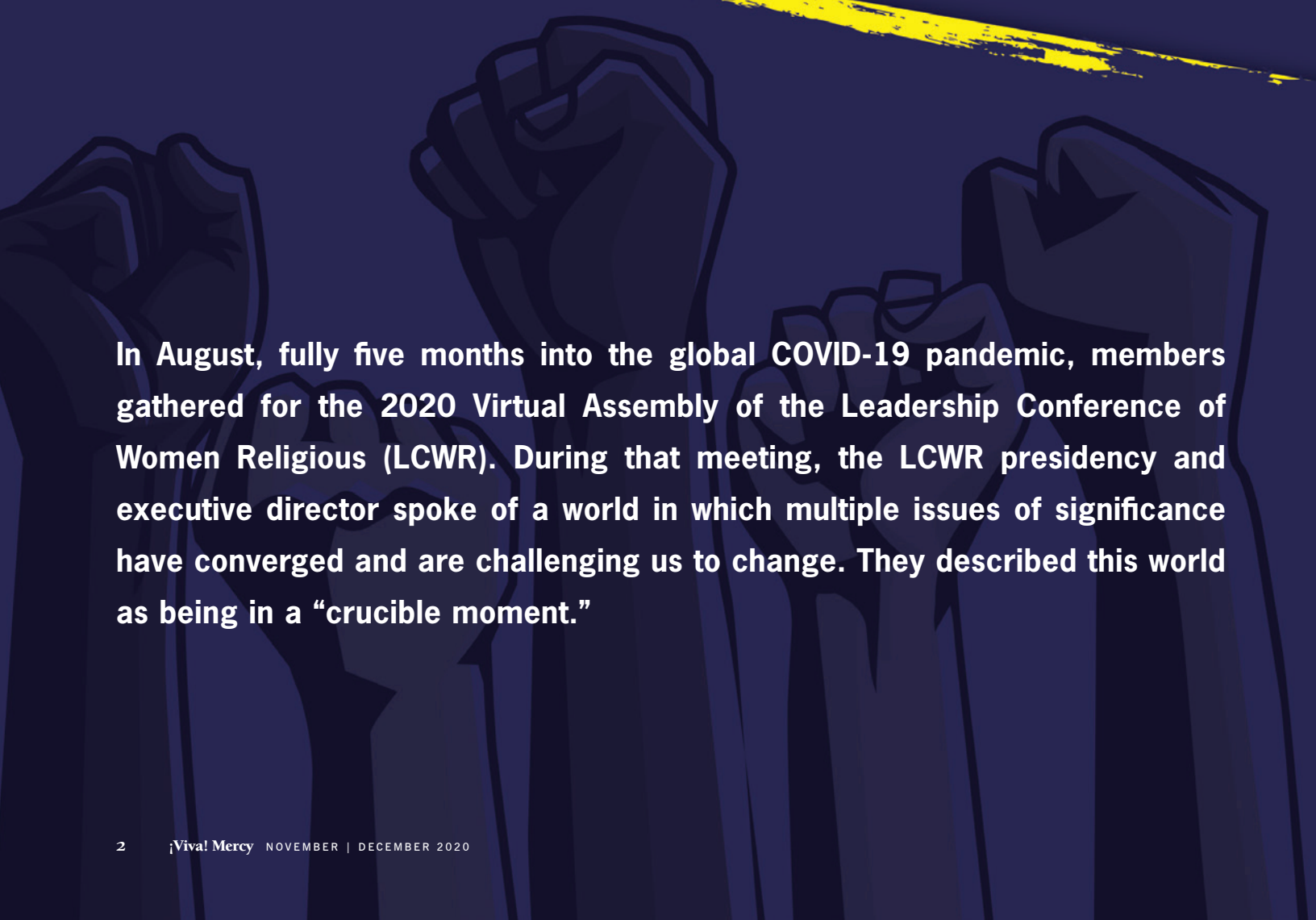
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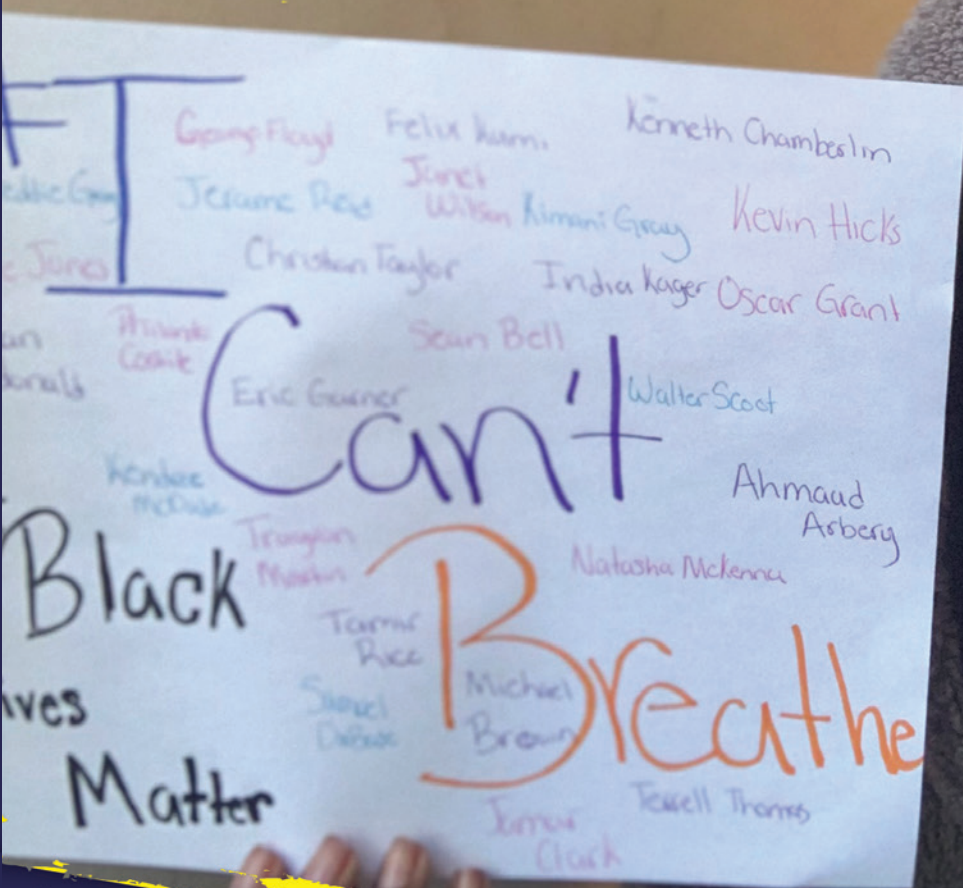


MERCY EDUCATION MEETS A CRUCIBLE MOMENT

By Lauren Albright



In August, fully five months into the global COVID-19 pandemic, members gathered for the 2020 Virtual Assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). During that meeting, the LCWR presidency and executive director spoke of a world in which multiple issues of significance have converged and are challenging us to change. They described this world as being in a “crucible moment.”



At Mercy Career and Technical High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, students such as senior Briana Cottman took part in a virtual protest to stand against racial injustice and the police killings of Black people.

Since March, the 53 schools that are part of the Mercy Education System of the Americas (MESA) have been shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic and, in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, a growing consciousness of the unhealed wounds of racism. From this crucible moment, a call for unity has been emerging within the Mercy education community, particularly in regard to MESA's commitment to educate young people in the spirit of Catherine McAuley and to affirm the teaching of the Catholic Church on the life and dignity of each human being.

As this article is written, most Mercy secondary schools are returning to class—some virtually, some in person, some with a hybrid model—and are developing plans to respond to the simultaneous crises of COVID-19 and racial injustice. Offered here is an overview of this ongoing, transformative work that will indelibly impact the way MESA schools approach their mission, embrace Mercy values and live out the Critical Concerns.

"UNPRECEDENTED TIMES ... UNPRECEDENTED MERCY"

When schools began to change their approach to education in March due to the spread of the coronavirus, few could imagine that the temporary procedures they were developing would be a template for a new reality.

Students at Colegio Santa Ethnea in Buenos Aires, Argentina, transitioned to remote learning just days after their school year began in March. In countries with vulnerable healthcare systems and high rates of poverty, including Honduras, Jamaica and the Philippines, schools needed first to ensure that students' basic needs were being met. In the United States, schools close to COVID-19 hotspots dealt not only with the adjustment to virtual education but also with the emotional toll to students and staff members grieving the loss of loved ones to the disease.

"In these unprecedented times, we are witnessing unprecedented mercy within our MESA community," the

MESA Board of Directors shared in a message to school administrators on March 23. “Administrators and faculty are working tirelessly to adapt to new virtual learning models. ... students are embracing so many challenges and uncertainties with resilience and enthusiasm. These expressions of mercy remind us that mission is not confined to the walls of a school.”

Then, as U.S. Mercy schools were developing plans for exams, proms, graduations and summer programs, the death of George Floyd, a Black man, during an arrest in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in May halted the hum of those anxious, hopeful preparations and led to massive public demonstrations throughout the United States and the world.

“We needed to confront the fact that our schools have played a role in supporting institutional racism and that we must do better for all our students,” said Sister Lisa Griffith, executive director of MESA. “As a system, we recognized that we needed to take concrete steps to educate ourselves and challenge each other. Our schools are where students are preparing to take their places as leaders in our world, and our response to racism will shape their perspectives. What we do now matters.”

From the time the first Mercy schools announced their transition to virtual learning to the present, when every school is considering how to respond to the surmounting need for antiracism training and education, MESA’s approach has been rooted in unity.

STANDING “IN UNION AND CHARITY”

Mercy education cohorts have gathered for many years, with the number of cohort groups expanding since the founding of MESA in July 2017. The cohorts provide an opportunity for administration, faculty and staff members throughout the Mercy Education System of the Americas to communicate and collaborate around their areas of responsibility; groups meet regularly via web-conferencing.

Following the onset of COVID-19 and in the aftermath of George Floyd’s death and other instances of racial injustice, these virtual meetings took on a new significance.



Alex Ack graduated with honors from Muffles College High School in Orange Walk, Belize, earlier this year. The outgoing president of the Student Government Association finished classes virtually, along with many of his peers throughout the MESA network of schools.

Sister Delores Hannon, president of Mercy High School, Omaha, Nebraska, explained some of the major distinctions of the Mercy head of school cohort compared to other professional groups in which educators might be involved. “We all have the same focus—continuing the legacy of Catherine McAuley, living the Sisters of Mercy Critical Concerns. It is a common rootedness and common passion that guides our decisions,” she said.

These bonds, Delores said, make the cohort a safe place to share, troubleshoot and brainstorm, which both generates new ideas and stretches administrators’ thinking around the many complex issues related to the dual crises of COVID-19 and racial injustice.

“We realized that we needed to stand ‘in union and charity,’” Delores said. “We could do much better collaboratively than in isolation.”

For Pam Baker, president of Our Lady of Mercy School for Young Women in Rochester, New York, the head of school cohort meetings are a place to exchange ideas, learn from one another’s areas of expertise and challenge themselves and others “to lead through the lens of Mercy.”

Other MESA cohort groups—including communications and marketing, technology, school counselors and campus ministers—shared how the social crisis of racial injustice and the health crisis of COVID-19 helped to unite them. As Elle Muzny, ninth-grade counselor at Mount St. Mary Catholic High School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, put it: “We share our struggles together and continue to encourage each other, all for the betterment of our Mercy students.”

TOMORROW’S LEADERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE TODAY

The mission of MESA is to “nurture highly competent and deeply compassionate leaders ready to serve a vulnerable world.”

Since the start of the pandemic, this mission has clearly been taking hold of Mercy students as they have supported one another, found creative ways to serve their communities and sought meaning in this crisis, especially its impact on our Earth and on the most vulnerable members of society.

Following George Floyd’s death, the power of the mission was even more apparent. Mercy students and graduates became active in challenging racist structures within their schools, their communities and nations. “One of our blessings is that our students and alumnae/alumni have taken the Mercy values and traditions to heart,” said Lisa Griffith. “When they see injustices, they are willing to voice them and to be a part of the solution.”

Olga Segura graduated from St. Catharine Academy (SCA) in the Bronx, New York, in 2007 and went on to serve as an associate editor for America Media and to found the podcast *Jesuitical*. While she works on a forthcoming

Mercy High School in Farmington Hills, Michigan, has been focusing attention on issues of race and equality. Here, students celebrate the diverse cultures represented at the school at an Ethnic Bazaar.



book about race, the Black Lives Matter movement and the Catholic Church, she is helping SCA create a plan to ensure the school does more to express the Mercy Critical Concern of antiracism.

St. Catharine is one of the most culturally diverse Mercy schools; it is also located in what was one of the first and worst U.S. hotspots of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the 2020–2021 academic year commenced, Olga facilitated a virtual conversation with staff, faculty and students in which students identified issues of race and diversity at the school. The concerns they raised will be at the heart of the school's planning process around diversity, equity and inclusion, said Sister Patricia Wolf, president of SCA.

Mary Ann Steutermann, director of campus ministry at Assumption High School in Louisville, Kentucky, discussed the ongoing work of the school's diversity steering committee. Active for several years, the committee is now developing a diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) plan that will include audits of curriculum/instruction, organizational structure, policies and programs.

"We have been working hard at Assumption the past couple of years to teach our kids about advocacy and getting involved in civic matters, especially in the area of the

Critical Concerns," Mary Ann said. "I've been very encouraged by the students' enthusiasm around this. They want to use their voices to effect change. I think the combination of their energy plus some very carefully planned strategic DEI programming can result in great things."

Sister Jenny Wilson, DEI coordinator and theology teacher at Mount Mercy Academy in Buffalo, New York, said that the school is in the second year of a three-year grant focused on strengthening diversity, equity and inclusion. The grant is shared by other area private and Catholic schools and this year will focus on enhancing curriculum to be more representative of different cultures and views. This initiative will enhance Jenny's ongoing work to create a culture of belonging for everyone at the school.

"If we want our schools to be more diverse and inclusive, we have to change the way we have always done things," Jenny said, including academic and social aspects of the

"This is How We Take Care of One Another"

On April 28, the Sisters of Mercy Institute Leadership Team announced that the Collaborative Ministry Fund would be releasing \$8 million to help address the needs of Mercy ministries impacted by COVID-19. MESA received a portion of these funds to disburse as grants to schools to help them address their immediate needs.

"We were grateful for all the wise financial planning that made this fund possible," said Sister Lisa Griffith, MESA executive director. "These important funds ensured our schools could offer help to those most directly impacted by the pandemic."

At Our Lady of Mercy Academy (OLMA) in Syosset, New York, the grant helped to address a significant increase in financial aid requests. One student's father, a medical doctor, died after contracting COVID-19 while serving on the frontlines of the crisis. Another student comes from a neighborhood that is struggling with gang-related violence; her mother, who works as a housekeeper, and her father, who is a construction worker, both faced reduced income as a result of the pandemic.

"It truly was a special gift—not just the financial component but also the compassionate support to keep us afloat," said Margaret Myhan, president of OLMA.

Marcia Tai Chun, ministry coordinator and legal counsel for the Sisters of Mercy of Jamaica, shared how the funding from the Sisters of Mercy helped to bridge the technology gap for students of the Convent of Mercy Academy "Alpha" in Kingston. The five schools that are part of the Alpha campus are engaged in a major IT infrastructure improvement project to ensure that administrators, teachers and students have the needed technology to face the dramatically changed education landscape. Read more about the project at mercyedu.org/internet-at-alpha/.

In addition to financial aid and technological improvements, Mercymount Country Day School in Cumberland, Rhode Island, used some of the funding to purchase materials that would ensure a safe environment within the school, including personal protective equipment (PPE), additional custodial services, keyboard and laptop covers, and ventilation filters. The school also purchased clear masks to help accommodate the needs of several students with hearing differences.

Said Sister Rayleen Giannotti, Mercymount's principal, "We want students to understand that this is how we take care of one another."

curriculum. “This can take many forms. ... Do students of color see themselves represented in the books they are reading? In the history they are studying? Do they have access to mentors who are like them and might have similar life experiences?”

At Mercy High School in Farmington Hills, Michigan, issues of race and equality are kept in focus with the help of the student-elected Human Relations Council, which was founded in the 1970s and includes four representatives from each grade in addition to several at-large members. The council helps the larger school community to recognize and respond to issues that could cause disharmony or injustice. In the past few years, members of the council have helped to educate their peers on microaggressions and institutional racism, among other topics, in addition to promoting events celebrating the diverse cultures of the school community, such as the Ethnic Bazaar and Black History Assembly.

The killing of George Floyd has prompted increased attention to antiracism efforts, including the hiring of a full-time director of diversity, equity and inclusion, Traci Smith, and the establishment of the Council on Racial Equity (CORE). The mission of CORE is “to build awareness, solutions and leadership for anti-racist, anti-biased structures, policies and practices at Mercy High School.”

“CORE was the brainchild of one of our 1995 alumnae, Sommer Woods,” said Eleasha Tarplin, dean of student affairs. “It was intentional that the steering committee would be Black women and indigenous women of color, and the subcommittees would be open to anyone.” CORE plans to concentrate its work in 10 focus areas, including the school’s handbook and code of conduct, curriculum, training, and recruitment and retention of Black students and Black teachers. More information about DEI planning at Mercy High School is available at mhsmi.org/mercy-life/dei.

At Instituto María Regina in La Ceiba, Honduras, students saw the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement and found ways to engage within their own country. “Students



Twins Jeremy (left) and Jerome Sharpe attended class at Mt. St. Joseph Preparatory School in Mandeville, Jamaica, from home during the spring. This semester, school is still being conducted virtually for the sixth graders and their peers.

have united in the Honduran movement, Garifuna Lives Matter,” said Mariela Nanet Pavon, coordinator of pre-basic academics. “The Garifuna community are African descendants with very little government support. Three Garifuna leaders were assassinated for defending persons of color in our country. [Our students] made virtual posters and murals to raise consciousness that the race of a person does not matter and that we should all support and defend one another.”

At the July 2020 meeting of the MESA Board of Directors, members voted to add a strategic goal to “foster a culture of inclusion and cultural/ethnic diversity on the MESA board and all local [school] boards.” Terry Quinn, chairperson of the MESA board, explained, “Our board and local boards do not reflect the population they serve.” Effecting change at the board level is just one way to help MESA ensure that issues of diversity, equity and inclusion remain at the forefront of a Mercy education and foster a culture of welcome for all students who have felt a lack of support or acceptance.

A NEW REALITY

These two crises may have altered education forever, but true transformation will come only through careful and intentional effort. Mercy education’s continued work in this crucible moment lays down a strong foundation for a new reality—one more closely united with and more deeply entrenched in Mercy values and the Critical Concerns.

Mary Ann Steutermann shared this reflection, which encapsulates the transformative power of the present moment: “My prayer ... is that the dual pandemics of viral disease and violent discrimination come to an end very soon. But alone, prayer is not sufficient. We may not be in a position to come up with a vaccine to fight COVID-19. But we are in a position to take a stand against racism. And as people of faith and character, we must. Together, as a community of mercy, we can make this happen.” ■



Lauren Albright is the communications manager for the Mercy Education System of the Americas. She can be reached at lalbright@sistersofmercy.org.

**OUR SCHOOLS ARE WHERE STUDENTS
ARE PREPARING TO TAKE THEIR
PLACES AS LEADERS IN OUR WORLD,
AND OUR RESPONSE TO RACISM
WILL SHAPE THEIR PERSPECTIVES.
WHAT WE DO NOW MATTERS.**

Comforting the Sorrowful, and Finding Hope in Days to Come

It has been almost four years since I lost my beloved Travis. Our life was far from perfect, but we found purpose and promise during our 23 years of marriage, raising three remarkable sons. Our love story began the summer of 1992 on Pier 3 at the National Aquarium in Baltimore. After the first date, we knew that we would spend the rest of our lives together. He proposed eight months later, in the same spot where we had our first conversation. A few months after that, we celebrated a July wedding. Life was uncomplicated and what we desired it to be.

Six months after I gave birth to our youngest son, Travis was diagnosed with heart failure and, two years later, kidney disease. He spent several years visiting specialists and trying new medicines in hopes of finding a cure before ultimately passing away in March 2017 at the age of 46. As you can imagine, my life was turned upside down as I tried to navigate the world without my life partner and stay strong for our sons. After all, they were budding young men who had just lost the most influential person in their lives.

Initially, my goal was to make it through each day. I proudly wore the mask of “this is what Travis would want me to do,” pouring myself into helping everyone else with their grief—including my boys, in-laws,

extended family and friends—while also trying to meet work expectations. This left me emotionally depleted and physically exhausted.

In hindsight, I have realized how unhealthy it is to prioritize the needs of others over my own. In the African-American tradition, women are encouraged to remain

forward. I also learned more about the stages of grief and that people experience them in different orders.

My first stage was finding hope in moving forward. Travis was an extreme optimist and saw the good in everyone and everything. My first gesture toward hope was making candles in honor of his memory so that our loved ones would find greater peace in the life we lived with him without regretting the years lost. In offering hope, I was able to remember our life together, laughing at lessons learned through the hard times while cherishing happy moments. Naturally, this brings lots of emotional highs and lows, which causes me to deeply miss our connection and his presence. In those moments, I’m reminded of my oldest son’s tribute during the funeral: “Don’t feel sorry for us. My dad did what he came to this Earth to do.”

I find comfort knowing that Travis’ purpose was to teach us how to love and to model manhood for our sons. Many years ago, Travis sent me an email saying, “The love that the five of us have [Travis, Tylia, Trevor, Todd and Tyler] will supersede all things, even death.” He taught us that the greatest path to peace is love. In my moments of unrest, I thank God for the life Travis and I had. His legacy, personality and mannerisms show up every day in our sons; that gives me great peace and the will to move forward.

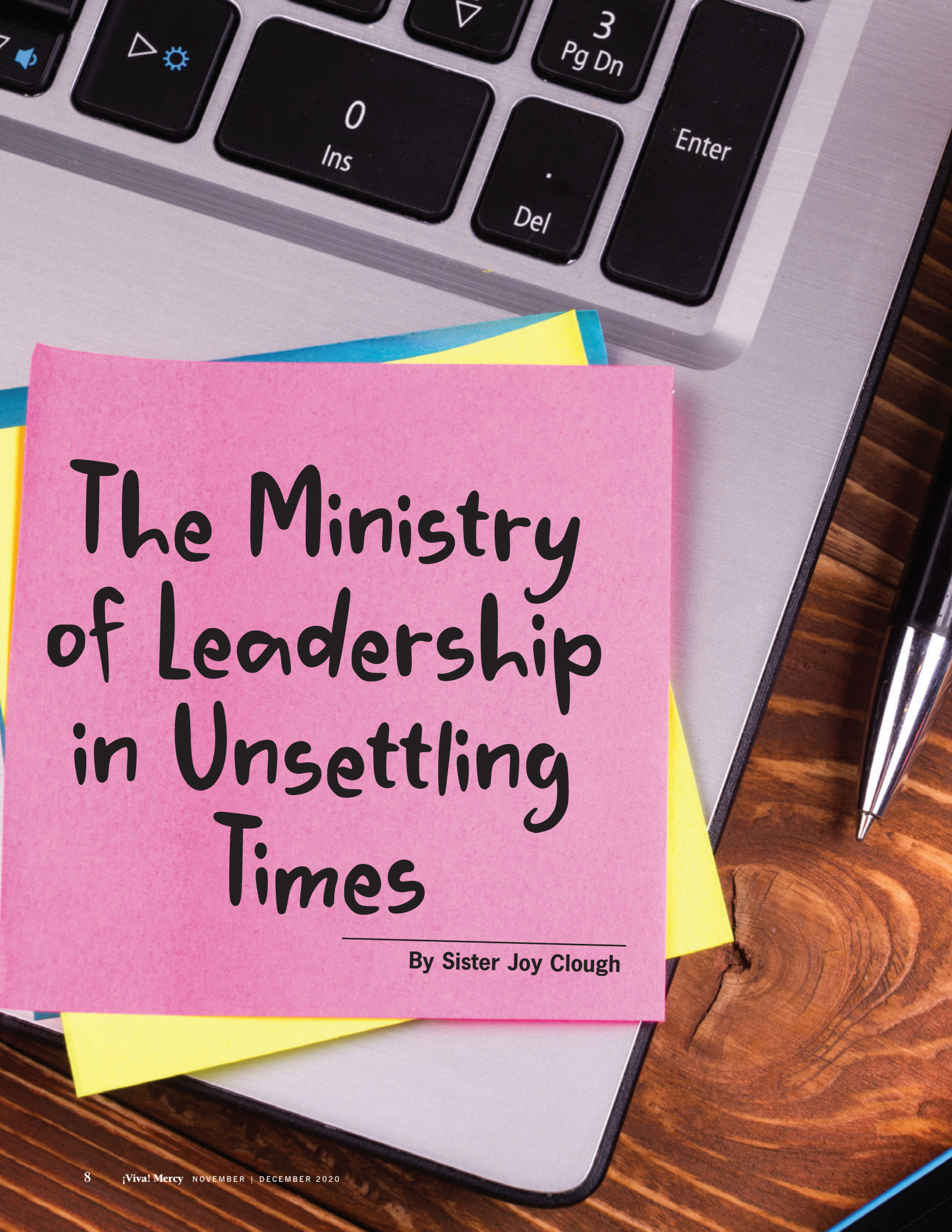
—*Tylia Barnes, executive director of the Office of Association*



Tylia Barnes calls them “My men”: From left, son Tyler, her late husband Travis, and sons Trevor and Todd, along with the family dog, Taco.

strong even during difficult times, and because it was expected of me, I did. However, after deep reflection and counsel with my pastor, I sought refuge in the spiritual work of mercy, comforting the sorrowful. Through prayer, I intentionally focused on this fourth work of mercy as a way to help myself through the process of grief. In times of despair, I learned to pay attention to the presence of our merciful God in my life and all the people caring for me in the process. Healing is both spiritual and practical.

I soon learned that I had to take care of myself if I wanted to move



The Ministry of Leadership in Unsettling Times

By Sister Joy Clough

Three statements from Mercy leaders paint a time-lapse portrait of their experience during a pandemic:



Like leaders across all sectors of society, those with leadership responsibilities in the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas have been significantly affected by the coronavirus pandemic. How? In July 2020, members of the Institute Leadership Team (ILT), the six Leadership Teams (LTs) and leaders in Guam and the Philippines addressed that question.

The interviews yielded six themes: expanded leadership responsibilities, an ambivalent appreciation for technology, a heightened emphasis on relationships, gratitude for lay colleagues, the interplay of Institute and local leadership, and intuitions about the future. This article—the first of two parts—explores the first three themes.

Expanded Leadership Responsibilities

When it comes to pandemic-related responsibilities, Sister Angelina Mitre (CCASA) captured the unanimous response of Mercy leaders: “Looking out for the sisters is not a new responsibility, but we have been doing so with greater intent, and we have tried to be present more regularly than before the pandemic.”

“Scrambling” is my word for what happened,” said Sister Pat Coward (South Central). “You couldn’t catch your breath. Taking calls from worried or upset sisters, checking on ministries, keeping up with government guidelines, learning to connect virtually from home, helping ministries—we were pedaling as fast as we could.”

Pat and other leaders encountered often bewildering and ever-shifting government regulations across cities, counties, states and nations that meant decisions made one day had to be rethought days later.

Leaders feel keenly the weight of their deliberations as decisions about everything from life care centers and ministry involvements to travel and vacation homes “become life and death decisions,” said Sister Sue Sanders (West Midwest). “That reality hangs over all of us, a worry we try to give to God.” It is a worry that comprises multiple concerns: the impact of isolation on older sisters, sisters who

seem not to care about the danger their behavior might pose to others, being unable to grieve together as would normally be the case and even the impact of the stock market, since Mercy’s major income today is from investments.

Sister Jean Delgado (Philippines) summarized many leaders’ experience: “We felt a sense of overwhelming uncertainty at times. Being a leader means being aware of the moment even when we don’t know what will happen tomorrow, [and yet] projecting calm and assuredness. We know our future is in God’s hands.”

Ambivalent Appreciation for Technology

Commenting on the realities of working almost exclusively online during the pandemic, Mercy leaders echoed one another with amazing consistency. ILT member Sister Pat Flynn acknowledged that online meetings were fine for sharing information and planning, “but we all recognized the limitations of not being able to drop into one another’s offices for a quick conversation, to share a story or a laugh,” she said. “Most of all, we missed the personal contact.”

For many, as for Sister Margaret Mary Hinz (West Midwest), “Days got longer; work seemed more intense. Things slowed down because it wasn’t possible to have impromptu meetings or quick caucusing.” ILT member Sister Judith Frikker sized it up this way: “People talk about Zoom fatigue. It’s real!”

Several leaders cited the loss involved in shifting Institute Leadership Conference (ILC) meetings online. “At ILC meetings, we work hard by day. You can disagree with someone at the discussion table in the afternoon and then relax together in the evening,” said Sister Patty Moriarty (Northeast). “Losing that kind of connection is a real loss.” Pat Coward agreed: “We’ve learned that we need that sort of balance.”

Meanwhile, sisters were advancing their own online skills. “Exploring live-streaming and technical options opened up more opportunities for gathering than we could have imagined,” said Sister Marian Arroyo (Guam), who

Circumstances have pulled us together. I think we grew in our sense of Institute and our appreciation and support of one another.

noted that sisters there used BlueJeans for their annual retreat. “And it actually worked!” she said. Sister Aura Matalines (Philippines) discovered a similar openness to technology: “Some in their 80s and 90s are trying to learn to use the gadgets in order to communicate.”

Whatever the cons, technology saved the day for the Institute Chapter session scheduled for March 2020. It became clear early on that the in-person gathering would have to be cancelled and other ways found to deal with one of its major agenda items—the consultation on the Sisters’ Life and Governance Framework. “We hosted telephone conference calls with over 100 delegates and alternates,” said Pat Flynn, “and the input was invaluable.”

Then came the challenge of the second agenda item slated for that Chapter session—deciding how to select delegates to the 2023 Chapter. After considering possible online alternatives, the ILT received word from Vatican authorities that “chapters by means of telecommunications” were prohibited. The solution, still unfolding across the Institute, is a process of consultation with Chapter delegates and alternates about the selection scenarios proposed months ago by the Sisters’ Life and Governance Task Force. Following those consultations, Institute President Sister Pat McDermott, with the consent of the ILT, will decide the delegate selection process for the 2023 Chapter.



Heightened Emphasis on Relationships

An intriguing aspect of the pandemic has been its impact on relationships, despite the fact that everyone is still social distancing. The need and desire to connect are strong.

For leaders, there was an immediate recognition of the importance of constant, consistent communication as the pandemic took hold.

“We set up what we dubbed ‘Call-em-All’ calls for our six local areas,” said Sister Maureen Mitchell (Northeast). Each call included the same content and was followed up an hour later by an email repeating the updates, news and encouragement. “So there was a steady information source, trusted as accurate, delivered in two different ways.”

Others found their own new or enhanced strategies. In South Central, planned in-person consultations on some substantial issues affecting sisters’ lives had to shift to online. “We set up a series of conference calls with small groups, and we started each session with a roll call during which each sister was asked to share her response to the key question that had been sent out in advance,” said Pat Coward.

Although a sister could opt not to speak during roll call, the end result was greater diversity of views, Pat Coward said, with sisters really hearing one another and listening effectively. The surprising benefit? “What had seemed like a limit—not being able to meet in person—became a grace of greater participation.”

CCASA also initiated group phone conferences, country by country. “We talk about how sisters are taking care of themselves and reaching out to the marginalized,” said Sister Julie Matthews (CCASA). “There’s so much grief and anxiety. We’re being more vulnerable with one another; our check-in at the start of a meeting is taking longer as sisters share more.”

The ILT’s bi-weekly Words of Comfort emails “were one way we felt we could interact with sisters in a personal way,” said Pat McDermott, “and we received many appreciative responses.” Added Judith, “We had ‘Comfortable Cup of Tea’ conversations with Leadership Teams, not to conduct business, but to share with one another how we feel and are managing during these unusual and trying times.”

For the ILC, Margaret Mary said, “Circumstances have pulled us together. I think we grew in our sense of Institute and our appreciation and support of one another.”

And there’s a lightness in some of these exchanges. “We’ve laughed over pandemic hairstyles,” Pat Flynn admitted. “We’ve had some online Farkle games [a dice game] as a team and with other LTs,” Sister Peg Sullivan (Northeast) confessed.

For Mercy leaders, the pandemic has been an intensified call to the ministry of servant leadership, and such leadership initiatives have their counterparts among members. “Sister-to-sister relationships are growing,” Patty said. “It’s making us stronger as a Mercy community.” From an ILT perspective, “The way sisters are caring for one another is so encouraging,” Pat McDermott said. “Sister-to-sister care has taken on depth in the best sense of responsibility for and to one another.”

Notes, calls, treats for sisters in care centers, online prayer and social gatherings—“sisters are taking leadership to be there for one another,” Julie said. Sister Pat Smith (Mid-Atlantic) agreed: “Leadership isn’t limited to us. People definitely stepped up.” ■

The second part of this story, which will appear in the January/February 2021 issue, will explore leaders’ gratitude for lay colleagues, the collaboration between Institute and local leaders, and insights into future possibilities.



An author and Scriptural storyteller, Sister Joy Clough is a member of the Institute Communications Transition Team. She can be reached at joyrsm@comcast.net.

Welcoming the Lessons of Community Life

What do you think of

when you hear “welcoming community”? There are a lot of myths about welcoming communities, and until we responded “yes” to sharing community life with a new member, we—St. Rita’s Community in Rochester, New York—believed some of them to be true. We have been a welcoming community since January 2020. Grateful to have had this opportunity to grow individually and communally, we want to share what the experience has been like for us.

When we first discussed writing this article, we made a list of the highlights of our shared life together. They ran the gamut, from gaining an additional sister to help cook dinner to having a younger sister in the house for free tech support! In

some houses, having a newer member means there is a more agile sister who can move furniture and climb on a chair or ladder to accomplish various physical tasks. While those may certainly be perks to being part of a welcoming community, it has also been our experience that we have been able to integrate diverse prayer practices, experience intergenerational living and expand our understanding of what it means to be Institute ... to be one.

When a sister transitions in or out of a living community, a new community is formed. As our community was beginning to form, we set a schedule for meals, prayer and faith sharing. Faith sharing has allowed us to express our unique spiritualities through music,

sharing around the Sunday readings and simply discussing where we saw the face of God in our days.

We have discovered that faith sharing does not require deep theological discussion; rather, it is something we as Sisters of Mercy do more naturally in our conversation than we may realize. Our time preparing this article became a vehicle for faith sharing because it opened space for us to discuss the movement of God in the joys and challenges of our daily life together.

Living with a new member has led us to the realization that we are a little isolated in our Rochester Community. New members travel to different areas of the Institute for workshops and may spend part of their incorporation years living away from “home.” By sharing stories about sisters and traditions, we feel that we have extended our circle of Mercy. Although intergenerational living can be challenging, there is beauty in older and younger sisters joining hands—the wisdom of the past and the emerging wisdom of the present launching us forward into a future of hope.

Prior to becoming a welcoming community, we were unsure whether we were “good enough” or could live up to the expectations. During the past months, we have come to see that it is possible and that the only expectation is the same one we should have whether there is a new member in the house or not: to be sisters to one another and live together the best Mercy life we can.

—Sister Marissa Butler



The welcoming community in Rochester, New York, includes (left to right) Sisters Marissa Butler, Arlene Semesky, Joanne Deck and Katherine Ann Rappal.

Remembering the Beloved U.S. Missionary Martyrs in El Salvador

December 2, 2020, marks the 40th anniversary of the martyrdom of the four U.S. churchwomen in El Salvador: Maryknoll Sisters Maura Clarke and Ita Ford, Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel and lay volunteer Jean Donovan. They were brutally murdered by the U.S.-supported Salvadoran military for their ministry accompanying refugees. I worked with them, along with Carmelite Father Peter Hinde. I also worked with Maryknoll Sister Carla Piette, who was killed in a flash flood several months before the murders.

As Archbishop Óscar Romero issued a call for support for his people, Ita and Carla, working in Chile, responded and arrived in El Salvador just before his assassination in March 1980. I arrived in mid-August that same year with Peter. We met with Bishop Arturo Rivera y Damas to offer help, and I was sent to set up a parish clinic to attend to the many ills of 200 refugees, some with infants, crammed into the church's basement.

Ita and Carla were members of a *comité de refugiados* (refugee committee) and worked from a parish base in Chalatenango, in an area where people endured Army sweep-and-destroy missions. Peter and I were called to a meeting at the archdiocese, where we met the two Maryknoll sisters and joined the team. I was assigned to health ministry; Peter offered to help with Masses and took a role with the human rights office.

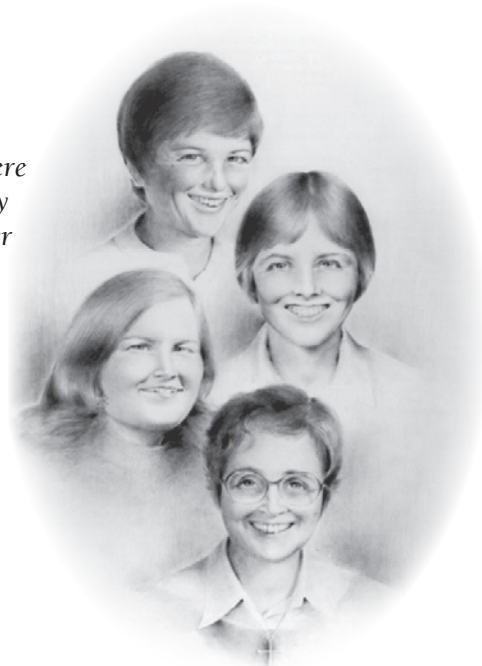
One weekend in August 1980, Ita and Carla were caught in a flash flood while in their Jeep. Carla did not survive. It seems Maura was destined to take her place and quickly found her way around. Dorothy and Jean were on the same pro-refugee team, working in a different region.

While I helped set up other clinics,

Peter went with Ita and Maura to outlying villages. Every day, these sisters took risks transporting food and medicine to people dislocated by army actions. They met *guardia* (the national guard) at roadblocks and saw the dead, as did we, left on the roadside like warning messages. Ita once gave an interview with a Radio Pacifica reporter, laying out in detail how the people were suffering from the U.S.-backed army. I believe that proved fatal.

On December 3, we got the message that our friends were missing. On December 4, the news came that four *gringo* women had been found murdered and buried. The worst of our fears had happened. Bishop Rivera presided at a funeral Mass, and we accompanied the coffins of Ita and Maura to Chalatenango for burial in the local cemetery. Later, I went to the airport with Dorothy and Jean's bodies, which were flown to the United States.

Our human rights contacts suggested Peter and I return to the U.S. to give testimony, and over the next two years, we gave extended speaking tours. We visited the families of our four beloved friends and countered the misrepresentation of U.S. government officials that they were political activists or were killed in



a crossfire. Such was our way of mourning them.

On this 40th anniversary, we commemorate them as martyrs, their portraits by Carmelite Sister Catherine Martin (above) on display in our main room, with that of St. Óscar Romero, here in Casa Tabor, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. May they continue to inspire love and passion in the building of a more just world!

A toolkit of resources developed by the SHARE Foundation and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious that you may use to plan local prayer gatherings/commemorations on December 2 can be found at share-elsalvador.org.

On November 17, Sister Betty and Father Peter will receive the 2020 CRISPAZ Peace Award in recognition of their years of work for the promotion of peace and social justice.

—Sister Betty Campbell

Filling the Gap: Mercy Partnership Fund

By Sarah B. Smith



A pollinator field in Washington, D.C., is part of a Catholic Climate Covenant project. It will eventually feature more than 650,000 flowering plants.

Founded in 1995, Mercy Partnership Fund became part of Mercy Investment Services in 2010. Now in its 25th year, the fund is committed to sharing its financial resources with mission-focused organizations and has grown significantly, deploying \$100 million in 25 years and reaching people in 65 countries around the world. Each investment—in 60 organizations in the United States and internationally—aligns with one or more of the Mercy Critical Concerns. Part of Mercy Investment Services’ 10 percent commitment to impact investing, Mercy Partnership Fund focuses on positive social impact, not financial returns. The following are a few examples of the impact of the fund’s investments around the world.

Encouraging Clean Energy Initiatives

With a loan from Mercy Partnership Fund, Catholic Climate Covenant’s Catholic Energies program is assisting Catholic organizations across the United States to develop, install and fund renewable energy projects on their properties. The program, developed in response to Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, has already completed 10 projects, including installing more than 10,000 solar panels that have generated 3.7 megawatts of energy.

A recently completed Catholic Energies solar project on land owned by Catholic Charities in Washington, D.C., is expected to reduce carbon dioxide emissions per year by approximately 3.5 million pounds or provide carbon sequestration equivalent to 25,000 trees. In addition to the solar array, the site includes a pollinator field that will feature more than 650,000 flowering plants when it develops fully.

“I hope the impact of this project is that other Catholic agencies and institutions will see that energy efficiency and renewable energy work are the right thing to do by God’s creation and help their financial bottom line, enabling utility cost savings to be used to support their core mission,” says Dan Misleh, Catholic Climate Covenant’s executive director.



This Catholic Energies solar project in Washington, D.C., is part of an effort to show Catholic agencies that renewable energy can help their mission and their bottom line.

A client (far left) who received assistance from the Center for Women in Transition in St. Louis stands with Sister Sharon Schmitz, founder of Sharon House, and another program supporter.



Supporting Women through Restorative Justice

The Sisters of Mercy were among the founders of the Center for Women in Transition, a nonprofit organization in St. Louis, Missouri, that assists women caught up in the criminal justice system in making a successful transition back to their families and communities. When center staff found the perfect building to expand the supportive housing program, they reached out to Mercy Partnership Fund to help provide the financing. The home, named Sharon House in honor of Sister Sharon Schmitz, one of the organization’s founders, provides a long-term residence for as many as 24 women.

“What going to Sharon House means to me is a chance to be independent again with a little structure, which for a recovering addict and alcoholic is very important,” says Beverly, one of the home’s first residents. “The positive environment, neighborhood, sober living and the sense of safety and security is so what I need and look forward to. For me, it is a wonderful, better way of life and support.”



Afghan refugee Muska Haseeb came to the United States 12 years ago and, with the help of loans from the Center for Economic Opportunity, has since started her own fashion business. She has also begun studies to become a doctor of obstetrics and gynecology.

Increasing Financial Accessibility for Immigrants

The International Rescue Committee's Center for Economic Opportunity promotes economic mobility for low-income refugees and immigrant families by offering small-dollar consumer and business financing combined with financial education and access to economic development programs. Mercy Partnership Fund is one of the organization's early investors that is making expansion of its lending to key areas across the United States possible.

"Our borrowers have a hard time finding affordable financing elsewhere, often due to lack of credit or because they are new to the U.S. In turn, financial exclusion makes climbing the economic ladder that much harder," says Kasra Movahedi, director of the Center for Economic Opportunity. "Our loans fill this gap." Loans and programs are supporting immigrants and refugees from Afghanistan, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Iran, Iraq and Syria, among other countries.

Muska Haseeb, an Afghan refugee, fled her home with her mother and brother 12 years ago because of domestic violence. After six years of being displaced in Pakistan, Muska and her family came to the United States. "Today, our long journey paid off. I am studying to be an OB-GYN and have started my own fashion business," says Muska. "My mother, too, is studying fashion design. And my brother plans to open a smoothie stand soon. My family is working hard to become productive citizens in the country that graciously welcomed us." Muska received two loans from the Center for Economic Opportunity to expand her fashion business, which has helped her build a new life and support her dreams.

The Impact of Community Investing

Mercy Partnership Fund's impact is extensive, reaching people and communities around the world. In 2019, investments supported affordable housing, financial inclusion, education, business, cooperative and nonprofit financing, community facilities, health care and healthy food, as well as environmental sustainability and sustainable agriculture initiatives.

Highlights included:

▶ **69%** of capital deployed in the United States was in low- to moderate-income communities

▶ **50** states in the U.S. with investments

▶ **65** countries with investments

▶ **22** investees support environmental sustainability and sustainable agriculture

▶ **15 million** clean energy or energy access products and services

▶ **101,151** megawatts generated from clean energy or energy access products and services

▶ **58%** of businesses, cooperatives and nonprofits supported were women-owned/led

▶ **68%** of businesses, cooperatives and nonprofits supported were owned/led by people of color or indigenous individuals

Our borrowers have a hard time finding affordable financing elsewhere. Our loans fill this gap.

Expanding Education Access in Disadvantaged Communities

Hope Enterprise Corporation (HOPE) is dedicated to strengthening communities, building assets and improving lives in the Mississippi Delta and other economically distressed parts of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee. “HOPE champions those on the edges of the economy, working in small towns and inner-city neighborhoods to remove obstacles that limit one’s ability to prosper,” says CEO Bill Bynum. “We are committed to a Deep South that works for all, regardless of race, gender, birthplace or station in life.”

Loans from Mercy and other social investors help HOPE support a myriad of projects, such as the expansion of Memphis Merit Academy, a school located in one of Memphis, Tennessee’s, most disadvantaged neighborhoods, where 65 percent of children under the age of 5 live in poverty. “Merit isn’t just closing the gap. We go beyond the gap,” says Alexia Hudson, a Merit kindergarten teacher. “We aren’t just giving our students a seat at the table. We are building the table.”



Teachers at Memphis Merit Academy in Tennessee are committed to increasing learning opportunities for their students, many of whom live in poverty.



Rosa Suspes is learning new agriculture techniques—and generating more income—thanks to ECLOF Colombia’s organic hydroponics program.

Fostering Success for Women Entrepreneurs

ECLOF International (begun in Switzerland in 1946 as the Ecumenical Church Loan Fund) is a nonprofit global micro-finance network with a mission to promote social justice and human dignity. A loan from Mercy is helping its members provide financial and nonfinancial services to microentrepreneurs and smallholder farmers in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

In Colombia, ECLOF is providing loans and training to help farmers adopt organic methods, including hydroponic techniques. This affords smallholders an opportunity to improve their yields and generate additional income to support their families while caring for the environment. Rosa Suspes, a client of ECLOF for the past three years, participates in ECLOF Colombia’s organic hydroponics program. With help from the network’s training courses, she hopes to increase her production and generate additional income for her family.

In the South Indian town of Kanchipuram, ECLOF’s financial support and advice have enabled women artisans in self-help groups—such as Mrs. Alamelu, who developed a pottery business and used the income to finance the education of her two sons—to grow their businesses. ■

Visit mercyinvestmentservices.org to learn more about these and other investees.



Sarah B. Smith is the director of Mercy Partnership Fund. She previously served for eight years as founding president and chief executive officer of Mercy Loan Fund (formerly Catherine McAuley Housing Foundation) and serves as the chair of the governing council of Mercy Focus on Haiti. She can be reached at ssmith@mercyinvestments.org.

A Minute of Your Time

Let's do the math. In less than four years, Sister Judy Ward has drawn 917 portraits. (Readers may remember seeing her portrait of the late civil rights icon Rep. John Lewis in *Viva! Mercy's* September/October 2020 issue.) That's an average of 20.4 portraits per month, not including two leap years. To call her prolific would be an understatement.

"[Primatologist] Jane Goodall is number 918," says Judy, matter-of-factly, pausing only to chase a squirrel away from her apartment window in North Plainfield, New Jersey. "Excuse me, but these darn squirrels keep climbing on my windowsill. I don't want them eating out of my birdfeeder."

At 82, Judy is outspoken and energetic. A retired high school art teacher, she will celebrate her 65th Jubilee as a Sister of Mercy next year. By that time, Judy should have at least 245 more portraits to her name. Not bad, considering that when she isn't drawing, she's busy keeping up with orders for her notecards celebrating Catherine McAuley. The following is based on a recent conversation with Judy about her life in Mercy and her art.

- Q.** What was the subject of your first illustration?
- A.** As a young child, I made a drawing of Superman.
- Q.** How long does it take to create a drawing?
- A.** About five hours. I start by researching a person, photographing them, then sketching and perfecting the portrait on my computer in Photoshop. Every portrait begins

with a person's eyes, which reflect the soul. Then I color the drawing on my iPad before finishing. I don't take requests or commissions. I'm not looking for fame or fortune. I do this for three reasons: I've always loved to draw, I love to keep learning and perhaps I can make someone happy.

- Q.** What do you say when people tell you they aren't talented?
- A.** Everyone has talent that's theirs alone. If you don't think you have talent, that's only because you haven't found it yet.
- Q.** What keeps you going?
- A.** My mother, who raised my twin sister and me alone as a single mom by working in a sewing factory, might have had something to do with it. She used to say, "Good, better, best—never let it rest, until your good is better and your better best."
- Q.** Do you ever get discouraged?
- A.** When I was younger, yes. Nowadays, I don't have time for that.
- Q.** What's inscribed inside your ring?
- A.** "Be still and know that I am God."
- Q.** What are your greatest accomplishments?
- A.** I have been in recovery from alcoholism for 36 years. Since then, I served as an inpatient drug and alcohol counselor, senior clinician and supervisor for 14 years.



The evolution of Sister Judy Ward's portrait of primatologist Jane Goodall.

During that time, one of the things I shared with my clients was the difference between religion and spirituality: Religion is for those who are afraid of going to hell, and spirituality is for those who have already been there. But my greatest achievement is that I am a Sister of Mercy and an artist.

Readers can order Judy's notecards at catherineslegacy.org and see more of her artwork on Facebook under Judy Ward Sister of Mercy.

—Deborah Herz

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