

Mercy congregations consider united approach to governance

By Teresa A. Parsons

For five days last week, Sisters of Mercy from across the United States and parts of Canada gathered in Rochester to consider reorganizing their congregations under a single governing structure.

Governing board members of the Federation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas came to Rochester for their annual meeting, held June 20 to 24 at Nazareth College. At the top of their agenda was consideration of the Mercy Futures Project, an effort to unify congregations under a single constitutional document.

"At the heart of the dream is the desire to pool our spirit to nourish the energies among us for ministries of mercy," said Sister Doris Gottmoeller, chair of the Mercy Futures' task force. "The structure we have now is not strong enough to carry us into the future."

Of the 27 Mercy congregations in the United States, nine groups representing some 4,000 sisters already belong to the Sisters of Mercy Union. About the same number of sisters belong to the remaining 18 congregations, which are independent entities.

The Mercy Futures Project, which has been in the planning stages for six years, envisions uniting all those congregations under a constitutional document describing how the Sisters of Mercy live in and serve the Church.

At the federation meeting, 110 governing board members chose the process by which congregations will decide whether to accept the new constitution and the governing structure it would create, known as the Mercy Institute. Their decision is still subject to approval by the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes in Rome and to further interaction among participating congregations.

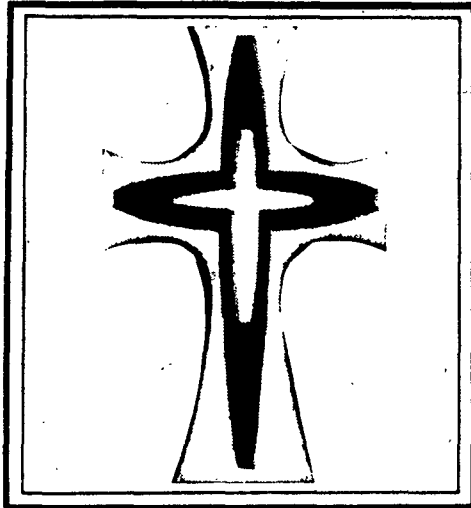
"We are studying how to make the decision, so that each individual sister and each individual congregation can be respected," Sister Doris explained. "Every sister will vote and every chapter will vote. . . . Each congregation has been preparing for the vote by shaping consensus."

For two hours Monday afternoon, participants conferred via satellite with Father Frank Morrissey, OMI, of Dublin, Ireland, canonical consultant for the Mercy Futures Project.

The following day, "the overwhelming majority" of those present approved the process, according to Sister Joanne Lappetito, executive secretary of the federation.

Those results echoed a straw vote taken last December in which 78 percent of those participating favored the reorganization plan.

Earlier, at a special chapter on matters of governance in May, Sister Joanne's congregation, the Rochester Sisters of Mercy, unani-



mously accepted the core constitution.

Although sisters feel the need for the institute is clear, its actual functions have yet to be determined. "The Institute will take on as many central projects as members feel will be helpful," Sister Doris said.

Possibilities might include teleconferencing; networking among sisters involved in similar ministries; shared ministry projects; workshops and seminars; and financial planning.

As a united entity, the American Sisters of Mercy also hope they will wield greater influence on national and international policies and issues. "To speak with a concerted voice, whether to the larger Church or to government, would certainly be a benefit," Sister Doris said.

Apart from considering the Mercy Futures Project, federation members and observers at the meeting discussed the proposed format of a national teleconference set for September 27 on the topic "Mercy Ministries to and with Women." In addition, more than 200 delegates participated in a workshop titled "Welcoming the Stranger," which featured Sister Ruth Graf, RSM, and Dr. Walter Brueggemann as speakers. The federation's governing board also chose a president and one member-at-large.

In October, three federation delegates will present the results of the Mercy Futures Project to the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes in Rome. Acting as a "neutral outsider, Rome will ensure that no one's rights are violated and that anyone who dissents will be provided for," Sister Doris said.

The congregation's decision could take three weeks or three months, according to Sister Joanne. But the federation's governing board has scheduled a January meeting, at which time members hope to have a written response.

"The reorganization comes at a time in the life of the Church when so much speaks of 'diminishment,'" Sister Doris said. "This speaks of new growth."



Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Along the Way

This is my last column before summer vacation. This morning I remember the events, encounters and challenges — the difficult and joyful moments — of the past year.

As I do so, I think of our gathering at Collegeville early in June and the daily encouragement to us all from Cardinal Martini. "Pray for an understanding heart," he urged. I followed his counsel then and have tried to make it part of my daily prayer ever since. It is a prayer for vision, discernment, wisdom and an awareness of the deeper meaning of life. His encouragement and my own experience in this ministry convince me that it is fittingly a central intention in the prayer of a bishop.

At the personal level, I find it helpful in dealing with what I am sure are issues you, too, must face: How do I make the very best use of my time and energy when calls upon them exceed my capacity to respond to them all? By what criteria do I make such judgments? How can I strike the necessary balance between my need for spiritual nourishment, rest, friendships, reading, etc., and my desire to be a servant available to the community?

There is no one set answer to those questions, but I know very much the need to keep them before me. If I don't, I quickly lose my roots in the Lord, and my ministry can easily become mechanical and unfocused; ministry that is meant to be rich in interiority, communication, search and solidarity with others takes on the appearance of things done just for the sake of doing them. And who needs that?

At the level of my concern for the life of our community of faith, I also find helpful this prayer for an understanding heart. It reminds me of the contribution

I am called to make and want to make to our continued growth to the full stature of Christ.

It leads me to look at the patterns of our life with what I hope is a lovingly critical eye. And when I do that, I deal with such questions as these: Are we poor and free and simple enough in our service of the kingdom of God? Are we dealing with the real issues of the day or are we caught up in the preservation of what was once fruitful but now no longer serves? Do we, by the way we live and treat one another, challenge our culture to change? Or are we in the main, indistinguishable from society at large? What is our most serious need for reform and how do we face that? What are the ways, quiet and not so quiet, in which the Lord calls us to fresher and deeper life? Although I have an unshakable conviction that the Lord constantly calls us to deeper life, I am not sure that we are quiet and simple enough to hear the Lord's voice.

It is for the opportunity to be quieter and less complicated that I welcome this vacation time. As I read and pray and rest and cook and share good times with friends, I shall be with you in spirit. Please be assured of my prayers that the summer will treat you well and that you'll have extra moments to rest and hear the Lord speaking to your heart.

Peace to all

EDITOR'S NOTE: Bishop Clark will be on vacation the second and third weeks of July. For that reason, we will not have Along the Way columns in the editions of July 17 and 24. The column will resume on July 31.

Diocese faces liability insurance hike

By Teresa A. Parsons

It will be at least another year before the Diocese of Rochester and its parishes feel the effect of legislation aimed at relieving New York state's liability insurance crisis. In the meantime, they're faced with a possible 25-percent increase in insurance premiums this year.

Bills approved last week by the state legislature and Governor Mario Cuomo increased the state insurance superintendent's power to limit insurance rates and to order that coverage be provided in some of the areas where it is not currently available, such as daycare and

health centers. Monetary settlements to victims are also limited in some instances, although no cap on awards is set.

The bills spell the end of "joint and several liability" in some circumstances by tying the amount of damages paid in pain and suffering awards to the percentage of responsibility determined for each defendant in a suit.

Depending on the outcome of hearings planned by the state superintendent over the next three months, general liability insurance rates may be reduced almost immediately. Be-

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