

## Features

# Mercy principal announces departure after six years at helm

By Mary E. McCrank

More than 40 years ago, Sister Judith Heberle, RSM, graduated from Our Lady of Mercy High School. This coming June, she faces another Mercy graduation of sorts as she leaves her post as principal of the all-girls high school.

The 60-year-old Rochester native, who announced her resignation in November, has been principal at Mercy High for only six years. Yet, she has spent most of her career at 1437 Blossom Road.

"I've completed a six-year contract... Primarily, the reason (for resigning) is that it's in the best interest of Mercy High School to now have a new person take over," Sister Heberle said, adding that she is also resigning for personal reasons. "I think I've accomplished the goals I've set," she concluded.

Colleagues and school supporters praised her for guiding Mercy through difficult times, when demographics and population changes have challenged the school's enrollment and financial health. While principal at Mercy, Sister Heberle has seen the number of students drop by more than half.

"It's truly incredible" that Sister Heberle could keep the school together so well, remarked Sam Ianacone, president of the Mercy board of governors. She was a "steady and guiding influence" who recognized the need to be committed to recruitment, observed Ianacone, who added that he has a "cautious optimism" that enrollment will soon increase.

Sister Jean Marie Kearse, RSM, the congregation's superior general, also paid tribute to Sister Heberle in the Dec. 9 Sisters of Mercy newsletter, writing: "We thank her for being instrumental in keeping alive and well the value and immense possibility that Catholic secondary education for women offers our Church and world."

In addition to Sister Heberle's administrative skills, Peggy Trevett, three-year member of Mercy's Parent Association and its chairman last year, cited the principal's "gentleness and her kindness and her caring and her extreme dedication to the cause that Mercy should stay alive."

"I don't think there's a parent who couldn't come in and talk to her," Trevett said.

Sister Heberle joined the faculty at Mercy in 1949 as a business teacher and office manager. While teaching, she received a bachelor's degree from Nazareth College in 1958 and a master's in education from the University of Rochester in 1965.



Linda Dow Hayes - Courier-Journal

**Sister Judith Heberle, outgoing principal of Mercy High School, has spent most of her life learning and teaching inside the school.**

Two years later, she left teaching to serve in her congregation's administration as assistant superior general, and three years later, as superior general, a position she held for 10-and-a-half years.

From administration of the order, Sister Heberle moved to Mercy as assistant principal, and shortly thereafter, in 1983, was promoted to principal. Her predecessor, Sister Mary Bonaventure Hall, had resigned after seven years.

In 1946, when Sister Heberle graduated from Mercy, she and her fellow students had few options: getting married, joining the Sisters of Mercy, or — in a few cases — going to college. But most of Mercy's graduates of the 1980s have gone on to attend college, and will face the challenge of balancing both career and family responsibilities — a challenge for which Mercy has increasingly tried to prepare them during their high school years.

Trevett credited Sister Heberle with trying to gradually adapt the school to "graduate women who would go on to careers. 'I think they were a little slow to adapt,' Trevett said of the school. 'It was a sort of quiet, laid-back philosophy.'"

Unlike the Catholic high schools of Sister Heberle's youth, Mercy has faced declining enrollment in recent years, dropping from approximately 800 students in 1983 to just 375 this year. In response, Sister Heberle and Mercy's

board of governors established the school's first formal recruitment program with the appointment of Joan Hildebrand as director of recruitment in August 1987 — a move that was lauded by some closely associated with Mercy.

"I think her selection of Joan as the recruitment director was just a brilliant find," said Trevett. The recruitment commercials and ideas that coming forth from the recruitment office "are going to further Mercy's cause more than the programs... That type of thing is going to keep Mercy's name alive," she added.

Despite the need to focus on enrollment concerns, Sister Heberle said Mercy has "made a real effort to keep a strong academic program" by offering elective courses. In an effort to allow students to take more such courses, Mercy extended its school day in September of 1987 from a seven- to an eight-period day. "The school spirit remains real high. We feel activities continue to be as strong as they were," Sister Heberle said. "I think we have some creative and special opportunities here, and some students and parents have taken advantage of them."

Under Sister Heberle's guidance, Mercy has also tried to meet emerging needs among students with such programs as drug and alcohol counseling, jointly offered this year by a Mercy teacher and a teacher from Penfield High School.

Another of her accomplishments as principal

was refurbishing the school. During the past six years, Mercy's gymnasium floor was replaced; the front foyer and classrooms were painted; rugs were placed in classrooms; and a new school sign was erected on the soccer field facing Blossom Road. Mercy also purchased new equipment, including computers and electronic typewriters.

In addition, Sister Heberle recently implemented the Pre-Pay Tuition Program, which allows parents to choose which of three payment options best suit their needs: full tuition payment at the beginning of the school year; half tuition twice a year; or the opportunity to obtain through the school bank financing of tuition payments. This plan of payment helps "to assure tuition payment prior to services rendered," she said.

Although some Catholic schools are closing, Sister Heberle feels confident that Mercy will survive and continue to fulfill what she believes is one of its primary purposes: "To offer the option for an all-girls school." She points to increased enrollment among freshmen as a sign the school can meet its goal of 100 students per grade level by next year.

Sister Heberle is considering various opportunities once June arrives, but she has not ruled out the possibility of returning to teach at Mercy. She admits she will miss her relationship with the faculty, students and members of the various boards she has worked with as principal, and the "day-to-day being able to meet with (students), provide for their needs — the provision of a good curriculum and the opportunity that we have for activities."

Meanwhile, Mercy is searching for Sister Heberle's replacement. Ianacone said the school's search committee, of which he is a member, is seeking someone able to "relate with and work with the faculty, and alumni in the kind of climate we have now."

The committee's ideal candidate, he added, should be someone who is "forward thinking, imaginative and creative with respect to the future of Mercy," and who also has financial and budget acumen.

The position has been "opened up to the entire network" of the Sisters of Mercy, Ianacone said, but the committee is not restricted to members of the order, and could choose a lay principal. Initial interviews will take place this month, and board members hope to announce the appointment of a new principal in early February.

## Sister Tierney

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after the diocese's divisional reorganization, Sister Tierney launched a planning process that produced the Urban School Study. Conducted by the Center for Governmental Research, the study proffered some controversial options, including the establishment of regional junior highs and an inner-city school for non-parishioner, non-Catholic students. The study also called for the closing and reconfiguring of other schools.

Despite waves of vocal criticism, Sister Tierney expanded the planning process to include all schools within Monroe County. The division has also initiated cooperative planning among clusters of parishes and schools throughout the diocese.

Although she said she learned to distance herself from the bitterness that has sometimes surrounded planning efforts and school closings, Sister Tierney is not immune to the emotions of those most directly affected. Particularly frustrating to her has been the diocese's inability to more effectively address the problems of small, isolated schools and of those in urban areas. "That is still a very painful thing," she said.

Although she is leaving the education office before enjoying the fruit of planning processes she helped initiate, Sister Tierney is not regretful. "There's never an easy time or an exact right time (for such a transition), because the work that we do in education is so dynamic," she said. "There's never been a time since I've been here when I could sit back and say something's finished."

In addition to her work in education, Sister Tierney has served on numerous diocesan committees studying lay ministry and ministry formation. The shape of such emerging ministries as pastoral administrator has encouraged her return to parish-level work, which she hopes to undertake somewhere in the Diocese of Rochester. "I think it would be good to have something more focused, to get to know people better," she said.

## Reflection

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community, and — as the teams begin meeting with parishioners — discuss specific issues and problems that arise. Approximately 900 people attended the first round of training, which was completed in December, 1988. The second round began January 11.

Either during Lent or the fall of 1989, reflection teams will begin guiding their parishes through a process of self-evaluation to determine future staffing needs and directions. Deacon Claude Lester, who is directing the reflection-team training sessions, said that a key component of the entire process is that parishes will to a large degree be determining their own courses for the future.

"The diocesan Church doesn't live in the parishes on a day-to-day basis," Deacon Lester explained. "What makes sense to us in terms of parishes to cluster or who should work together might not in the parishes. It's the people of the local communities who know the natural trafficking patterns."

In Corning, for example, the staffs of St. Patrick's, St. Mary's and St. Vincent DePaul have already begun to meet regularly to discuss city-wide issues and to coordinate activities. As a result of one of these discussions, the three parishes, in conjunction with Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish in Painted Post, jointly hired a youth minister in September, 1987. Last year, St. Patrick's also began to share Deacon Ray Defendorf with St. Mary's, where he has been stationed since 1982.

According to Collins, the changes that have already taken place at St. Patrick's have prepared parishioners for future changes. "We're at the point where we're getting people involved and to realize that this is their parish and that a lot of the ministries being done in the parish will have to be done by lay people," he said.

To be aware of additional options for the future, to discover what other parishes are doing, and to learn in what direction the diocese might move, Collins attended a first-round training

session in Ithaca. He believes that the changes being discussed at the sessions need to be shared with parishioners. "I think the purpose of the whole thing is to get the people who are not involved — the fringe parishioners — actively involved in the parish in some way," he remarked.

One of Collins' main motivations for attending the training session was his involvement with youth ministry. "I think that a lot of the ideas and concepts that they're talking about are changes that will happen in the next five to 10 years and point to a change in the way people have viewed the Catholic Church and the way parishes are run," he observed. "That message needs to be conveyed to the youth. They won't be 'the youth' 10 years from now."

Patti Federowicz of St. Margaret Mary Church in Appalachin asserted that that the process must address a wider parish audience. She reported that after a recent Mass during which Father David Simon preached about declining numbers of priests, a parishioner told the pastor she didn't believe that a shortage of priests existed. At a meeting Federowicz attended where the shortage was discussed, another woman suggested that the shortage wouldn't exist if the Church allowed priests to marry.

The Commitment to Ministry process, Federowicz said, will help parishioners fully recognize the reality of changing staffing patterns and the options current Church law allows. "I think the process will facilitate people talking about these things," she said. "It takes time for it to reach everyone."

The first round of the training has, in fact, turned up differing levels of understanding concerning baptismal vocations and lay involvement, even among those already active in parish ministry. Small group discussions were structured to separate participants from the same parish so that they could discover what is happening in other parishes.

Anne Barton of St. Elizabeth Anne Seton, Hamlin, was surprised by what she learned at the session she attended at St. Helen's, Rochester. "I assumed lay men and women were being utilized in other parishes as they are in ours,"

she said. "Talking with people from other parishes was eye-opening to me."

Barton hopes that future sessions will include discussions of staffing options that take into account the differing levels of lay involvement in parishes as well as the varied levels of understanding and acceptance of lay ministry. "I'm sure that at some point over the two years we will be taught the concrete tools and skills we need as a team for reaching people because of the different levels people are at," she said.

Barton also cited a need to explain what the Church allows in terms of lay ministry. "I think that (the session coordinators) need to make perfectly clear what is within the realm of possibility for changes, canonically that is," she added.

Deacon Lester noted that the second round of training does focus on permissible staffing options. "We will put together canonical models — in other words, what the Church allows," he said. "We will not deal with women priests, ordained married priests or returned priests, because they are not allowed at this time."

Father Tomasso pointed out that often-recommended measures — such as recruiting priests and deacons from foreign countries, postponing retirements or releasing priests from special duties — could not provide enough priests to fill all the positions. Nor, he said, would those measures be fair to priests. "Priests can't be moved around like furniture," he said. "They love their priesthood and serving the people, but every priest doesn't possess every talent to function well in every opening."

And even if the number of available priests was sufficient to fill all positions, Father Tomasso said, the diocese would still develop lay leadership. "We have a responsibility to recruit the pool of non-ordained to act on their baptismal vocations," he remarked.

Federowicz agrees, and she applauds the Commitment to Ministry process.

"I don't think it's just the Church that wants lay people involved," Federowicz suggested. "It's the Spirit working in the Church."

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