Part One: Journey of Oneness

Desire to explore three questions with you this morning:

1. Where did the Journey of Oneness come from and why are we doing it?
2. What grounds us for this journey?
3. What are the key elements emerging in this journey?

WHERE DID THE JOURNEY OF ONENESS COME FROM AND WHY ARE WE GIVING ENERGY TO THIS PROCESS?

There are a number of ways I might answer this question:

First, the gospel plea is quite clear when Jesus says: I pray that all may be one

Second, we can turn to Catherine McAuley and that one of her hallmark invitations was the call for “union and charity”. The call for oneness resides in that fundamental stance of how we are to be with and for one another – a dynamic of union and charity that Catherine hoped would be present in all of our relationships

Third, Pope Francis in his opening statement to the recently completed Year of Consecrated Life stated: “Have the courage to be present in the midst of conflict and tension as a credible sign of the presence of the Spirit who inspires in human hearts a passion for all to be one.”

And, finally, I might answer the question is out of the context of our Founding experience as Sisters of Mercy of the Americas in 1991.

Let me recall a little bit of our story...

By 1991 and our Founding Event in Buffalo, each of us individually had to make a choice as to whether I/you would join this new Congregation and then
each Congregation had to make a choice through its own Chapter deliberation as to the future of the Congregation

Previously we had other distinct identities as the Union, Brooklyn, Merion, New Jersey and in 1991 we created a new Congregation that affirmed our single, one identity as Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, to be facilitated initially through a cohesive and effective model of governance in 25 regional communities. The 25 Regional Communities were a way to operationalize our governance as ONE REALITY and to facilitate our sense of belonging

Some of us might recall the words of Sisters Peggy Costa, Amy Hoey and Judy Carle (Transition Team) proclaimed in our Founding Document: “We, women of mercy, have discovered a new relationship among us, and we pray that the bonds we formalize today will endure, will enliven us, and will serve our church and touch our world.”

For me, in these 25 years as Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, the reading and hearing of our Founding Document has deepened my desire and commitment to become ONE community where “union and charity” abound and in which the Institute Direction Statement we created at that time articulated our mission and ministry commitments.

I invite you to listen to the familiar words of the 1991 Institute Direction Statement:

We are “impelled to commit our lives and resources...to the economically poor of the world, especially women and children; to women seeking fullness of life in church and society; to one another as we embrace our multicultural and international reality.” Later in the document, we hear the words “call ourselves to continual conversion” which has been at the heart of our 25-year story.

Through chapters and assemblies, and theological reflection processes attending to our experience, we’ve tried to continue to name our commitments in light of our changing realities as a world, church and community...remember Pathways to the Future (“what can we do better together...what can we do better as one...), Opening Worlds of Mercy, Guyana Agreement, Reimagining and Reconfiguring our Institute, Women of Mercy/Women of Hope...and your own...
Mid-Atlantic Community themes: Called Together to Proclaim a New Dawn (2006); Passion, Purpose, Promise... A Path to the Future (2011)

Institute chapters and related processes with their attention to how to continue to break open the Institute Direction Statement identified five Critical Concerns – women; anti-racism; immigration; Earth; non-violence – all demonstrations of our ONE commitment to address issues of poverty and those most affected by poverty – women and children. We are always seeking more integrated and cohesive ways in our planning to engender an energy and synergy for deeper integration and more effective implementation regarding these Critical Concerns. Yesterday, inspired by Mary Sullivan’s invitations and building on your previous conversations, you were asked to concretize your commitment to these Critical Concerns.

All of these processes, conversations, and engagements – enhanced by our grounding in sustained contemplative dialogue with one another – are leading us more deeply into experiences of being ONE and desires to be ONE – in identity, in consciousness, in action, in mission. So much so, that at our last Institute Chapter in 2011, we stated that “we are growing in consciousness of the interdependence among us”. That same Chapter Declaration also asked us “to act in ways that contribute to a sustainable future for our Institute” – not just sustainability as an Earth community and as a church but also as the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

It is the Chapter Declaration that has guided and directed our efforts as an Institute Leadership Team as we have returned over and over to the meaning and the challenge of those two phrases: “growing in consciousness of the interdependence among us and all creation…” and “To act in ways which contribute to a sustainable future for our Institute, the Church and Earth.”

You might recall the question we pursued during our 2011 Chapter processes: “God of Mercy, of Wisdom and Mystery, where do we need to be led now to come to both a deeper response to our Critical Concerns and a radical embrace of our identity?” Where do we need to be led NOW, TODAY, is at the heart of the journey of oneness as we turn to each other for direction, inspiration, possibilities.

As we’ve made our Sisters of Mercy of the Americas journey over these past 25 years, our world and the realities of poverty, violence, deprivation for so many,
disregard for human dignity, and the displacement of literally hundreds of thousands of people have shocked us at time, stunned us into silence and eventually asked of us a hope-directed response. And so how do we make a whole of our story…and these realities? Where is our oneness with all of what surrounds and impacts us?

What expression does “union and charity” call from us for today? How does Jesus pray in us and through us “that we all may be one”? How might we live with deeper integrity our “growing consciousness of our interdependence” while contributing to a sustainable future for ourselves and our whole universe?

In November 2015, the Institute Leadership Conference wrote to you about “why” are we doing this Journey of Oneness and what is at the heart of this journey. At that time, we named what I believe is the essence of this process:

“Who do we, as Sisters of Mercy, desire to be for one another and for our world? How might we embody the Mercy of God for a suffering world in more meaningful and impactful ways into the future?”

One part of the question is about identity: who do we desire to be for one another? The other part of the question is about mission…how do we embody the mercy of God for a suffering world?

Yes, we have governance issues to attend to. Yes, we have to find ways to address some of our organizational redundancies and be smarter about how to use our resources better for the future. Yes, our demographics are shifting and there is a new urgency in thinking about our sustainability. But at the heart of the Journey of Oneness is the critical need for us to engage one another for how we envision our future…what future are we creating and what future do we wish to create for and with one another. And we can never ask that question about our own future without asking (much less answering) who do we want to be for our suffering world?

Who do we, as Sisters of Mercy, desire to be for one another and for our world? How might we embody the Mercy of God for a suffering world in more meaningful and impactful ways into the future?”
QUESTION TWO: WHAT GROUNDS US FOR THIS JOURNEY OF ONENESS?

If the heart of journey of oneness is our envisioning who we desire to be for one another (identity) and for our suffering world (mission), then what most grounds us is our radical and fundamental identity as MERCY. *We are of the very essence of mercy and being mercy for one another and for our world.*

An 1888 Guide for one group of Sisters of Mercy reads: “The spirit of our Institute is mercy as its name denotes. Mercy can operate only in proportion as destitution, suffering, ignorance and other miseries call it forth.”

The key dynamic is how and where we place ourselves in relationship to suffering; how do we, with a grounded sense of consciousness and heart, absorb and integrate into the fiber of our being that we are one with such suffering, destitution, ignorance and misery. This is the heart of the Journey of Oneness, our oneness with Jesus and Catherine McAuley who said that this Institute is founded on Calvary therein to serve a crucified Redeemer.

When we speak of the need for member engagement (and I understand the ups and downs of how participative governance works and fails...and we will attend to that need), I hope that the thirst and yearning of our best member engagement is about our oneness with our suffering world and our oneness with each other as we experience “joys and sorrows mingled” on a daily basis.

I believe that is why our Foundational documents, like the Gospel itself, all call us to conversion and transformation...to turn to the right issues and the right questions and the right engagements...for the sake of those suffering in our world.

Our experiences with contemplative dialogue are opening us to search communally and with integrity as to where God is leading us now. The dynamic and practice of contemplative dialogue grounds us for the desire, the work and the transformation needed to become ONE.

The call for conversion and transformation is always for the NOW – the only moment in which God can be found and suffering attended. The call for conversion and transformation is always personal and communal. We cannot do this journey alone and we must each do our part.
Very simply, what then grounds us for this Journey of Oneness is that we remain faithful to our identity: being of the very mercy of God for one another and for our suffering world; that we stay mission focused (how do we embody the mercy of God for a suffering world), that we turn to one another to offer our best engagement with one another through contemplative dialogue to address our identity and mission for the future; and, that we recognize our need and desire for continual conversion and transformation.

QUESTION THREE: WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS EMERGING IN THIS JOURNEY?

1. Mission and identity focus. Remember the two key questions: who are we for one another and for our suffering world. Our invitation is to name our future together.

The key process for engaging all of us in conversations in service of our future are coordinated now through our Institute Chapter processes so that in fidelity to our Constitutions, we will “clarify and renew our vision, determine our priorities, and respond to changing needs in our mission and life.” (# 51)

The first Chapter process (September 2015-Jan 2016) asked, “What would you name as most important for leadership and the chapter planning committee to hold and carry forward?”

A few weeks ago, we were invited to watch a video from the Chapter Planning Team where they shared that they heard three themes from our 1100+ responses. First, members’ desire for participation and engagement in shaping our future through processes that are sensitive to cultures, countries, ages; second, that we deepen our lives in mercy and commitment to our contemplative practices; and, third, that we focus on mission and deepen our responses to Critical Concerns.

The second Chapter process (March to July 2016) focuses on the 2011 Chapter Declaration and is asking us: what transformation has occurred in us, personally and communally, because of the ways we have integrated
the Chapter Declaration into our lives...and then, what complicity might we need to acknowledge for continued transformation?

Preparation for this coming Chapter asks us to prayerfully name our complicity today...in service of the transformation we desire and need and in service of naming future possibilities and directions.

I know that you will be pursuing this second set of questions in the next few months and offering your wisdom to all of us through the Chapter Planning Team.

2. Internationality. We are learning how to be ONE as an Institute of many countries. Our realities vary from locale to locale in the United States but the realities that our CCASA sisters face on a day to day basis as well as our Sisters of Jamaica and the Philippines are radically different.

We’re invited to a dynamic that our consultant and facilitator Marisa Guerin has named as integration and differentiation. Marisa says, “I would like to suggest that your Journey of Oneness is likely to mean greater integration of U.S. communities and a corresponding greater differentiation of off-shore and international communities, all in the name of one unified Institute of Mercy.”

We’re exploring that dynamic in our meetings with sisters from other countries (e.g., Institute Leadership Conference, chapter planning, governance work group). Later this month, almost 30 sisters from the Philippines will be part of the NyPPaW Assembly and we as a team will spend an additional day with them learning more about their realities and desires and how that might be richly enhanced in our Journey of Oneness.

3. Functions of life and mission. By functions, we mean those major activities that make up our life and mission (communications, finances, justice, technology, etc.). As leaders, we just began last month to explore how we
will shape the ways that our “functions” might be organized in the future. Our first steps into this organizational work is focusing on new membership in the U.S. and work groups have been formed that includes leaders, vocation and incorporation ministers, and members. Another example is the work that is happening in our ministry of secondary and elementary education as we are doing the groundwork for one educational system across all countries.

4. Governance for the future. We are working toward a single leadership team in 2019 in which we would also have other leadership roles and structures throughout the U.S. CCASA will likely continue in its own planning efforts and together we will continue to create the best ways to integrate the planning that is needed for all of us as Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Conversations are occurring among sisters and leaders in Jamaica, Guam and the Philippines and those conversations will give direction to our future. Again, in the second part of this morning, we will ask you for your wisdom about how participative processes and structures might look in light of U.S. realities.

Shifting the timeline to 2019 seems reasonable to many of us based on many responses that we as a team received from members about why are we waiting so long...let’s do it! Some sisters shared with us rather passionately that they want to be part of this process now and there was a frustration about maintaining energy over a long period of time if this process were to take years. We are also very mindful of our demographics and for example (not as a determinant but for example), in 2017 we will have 382 sisters under 70 and in 2019 we project that the number of sisters under 70 will be 269.

Additionally, we, as leaders, believe that we need to work toward greater integrative planning and a common agenda and an organizational simplicity. In most conversations, I do not hear a lot of talk about centralization but rather what is a cohesive way of organizing our planning toward a deeper integration.
A dynamic that we did not expect or plan for is what is happening with the NyPPaW Community. Their Assembly is later this month and further conversation is needed about the future they desire but it would appear that they are on a different path than any other Community in that they likely will begin to relate to a single elected leadership team (ILT) as of January 2017. The values, processes and structures to support life and mission needs will be created and implemented as we learn from them at their Assembly regarding their desires and then engage with them over the next few months.

5. A THINKING AREA that is emerging is what do we mean by “local”. This certainly relates to governance and what participative governance structures might look like in the future. It is critical that we engage imaginatively and conceptually that first key question concerning our identity: Who do we want to be for and with one another?

Our chapter and community processes have engaged us somewhat in addressing this question of identity and belonging and we recognize that our needs and experiences are significantly different. Many of us have significant relationships across various geographical areas and some of us have found creative ways to stay connected. Currently, my dialogue group as part of the WMW structure finds me on skype with persons from a number of states and two countries. At the same time, most of us need to connect locally to a specific group of persons, perhaps with a common ministry or through a common commitment, as well as regular gatherings of prayer and support.

Finding a rhythm of local, national and global connections to address our needs and desires for “belonging” calls for our careful attention. It is a very important conversation for us regarding how we want to be sisters to one another and how we consider our various needs and realities.
Finally, I was going to pursue a fourth question: WHEN WILL WE KNOW WE HAVE ARRIVED and then I decided that that probably would be not be very wise or helpful reflection.

What I would like to say in closing comes from a talk that Franciscan Sister Nancy Schreck did a few years ago regarding “middle space”.

Nancy calls our time “middle space” where we are in a time “of both creativity and disorientation when much of what was is gone and what is coming, is not yet clear…” She states, “We (women religious) are in this middle space of the in-breaking of something new, of major shifts in our world view, our cosmology, with the concurrent breakdown of so much of what is familiar…This is not a time that can be filled with plans or blueprints or schedules or budgets or six easy steps. What God gives is elusive at best.”

What God gives is elusive, yes, but what God gives is also grace-filled and rich and it is our responsibility to listen deeply to one another to create our path together for the sake of the sustainability of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and for the sake of an effective mercy-filled response to our suffering world.

Pat McDermott, RSM
April 12, 2016