Over 560 Sisters Gather for the Mid-Atlantic Community Convocation

Mid-Atlantic Sisters Alicia Zapata (left) and Kathleen Quinn (right) assemble outside with over 500 other members for the Opening Ritual of the Mid-Atlantic Community Convocation which was held in July, 2009, at Misericordia University in Dallas, PA. Photo by Jackie Walsh, RSM

Some traveled from as far away as Bolivia, Florida, Virginia, and Massachusetts. Almost all packed extra pillows, towels, and patience so they could comfortably stay in college dorms and townhouses at Misericordia University in Dallas, PA. For five days, over 550 Sisters of Mercy worshiped, sang, listened, learned, contemplated, ate, and prayed together at the Mid-Atlantic Community Convocation.

“This ‘pause in the middle’ was a stroke of genius on the part of the Mid-Atlantic Community leadership team,” says Sister Mary Waskowiak, RSM, the president of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy, in one of her two presentations during the Convocation. “To have the foresight to pause and contemplate at the half-way point of their administration is a brilliant move.”

The smiles and animation on the faces of the participants showed concurrence with Mary’s thoughts. (continued on page 2)
On Thursday morning, Sister Rose Martin, RSM, (right) a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community and the Convocation Planning Committee, introduces keynote speaker, Sister Lynn Levo, CSJ, (left) after presenting her with a prayer shawl. Photo by Jackie Walsh, RSM

The Convocation began on the evening of Wednesday, July 8, when Sister Terry Agliardi, RSM, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community and leader of prayer for the day, proclaimed, “May the breath of Divine love that stirs us to blazing, move among us in uproarious joy, in tender compassion, and outrageous hope!”

Sisters dressed in the colors of flames - red, yellow, and orange - processed into the auditorium singing the mantra, “Holy Sacred Spirit, breathe your breath on us,” as an animated fire sparkled on the PowerPoint screen.

Sister Christine McCann, the president of the Mid-Atlantic Community, welcomed and inspired participants saying, “Tonight the kindling of the idea of a Convocation, tended in the planning and sparked by the presence of so many who are here and the prayerful presence of those who could not be here, bursts into flame. The fire has already been ignited! It is passion. It is purpose. It is promise.”

After a passionate Opening Ritual combining readings, songs, videos, and images, sisters gathered together and rekindled relationships at an opening reception.

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Sisters Gather for Mid-Atlantic Convocation

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On Thursday, July 10, Sister Lynn Levo, CSJ, the keynote speaker, challenged participants to not only tell the “old” stories, but also tell their new stories of being Sisters of Mercy today in the Mid-Atlantic Community in order to grow in communion with self, others, and God. She also talked about increasing mutuality and experiencing continual conversions of heart.

On Friday, July 11, Lynn continued the conversation by recommending ways to improve listening and communication between sisters. She also expressed ways to cultivate joy and hope and build resilience so sisters can continue to be authentic witnesses of the Gospel.

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During Solemn Vespers on Friday evening the Mid-Atlantic Community received Jacqueline Nedd as a candidate. During this ceremony of hope, Sister Christine McCann, RSM, presided, and Sister Margaret Taylor, RSM, provided the instruction of the vows. Sisters Mary Helen Nugent, RSM, and Theresa Condon, RSM, witnessed the reception.

Sixteen associates from the Mid-Atlantic Community joined the Convocation on Saturday. The morning began with Sarah McFarland Taylor sharing with sisters and associates excerpts from her award-winning book, “Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology.” She also provided participants with an ecological perspective on today’s world and recommended ways to re-inhabit the earth.

In the afternoon, Sister Deirdre Mullan, RSM, journeyed with sisters and associates reminding them of the heritage of the Sisters of Mercy and challenging them to unlock their fears at this cross-over moment in time to pursue the mission of Mercy.

Sister Mary Waskowiak, RSM, the president of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy, spoke about her personal journey in Mercy and the challenges and opportunities of the future. Next, the Mid-Atlantic Community leadership team outlined their priorities for the next two years.

The Convocation closed with a lively Eucharistic liturgy and a commissioning of sisters and associates to bring the fire of God’s love to a world yearning for Mercy.
Barbara McGahan Professes Her First Vows

by Elena Perri, Communications Specialist, Mid-Atlantic Community

“It’s out of God’s love that I want to do for others, and I’m impelled to share that love with others.”
— Barbara McGahan, RSM

Sister Barbara McGahan, RSM, describes her first profession as “absolutely amazing.”

“There were so many people from my whole Mercy journey who were together on the one day with me,” she said. “I could see their joy. I knew my joy, but to have theirs reflected back to me was unbelievable. It was a wonderful feeling.”

Sister Barbara from Middletown, NJ, made her first profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy in the Mid-Atlantic Community on Sunday, June 28, at Mount Saint Mary in Watchung, NJ.

Barbara first encountered the Sisters of Mercy at St. Catharine Parish in Holmdel, NJ, where Sister Marge Scarpone, RSM, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community, was the pastoral associate.

Sister Barbara joined the social justice committee that Sister Marge was leading at St. Catharine’s. “Through her I met eight sisters living in Keansburg, NJ, who had five ministries going on in a very poor town,” she said. “I started volunteering at one ministry, serving on the board of another, and getting to know the sisters. I would go to morning prayer and Mass with them.”

Sister Barbara’s connection with the Sisters of Mercy deepened in 1997 when she became a Mercy associate. In 1999, Sister Barbara began serving as the pastoral associate at St. Catharine’s, a position she held until she entered the novitiate in 2007.

Sister Barbara said she is impressed with Catherine McAuley’s love for people who are poor and the way she persevered in her faith even though Catherine’s family didn’t support her.

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Mid-Atlantic Sisters Mary Faith Moore, RSM, (center) and Marguerite Pessagno, RSM, (right) witness Barbara McGahan, RSM, (center) signing her temporary vows.

Photo by Judy Ward, RSM

“As you live into your vows day by day, both the joys and the challenges surprise you.”

— Barbara McGahan, RSM

“I loved Catherine from the beginning, especially the way she lovingly uplifted her own sisters in order to serve God’s people,” she said. “It was just outstanding. Her spirit was so enlivening to her sisters, and the way she attracted people to the work speaks of her effectiveness.”

Sister Barbara was born in Brooklyn, NY, and attended St. Agnes Seminary Academy in Brooklyn and Middletown Township High School in Middletown, NJ. She earned a bachelor’s degree in French and Russian from Farleigh Dickinson University in Madison, NJ, and a master’s degree in theology from the College of St. Elizabeth in Morristown, NJ.

She recently completed an internship in campus ministry at Gwynedd-Mercy-College in Gwynedd Valley, PA, and is interested in working as a campus minister or in pastoral ministry. “I’m looking forward to many productive years with the Sisters of Mercy, in whatever God calls me to do,” Sister Barbara said.

In June nine members of the Mid-Atlantic Community attended a conference at St. Joseph’s College in Maine sponsored by Mercy Northeast Ecology Ministry. During that week, sisters prayed, reflected, learned, and shared ways to cherish and preserve our Earth. The keynote speaker, Sister Miriam McGillis, OP, founder and director of Genesis Farms in New Jersey, inspired and challenged participants to act in harmony with all creation.
The Mid-Atlantic Community 2011 Assembly Planning Committee met for the first time at the recent Convocation. Committee members include (left to right) co-chair Sister Mary Ellen Fuhrman, RSM, Sister Beth Dempsey, RSM, Sister Ivette Diaz, RSM, Sister Patricia Smith, RSM, leadership liaison Sister Carol Conly, RSM, co-chair Sister Kathleen Keenan, RSM, Sister Anne Kappler, RSM, Sister Nancy Donovan, RSM, leadership liaison Sister Honora Nicholson, RSM, and Sister Jean Messaros, RSM.

“We commit our life and resources to act in solidarity with one another as we embrace our multicultural and international reality.”

Institute Direction Statement, 2005

“The Mid-Atlantic Community 2011 Assembly Planning Committee met for the first time at the recent Convocation. Committee members include (left to right) co-chair Sister Mary Ellen Fuhrman, RSM, Sister Beth Dempsey, RSM, Sister Ivette Diaz, RSM, Sister Patricia Smith, RSM, leadership liaison Sister Carol Conly, RSM, co-chair Sister Kathleen Keenan, RSM, Sister Anne Kappler, RSM, Sister Nancy Donovan, RSM, leadership liaison Sister Honora Nicholson, RSM, and Sister Jean Messaros, RSM.

“Mark Your Calendars - The dates of the 2011 Mid-Atlantic Community Assembly are Tuesday, April 5, to Sunday, April 10, 2011.

“We commit our life and resources to act in solidarity with one another as we embrace our multicultural and international reality.”

Institute Direction Statement, 2005

Mid-Atlantic News

Sisters and an associate from the Mid-Atlantic Community pause to admire a garden at the Act in Harmony with the Earth conference in Maine. Mid-Atlantic participants included (left to right) Sister Peggy Costa, RSM, associate Ellen Volpica, Sister Bernadette Pape, RSM, Sister Patricia Welsh, RSM, Sister Sharon Kelly, RSM, Sister Diane Guerin, RSM, Sister Bernadette Wynne, RSM, and Sister Susan Myslinski, RSM.
Mercy Associate Helps Women in Need
by Elena Perri, Communications Specialist, Mid-Atlantic Community

Mary O’Connor is considered a dedicated volunteer at Catherine McAuley Center in Plymouth, PA, even though she sleeps on the job. That’s because her volunteer work includes an overnight stay each month.

“My son laughs about me sleeping there,” says Mary, who has been a Mercy Associate for 21 years. “He said, ‘You call that volunteering. I can’t believe you just sleep there. I wouldn’t tell anybody, Mom. That’s kind of embarrassing.” But volunteers like Mary are critical to the mission of the center, which has provided housing and other support services to women and children for 20 years. Without the team of overnight volunteers, the center would have to hire additional staff to fill that need.

In addition to her monthly overnight stays, Mary also assists with the Adopt a Family program during the Christmas season and fundraising activities. Her affiliation with McAuley Center began 20 years ago when she made meals for the guests there. “You do get more than you give,” she says. “The women are so appreciative.”

Mary experienced that appreciation one night when a guest returned the key to the laundry room. “A lady comes in and says, ‘Here’s the key for the laundry room.’ I said, ‘Thanks for bringing that back.’ She said, ‘No, thank you because we wouldn’t be here if you weren’t here.”

Volunteering at McAuley Center has also given Mary a greater awareness of things she takes for granted, including having coffee in the morning. She says that one morning at the center she got up early and made a pot of coffee when a guest came downstairs and asked for a cup.

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Associate Helps Women in Need

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Mercy associate Mary O’Connor (left) listens to a client (right) at the Catherine McAuley Center in Plymouth, PA. Photo by Sister Marie Larkin, PBVM

“I handed her a cup of coffee, and there were tears running down her cheeks,” Mary says. “I said, ‘Are you OK?’ The woman said, ‘I’m fine. I just can’t remember the last time anybody made me a cup of coffee.’”

The woman, who arrived at the center the day before, also told Mary that she had “the best night’s sleep in months because I felt so safe.”

“I thought, ‘I can’t imagine going to bed feeling unsafe,’” says Mary. “That has to be a terrible way to go to bed at night.”

Mary’s association with the Sisters of Mercy goes back to her days as a student at Lancaster Catholic High School in Lancaster, PA. That Mercy connection continued when Mary attended Misericordia University, where she earned a bachelor of science degree in nursing. “I always think of myself being associated with the Sisters of Mercy,” she says. “I’m really grateful for the sisters in my life because they have really been a big gift to me, and they have taught me so much.”

Mary, who has been married to her husband John for almost 45 years, is the mother of seven children and eight grandchildren. She worked as a school nurse for more than 25 years in the Wyoming Valley School District before retiring in 2004. She has been an active volunteer at St. Ignatius Loyola Parish in Kingston, PA, where she taught religious education for more than 20 years. Mary is currently the coordinator of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, and she is a member of the social justice commission at St. Ignatius. She also volunteers with the West Side Food Bank, which is an ecumenical ministry that helps needy families.

Working at McAuley Center has been especially gratifying for Mary. “It really is a special and holy place for me to be,” O’Connor says. “I somehow get what I need there.”
Mid-Atlantic Sisters Visit Panama for a Multi-Cultural Immersion

During a recent meeting in Panama, sisters from the extended Justice Team, accompanied by Barbara Ozelski, RSM, and Dina Altamiranda, the new president of CCASA, visited the impoverished barrio in Colon, which is Panama’s second largest city and has the highest rates of poverty and crime in the country.

“No words can adequately describe the dirt, the stench, the squalor, the poverty we encountered,” says one of the participants, Sister Diane Guerin, RSM, the Mid-Atlantic Community’s justice coordinator. “No words sufficiently grasp the love in the eyes of people, the tenderness of Barbara and Dina, nor the joyful expressions on the faces of the children as they embraced these wonderful women!”

In June, the extended Justice Team, which includes the Institute Justice Team, Institute leadership liaisons Sisters Eileen Campbell, RSM, and Anne Curtis, RSM, and Community justice coordinators, traveled to Panama to share in a week-long immersion experience and to increase their awareness of international justice issues. Participants from the Mid-Atlantic Community included Sisters Diane Guerin, RSM, Eileen Campbell, RSM, and Alicia Zapata, RSM, who served as a translator. Their guides were Sisters Edia (Tita) Lopez, RSM, (CCASA) Barbara Ozelski, RSM, who served for 40 years in Panama, along with Dina Altamiranda, RSM, both members of the former Brooklyn regional community.

At the beginning of the meeting, several Panamanian professors, social workers, and activists explained the political, social, religious, and economic history and conditions of Panama. Sisters from CCASA also shared stories from their ministries and the ways in which they accompany people who are poor, sick, and in need of education.

Then the participants traveled by van to Colon passing through a newly constructed road that had been cut through the rain forests leaving mud and flooding everywhere. (continued on page 11)
The native species had been scattered; plant life disrupted; and the land and livelihood of the indigenous people sacrificed for progress.

At a park on the main street in Colon, barely an inch of ground is visible as people gather on benches, under trees, or on sidewalks claiming their postage stamp sized space for the day. Many of these people are homeless since their residences were bombed in the late 1980’s by the U.S. military in their search for Manuel Noriega, the former military dictator of Panama. The homes of these people have never been rebuilt. The walls and hulls of these buildings stand as a make-shift memorial to the suffering and hardships of the people of Colon.

Amidst this suffering, Sisters of Mercy and Mercy associates are igniting sparks of hope. At the Women’s Center in Colon women develop work-related skills such as sewing, crafts, cooking, art, hair-cuts, massage, and computers. In a supportive environment, the staff empowers women to develop marketable skills, produce an income, and care for their families. How proud Catherine McAuley would be of this ministry with women!

Read more about the issues facing the people of Panama in future issues of Mid-Atlantic Messages.
Mercy Volunteer Gives an Added Dimension to People in Need at Mercy Neighborhood Ministries

by Elena Perri, Communications Specialist, Mid-Atlantic Community

Amanda Branum hadn’t heard of Mercy Volunteer Corps, but during her search for a year-long volunteer opportunity, she soon realized the program would be a good fit.

“I read the description, and I really liked the values and the community and faith aspect that weren’t really in the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps,” said Amanda, a 2007 graduate of Messiah College, which is located near Harrisburg, PA. “I applied right away, and I found a site that I liked, so I decided to go with it.” Amanda said she was drawn to Mercy Volunteer Corps’ focus on living simply and in community with other volunteers.

“Their strong emphasis on living in community was important to me,” she said. “I wanted to live with other people who were having the same experience rather than just living on my own. Mercy Volunteer Corps also has an emphasis on living simply and focusing on the people in your life rather than on material stuff.”

Mercy Volunteer Corps offers placements in the continental United States and Guyana, South America, for a one or two-year commitment for full-time lay volunteers. Mercy volunteers serve in education, health care and social services. Volunteers commit equally to service, a simple lifestyle in community, and personal and communal spiritual growth.

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Mercy Volunteer Adds to Ministry
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“The clients are very cheerful and very excited to be here,” she said. “I think it’s very inspiring that they have such difficult situations, and they manage to be so happy and enthusiastic every day.”

Amanda has enjoyed her work at Mercy Neighborhood Ministries so much that she has decided to extend her volunteer commitment for another year.

“It’s been a stretch for me, but it’s been really good for me,” she said. “I’m curious to see how the program grows and changes. I’m excited to be a part of that.”

The adult program currently has nine clients, but is licensed for 16. In January, Mercy Neighborhood Ministries began moving from Our Lady of Hope Church in the Tioga section of North Philadelphia to a new environmentally-friendly building a few blocks away.

At Mercy Neighborhood Ministries, Amanda works with executive director Sister Anne Provost, RSM, facilities manager, Sister Margery Lowry, RSM, and Mercy associates Denise Hay, director of development and public relations, and Marie McGuigan, director of adult programs.

“We’re thrilled Amanda has signed on another year especially since we’ve made the transition into this new facility,” Marie said. “She will lend continuity and consistency. She has a beautiful ability to minister in such a way that promotes the independence of the participants in the program and having them become fully who God calls them to be.”

Marie noted that although Amanda is a quiet person, “Her presence provides a security for them. They feel safe. Her approach is so gentle, quiet and non-threatening.

“If we didn’t have her, we’d have to hire somebody, which would be a financial constraint,” Marie added. “It’s been nothing but a blessing to have her here with us.”
Mercy-Sponsored Ministry Helps People in Rural Areas

“The most terrible poverty is being lonely and unloved,” says Sister Catherine Cummings, RSM, the director of the Volunteer and Parish Nurse program for Mercy Care for the Adirondacks, the newest sponsored ministry of the Mid-Atlantic Community.

In her ministry, Sister Catherine helps ease the loneliness and isolation of older people living in their homes in the Tri-Lakes region of Tupper Lake, Saranac Lake, and Lake Placid, NY. The cold winters of upstate New York, the long distances between services, and the rural sparsely populated area can be very challenging for older adults,” says Sister Catherine.

“With only two full-time employees and one part-time staff person and over 49 friendship volunteers and four parish nurses, this ministry responds to the spiritual, emotional, and health education needs of over 40 people living in upstate New York,” says Donna Beal, the executive director. The friendship volunteers visit elders in their homes, transport them to doctor’s appointments, run errands, help with housework and gardening, and assist with grocery shopping and meal preparation, to name a few of their activities. The parish nurses do not provide “hands-on” nursing care, but educate, refer, counsel, and advocate for the health care concerns of elders living in their own homes.

The sixteen Mid-Atlantic sisters who live in upstate New York also contribute in one way or another to this ministry. St. Margaret’s Convent in Lake Placid, NY, where seven sisters from the Mid-Atlantic Community live, even provides the office space for this ministry.

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Four Mid-Atlantic sisters and one associate serve as friendship volunteers.  

Mercy Care for the Adirondacks began in March, 2007, as a way to improve the quality of life of older people living independently in their communities. Through its programs of parish community nursing, friendship volunteers, education, and advocacy, the staff and volunteers of Mercy Care for the Adirondacks reach out to the older people in need in their communities.

“This ministry continues the mission of long-term health care for people in need which the Sisters of Mercy have pursued in the Adirondacks since 1895 when they founded Gabriels Sanitorium for tubercular patients. For many years, the Sisters of Mercy sponsored the former Mercy General Hospital and Mercy Health Care in Tupper Lake, NY, and Uihlein Mercy Center in Lake Placid, NY,” says Sister Patricia Vetrano, RSM, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community’s leadership team who also serves on the board of trustees for Mercy Care for the Adirondacks.

“The Sisters of Mercy are still responding to the health care concerns of people of need in the Tri-Lakes region, but in new, innovative ways with a more holistic approach which integrates faith, spirituality, and health,” says Sister Pat.

“Today, in the Tri-Lakes region we need quality and compassionate care for our elder brothers and sisters,” says Sister Catherine. “If Catherine McAuley were alive today, I think she would support our ministry to elders, since it helps meet the needs of our times.”