Reflecting on 25 Years as Institute:
An Interview with Sisters Judy Carle, Peggy Costa and Amy Hoey

It was the morning of July 20, 1991. “I went into the convention center,” said Sister Amy Hoey. “It was bustling with activity. Choirs were practicing. Musicians were rehearsing. Volunteers were setting up hundreds of chairs into horseshoe formations. And I started to cry! Someone asked me, ‘Are you OK?’ And I said, ‘I’m wonderful.’”

A few hours later, Sister Judy Carle recalls stepping up to the podium with Amy and Sister Peggy Costa. “I remember saying that first sentence—‘We are Sisters of Mercy!’—and the place went wild,” Judy said.

Peggy remembers turning in all directions to get a full view of all those present. “It was remarkable,” she remembered. “A 360-degree mosaic that revealed the face of Mercy! I still picture it in my memory!”

Judy, Peggy and Amy played a crucial role not just at the 1991 Founding Event, but for the decade leading up to that moment. In 1981, Sisters of Mercy worldwide gathered for Trocaire ’81 to celebrate the 150th anniversary of their founding in Dublin, Ireland. The Federation of the Sisters of Mercy, made up of leaders from nine provinces and 16 independent congregations, planned their own celebration in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for sisters in the Americas. The leaders were recognizing a movement toward unity among themselves, and they began working on a plan that the Vatican would need to approve. In 1989, optimistic and hopeful about a positive response from the Holy See, the Federation named Judy, Peggy and Amy to serve on the Transition Administration Group (TAG) whose many tasks included finding a site for and setting up Institute offices, planning for the Founding Event and First Institute Chapter, attending to legal duties and much more. (Please read Union and Charity: The Story of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas (2017) for a more thorough history.)

In celebration of the 25th anniversary of our Institute, the members of TAG shared some of their reflections from this exciting, transitional time 25 years ago that has become a foundation for our Journey of Oneness today.
THE FORMATION OF TAG

**Judy:** TAG was formed in 1989, but our work stretched back. We were part of Mercy Futures, we were working on the Constitutions and we were working closely with Rome on the legal matters. Each congregation had voted regarding the formation of the Institute. We heard from Rome in January 1990. We had confirmation for 22 congregations—but three needed to go back to the vote. We rejoiced that we had received some type of confirmation, yet we were saddened.

**Amy:** The major superiors of those three groups went to Rome to dialogue with the authorities there. I remember sisters lining the driveway with candles when one returned. It was a very poignant time, because we did not feel we could celebrate as a whole, when three of our congregations were not confirmed. There was great pain as well as exuberant joy.

**Peggy:** It was always our hope that we would lose no one along the way to becoming one. If more time was needed or adjustments had to be made, that is what we provided. As we waited for word that these three congregations were confirmed, we realized in a new and deeper way the unity that was already present and just waiting to be ritualized.

**Judy:** Then in April 1990, we heard that Catherine McAuley had been proclaimed venerable. We had to find out what “venerable” even meant! But it was so significant for two reasons. One, because of our experiences, coming together as Institute, Catherine was nearer and dearer to us. And she is still today, too. We are seeing the need to look toward Catherine, a woman who lived a life of real commitment to God and to those who are poor. Two, the proclamation came at a time when we were starting to feel more connected with Sisters of Mercy around the world. The Mercy International Centre project was beginning to be planned. Other Mercy sisters in Ireland and Australia were beginning to talk of becoming one, too.

What things were foremost on your minds when the Institute was being formed?

**Amy:** It was really about relationships. Our Founding Document says it, and we continue to say it: “We, women of Mercy, have discovered a new relationship among us.” We wanted desperately to develop the right structures that would foster those relationships.

**Judy:** We were on a quest for identity. At that time, we were having some struggles with the Church, and we wanted to claim who we are in the Church.

**Peggy:** From the beginning we valued the desire to be in right relationship with the institutional Church. One of our first “official visits” was to meet with and introduce ourselves to Cardinal James Hickey of the Archdiocese of Washington and explain the project on which we were working. We wanted to be seen as credible and open.

We knew to expect surprises and challenges at some point! One big surprise to me was the Vatican appointment of three representatives from Rome to assist the Sisters of Mercy with financial, canonical and community life issues. The second surprise was the expectation and requirement that we would submit a finished Constitutions for approval before permission would be granted to form the new Institute. In both instances we needed to speak our truth and stand strong in being faithful to our lived reality. We were able to communicate effectively that it would be impossible to have our Constitutions approved prior to the formation of the Institute, the major reason being that we had no common legitimate structure to act on this together. Separate approvals by each of the individual chapters would not be acceptable. We needed a common forum to reach consensus. We made a compromise to submit the best effort towards a finished Constitutions for Rome’s approval, and to make the approval of our constitution the first order of business for approval at the First Institute Chapter of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

**Judy:** We wanted to remember our heritage and mission and celebrate our community. We wanted to see transformation in our ways of relating to each other, in terms of our spirituality and our mission. Those questions are still current today. We had to look at relationships, finances. We had to share, reallocate and centralize our resources.

**Amy:** That reminds me of a story. At that time, I was talking to a sister after chapel, and I asked her, “What do you think about the Institute?” She said, “I’m not sure. What if one of the congregations gets into financial difficulty?” “Well, what would you do?” I asked her. She paused then said, “I’d help them, of course.”

It also reminds me of something Catherine McAuley says: “God can bend and change, form and reform any of his creatures to fit them for the purpose he designs.” In a sense, that is what the Institute is doing now on our Journey of Oneness.
Your work required a vision—the need to risk, to believe and to have faith in where the Sisters of Mercy were being called. What do you see as being our vision as an Institute now?

**Judy:** As an Institute we have bent and changed, formed and reformed, looked again with fresh eyes and engaged together in various processes. But we are really still treasuring Catherine’s legacy with greater endearment.

Passion for service, vibrant community life, our Critical Concerns—all of these have been formative for our work into the future. We are very much involved in the same work we were 25 years ago, but in new and contemporary ways. For example, I look at our efforts with anti-racism and justice for immigrants. So many of us have participated in the anti-racism workshops; so many of us minister and support immigrants and refugees. My own community of Burlingame, California, declared public sanctuary for immigrants 30 years ago. When I look at everything happening right now in our world, I see that our past lays the groundwork for our future. We have to figure out how to respond to new situations with mercy and hospitality.

And today, our work is strengthened more than ever by our relationships. We know a lot more about what sisters are doing in different areas. These relationships help us to “develop creative solutions to unmet needs acting in solidarity with impoverished people,” quoting the 2011 Chapter Declaration.

**Amy:** While we love and cherish what we have in common, the past 25 years have also helped us to deepen our understanding of the cultural differences among us. We have learned how to transcend those differences and focus on what unites us.

**Judy:** We have also invested a lot of time and resources into the formation of our newer and younger members. We see this as an investment in our sustainable future. We don’t know what our Institute will be like in the next 25 years, but we are preparing our own to step into that uncertainty with confidence.

**Amy:** I look at the composition of the 2017 Chapter body, and I think, “It’s good!”

**Judy:** That’s how I feel about the final vow program, where all our new members have an opportunity to go to Baggot Street with other Mercy sisters from around the world before taking final vows. It’s really wonderful!

**Peggy:** As I look at all the projects and programs we are implementing, I am proud that sustainability is a desired outcome. However, I feel we are also called to nurture new realities—some of which are still hidden to us. Little by little through sustained contemplative dialogue we are getting to the root of what is called for us to be in our time. Our Journey of Oneness holds such hope. It also holds the need for radical transformation. Evolution is usually from a simpler to a more complex life form. We, I believe, are called in the opposite direction. I imagine our future will find us with a much more “simple” set of organizing
principles which are aimed at increasing relationships, advancing our capacity to bring Mercy to all in need and empowering one another through the principle of subsidiarity. And, while I’m dreaming, I will rejoice on the day we make real our commitment to sharing our resources in a bold way!

How has Mercy been shaped in the past 25 years? What do we continue to be called to?

Amy: The world needs mercy now, just as it did in 1991. I need mercy now, just as I did in 1991. The need for mercy is never going to be gone.

Judy: Throughout the Jubilee Year of Mercy declared by Pope Francis, as I watched people engage in this movement, opening the literal and symbolic doors, it seemed like the whole world caught on to the need for mercy. We, the Sisters of Mercy, embrace this need every day.

Amy: Yes, I think the Common Statement that came out of the Trocaire ’81 meeting captures this: “We commit ourselves anew to search for ways to express God’s mercy … in collaboration with people of goodwill.” That phrase, “in collaboration with people of goodwill,” captures the beauty and reality of our present and future: in our ministries, we partner with people of goodwill.

Peggy: Our movement towards recognizing a global community has heightened our awareness of the desperate need for mercy. I remember seeing a statue in China of a feminine figure who had multiple arms and hands. It was named the goddess of mercy. The lesson was that two hands would never be enough to bring about the mercy needed in the world. We know that to be true. And even all the arms and hands of our members are not enough. We rely on all our associates, companions, coworkers and all people working for a more just society to extend their merciful hearts, arms and hands to touch our suffering world with tender mercy. We continue to be called to being more inclusive in thought and action about those who “mercy” with us!

Judy: And, those with whom we partner see themselves as a part of our mission. Thinking about our Critical Concerns—they did not just happen in 2005. Our Institute response to these concerns started in 1991—we have discussed them, we have made decisions about them and we have responded to them. With this groundwork, in 2005 we named them as part of our direction for the future. And today, the Critical Concerns permeate our ministries. They help shape the curriculum in our schools, the policies on our boards and in our offices. We used to hear lay staff say, “the sisters’ Critical Concerns” but now it is “our Critical Concerns.”

The theme for Chapter 2017 is “the door of mercy stands ajar”—which ties to the theme of the Institute Leadership Team’s Accountability Report, titled “We will hold the door ajar.” Both lines are taken from poems by Australian Sister of Mercy Mary Wickham. How do these themes challenge us for the future?

Peggy: Holding the door ajar—it is what we have been doing throughout the history of the Institute! And it is what we are still challenged to do today: to hold the door ajar and let the future in.

It reminds me of an image: a perfume atomizer. During the formation of the Institute, we spent considerable time imagining and drawing images to help express what our future might be. During this time, one sister drew the perfume atomizer, and she said, “The right way to put on perfume is, you squeeze the bulb of the atomizer, then you walk into the perfume. That’s the way we go into the future!”

The door stands partially open at Baggot Street, challenging our Mercy community to hold the door ajar and let the future in. Credit: Anne Walsh, Mercy International Centre.
Judy: It calls to mind Pope Francis' words to women and men religious—that they are “capable of waking up the world” and “have something to say” to the world today. That call to wake up the world means that we have to be very deeply conscious and attentive to the movement of the Spirit in ourselves, in our community and in our world. When the pope says “wake up the world,” it may seem like he is saying we should have something to say. And sometimes we may feel we don’t have anything to say, because we’re not as young as we were, and we’re not all in the same institutional ministries that we have been in through history. But any encounter in which people are seeking God, is an opportunity to “wake up the world.” It's not always about what we have to say, but about what we have to be.

Amy: Yes, “being” transcends age, energy, location. “Being” can always, anyplace, exist. To quote a line from Mary Wickham’s poem, it is “sturdy, yet easily moved.” I’m struck that the Chapter 2017 member engagement processes have urged us to talk about being rather than doing. At Chapter 2017, we will discern a question about who we as Sisters of Mercy should be as we set the direction for our Institute for the next six years. We listen in hope to see how our Institute will respond!

Sister Judy Carle has ministered in secondary schools, formation/incorporation work, leadership and Mercy Housing. She now serves on the board of Dignity Health. Judy is also involved with Catherine Center; two programs serving those who are homeless in San Francisco, California; and Mercy Volunteer Corps in San Francisco. You can contact Judy at jcarle@mercywmw.org.

Sister Amy Hoey has ministered in education at all levels and elected leadership at the local and Institute levels. Her ministries have also included staffing the USCCB committee which prepared Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord. She currently serves as Mercy Family Contact with the Sisters living at the Warde Rehabilitation and Nursing Center in Windham, New Hampshire. You can reach her at amyrsm@comcast.net.

In Memoriam
Sister Peggy Costa returned to God on April 23, just days before the publication of this issue. She had ministered for over 60 years performing administrative work in secondary education, hospital administration, community redesign, social services and fund development. She also nurtured her creative side with watercolor painting. Her piece entitled “Radical Transformation” even graced the cover of ¡Viva! Mercy to celebrate the Jubilee Year of Mercy. We celebrate her innumerable gifts to Mercy!

Founding the Institute: A Digital Exhibit
In 2016, archivists at Mercy Heritage Center created an online exhibit exploring the formation, history and ongoing works of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. The site includes dozens of photographs and a video of the doors opening in Buffalo, New York, on July 20, 1991.

View the exhibit at foundingtheinstitute.com.

Union and Charity: The Story of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas
Our 25th anniversary book was published in both English and Spanish in March 2017. Heartfelt thanks and congratulations go to its authors, Sisters Doris Gottemoeller and Denise Colgan. Their work tells the story of the formation and development of the Institute. Described as a “logistical miracle,” the Institute became reality for one reason: “…because its members prayed together and shared their wisdom with one another; they spoke and listened to one another with intensity and commitment in order to make their choices together.”

If you have not already purchased a book, you may do so online. Paperback: bit.ly/RSMpaperback Hardcover: bit.ly/RSMhardcover