Twenty-Six Sisters Plan to Participate in Mid-Atlantic Community Discernment Weekend

The weekend of January 14-16, 26 members of the Mid-Atlantic Community will participate in a Discernment Weekend in Sea Isle, NJ, regarding Mid-Atlantic Community leadership.

Mid-Atlantic Community Assembly facilitators, Marie Chiodo, DW, and Pat Flynn, SSND, will facilitate the weekend. During this time, potential Mid-Atlantic Community team members will share their expectations of leadership and contemplate their call to this role in the community.

On Saturday, January 15, the current Mid-Atlantic Community Leadership Team will interact with nominees and discuss their experiences of leadership.

Sisters, Associates and staff are asked to pray the Assembly Prayer for each of the nominees as they discern the responsibilities of leadership.

Sister Sharon Donohue, RSM, life and ministry facilitator (left), meets with Sister Anne Johnston, RSM, (right), at the Sisters of Mercy Convent in Whitestone, NY. Sister Anne is planning to move into the convent in the near future.
Over 500 Sisters Attend Fall Consultative Gatherings

During the first two weekends in November, 542 Mid-Atlantic sisters attended the Fall Consultative Gatherings at four different sites throughout the Mid-Atlantic Community.

The agenda for the day started with an update about the recent Apostolic Visit from Christine McCann, RSM, president of the Mid-Atlantic Community, and a few sisters who were interviewed during the visit. The morning session on Ministry included reflection time for sisters (and associates) about their future hopes for ministry.

The afternoon began with a discussion with the Governance Committee about the approval of the revised Governance Plan and a presentation by the Assembly Planning Committee with emphasis on the Nomination and Election process for Mid-Atlantic Community Leadership.

At the conclusion of the gatherings, participants received two electronic surveys – one to evaluate the Fall Consultative Gatherings and another to give additional feedback on certain elements of the proposed Mid-Atlantic Community Governance Plan. Information from both surveys was shared with the Assembly Planning Committee and the Consultative Gathering Committee and will be used to prepare for the Winter Consultative Gatherings in January and February 2011 and the upcoming Mid-Atlantic Community Assembly in April 2011 in Parsippany, NJ.

Mark Your Calendars

2011 Mid-Atlantic Community Assembly
Tuesday, April 5 to Sunday, April 10, 2011
Parsippany, NJ
Mid-Atlantic Sister Serves Elderly at Mercy LIFE

When Sister Anne Wootten’s mother died at 62 after suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, her death inspired Sister Anne to pursue geriatric nursing, a field she has worked in for 30 years.

A geriatric nurse practitioner, Sister Anne currently serves elderly clients at Mercy LIFE (Living Independently for Elders) center in North Philadelphia. Mercy LIFE helps people over age 55 with medical problems live independently at home instead of in a nursing home. Mercy LIFE clients come to the center for meals, social activities and to receive medical care.

“We really become their primary care provider,” Sister Anne says. “We give them medications they need and provide transportation to appointments with medical specialists.” The LIFE center also helps clients obtain home care services like housekeeping and laundry so they can live independently and safely at home.

“I love it when I can talk one on one with a person in the office and help them to see that they’re OK and that they can take care of themselves,” says Sister Anne. “I like helping them feel empowered to take care of themselves. It’s always nice when you can make someone feel better.”

Maintaining contact with clients is an important part of Sister Anne’s ministry. “Most of our clients have family members who are in regular contact with them,” she says. “Some of them don’t have families and then we become their family.”

Sister Anne enjoys the opportunities to interact with clients and put them at ease. “It’s very rewarding to bring a little bit of calm and peace to them when they feel stressed out,” she says. “It’s just wonderful to become a little part of their lives, to share their stories and affirm them for what they’re able to do.”

(Sister Anne Wootten, RSM, checks the heart rate of Jessie Smith, a client at Mercy LIFE in North Philadelphia. Sister Anne has been a geriatric nurse practitioner for 30 years.)
Another important aspect of Sister Anne’s ministry is the connection with Catherine McAuley’s service to the poor and sick. “We serve the sick and the poor every day,” says Sister Anne, who keeps a picture of Catherine McAuley in her office as a reminder to be a merciful presence to her clients. “I always try to approach them with the sense of bringing God’s mercy to them.”

While Sister Anne’s clients may experience medical challenges, she says it is a blessing for her to help people “manage their lives and their health care problems and help them to be agents for themselves and their own health care.”

Another blessing is sharing a laugh with her patients. “Sometimes they have a lot of problems in their lives and can feel overwhelmed and helpless,” Sister Anne says. “For them to have some lighthearted moments is a wonderful blessing.

“This program and what we’re able to do for people is just wonderful,” she adds. “It’s great to be a part of a team that works so well together to provide these services. It’s very rewarding, and it gives me a sense that we’re all in this together.”

Sister Regina Burrichter, RSM, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community, talks with students from Misericordia University who volunteered during the Mercy Day of Service on November 20 at Mercy Neighborhood Ministries in Philadelphia. The Mercy Day of Service was part of the 150th Anniversary celebration of the Presence of the Sisters of Mercy in the Philadelphia area.
Mid-Atlantic Sister Helps People Who Are Deaf-Blind

When Bernadette Wynne, RSM, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community, was a teenager, she volunteered at a home for people who are blind. Today, she serves people who are blind and deaf.

Sister Bernie, coordinator of the national training team of the Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youth and Adults in Sands Point, NY, trains the staff at agencies that serve the deaf-blind population in the United States and overseas.

“Almost half of this population starts out as deaf, and sign language is their primary language,” says Sister Bernie, who has worked at the center for 35 years. “Once they begin to lose their vision, they need to learn new skills to regain their independence.” She says mobility skills are a high priority. Clients are trained to walk safely with another person, how to use a white walking cane or work with a guide dog.

The Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youth and Adults is a national rehabilitation program serving youth and adults who are deaf-blind.

One of the primary challenges, she says, is that there are state agencies for the deaf and agencies for the blind, and the deaf-blind can “get lost” between the two organizations. “The deaf-blind person needs skills taught at the blind agency such as Braille and mobility and independent living skills,” Sister Bernie says.

If a person is born blind, they cannot learn sign language because it is a spatial language and they have no concept of space or shape. “The staff can use alternative communication methods, and that’s what I teach them,” Sister Bernie says. One method is tactile signing, which requires signing directly into a person’s hand. She adds that learning Braille can be challenging for a deaf person because English is not their native language.

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For people who are deaf, she says losing their sight is the “most horrible terror because their eyes are their eyes, their ears, their link to the world.” “It’s a terrible situation because fear is not logical; it’s emotional,” Sister Bernie adds.

“Usher syndrome is the primary cause of deaf-blindness, and it is a genetic condition where a person is born deaf or hard of hearing and then blindness develops in the teen years,” she says. “If Usher syndrome is diagnosed early, young people can begin learning how to cope with vision loss.”

One of the biggest misconceptions about deaf-blind people is that they can’t do anything. “They accomplish great things,” Sister Bernie says. “When they come up with an idea that sounds far fetched, I say, ‘OK, try it.’ I have been so inspired by them, by their courage, by their stamina.”

Getting vital information during natural disasters or emergencies is a primary challenge for deaf-blind people. Sister Bernie explains that National Public Radio is partnering with the Helen Keller National Center to develop Braille Radio, which will convert speech to text information and translate it into Braille through an electronic Braille device. According to the NPR Web site, “the device utilizes rows of pins that move up and down to create Braille characters and are designed to plug into the radio.”

As a Sister of Mercy, Sister Bernie says she enjoys the opportunity to provide spiritual guidance to her clients. “I’ve planned weddings and memorial services, and I’ve prepared several students who wanted to receive their sacraments,” she says.

Just as Catherine McAuley reached out to the forgotten in Dublin, Sister Bernie says the deaf-blind are “a forgotten population in the world, not just in America.” Sister Bernie regularly travels across the United States and to several countries, including Finland, Poland and Peru. “When I entered the convent in 1952, I didn’t travel at all,” she says. “Now I travel everywhere.”

Reflecting on her ministry to people who are deaf-blind, Sister Bernie says she is proud of the impact her ministry has made in their lives. “We help the deaf-blind reshape their lives,” she says. “We never close a case. People come to us and we train them. When they lose more hearing, lose their vision or lose their job, we continue to help them.”

“When I retire, I can look back and say, ‘Wow, this was a good run.’”
Mid-Atlantic Sisters Offer Spiritual Direction

Maureen Conroy, RSM, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community, is a teacher at heart. After teaching high school for eight years, she transitioned into spiritual direction and retreat ministry in 1985.

As a co-director of the Upper Room Spiritual Center in Neptune, NJ, Sister Maureen teaches people how to be spiritual directors. She also travels internationally to educate people about spiritual direction, spirituality and discernment.

As a spiritual director, Sister Maureen enjoys helping people to grow in their relationship with God and to experience God’s healing. “Through this wonderful ministry, a person has the opportunity to find God in hard times, in the struggles and in the joys of his or her life,” she says. “Spiritual direction is an opportunity for people to connect with a loving, healing God. I feel like I’ve been called to be a compassionate presence for others.”

Sister Maureen adds that the longest journey is the journey inward. “With all our ministries here, we help people to take that long journey inward and help them to find God there,” she says.

The Upper Room, which is sponsored by the Diocese of Trenton, offers a variety of spiritual workshops, monthly women’s gatherings, weekly centering prayer sessions and Taizé prayer. The center also offers 12-step retreats and Rachel’s Vineyard retreats for those who have experienced an abortion. Sister Maureen, along

‘A Merciful Presence for Others’

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‘A Merciful Presence for Others’

with Maureen Christensen, RSM, (See story on bottom of page) and Trudy Ahern, SSJ, are co-directors of the Upper Room.

In addition to being a co-director, Sister Maureen is a certified massage therapist. She has also written books on spirituality, spiritual direction, and supervision of spiritual directors. Her books include “Looking Into the Well: Supervision of Spiritual Directors,” “The Discerning Heart: Discovering a Personal God,” “Journey of Love: God Moving in Our Hearts and Lives,” and “Growing in Love and Freedom: Personal Experiences of Counseling and Spiritual Direction.”

Sister Maureen says it is a privilege for her to be a merciful presence to people. “We really are a center of mercy for those who are wounded psychologically and need spiritual healing,” she says. “This ministry gives me the opportunity to let God’s merciful compassion flow through me to the people with heavy burdens in their life. People really find a safe haven here.”

Helping People in Their Faith Journeys

Maureen Christensen, RSM, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community, accompanies others on their faith journeys as a co-director of the Upper Room Spiritual Center in Neptune, NJ.

While she was serving as a vocation director for the Sisters of Mercy in New Jersey, Sister Maureen wanted to become a better listener, so she attended the spiritual direction training program offered at the Upper Room. “During that time I fell in love with the ministry, and I wanted to do it full time,” she says. “It fulfilled a desire in me to give back what’s been given to me and also to be that mercy presence here.”

“People come for spiritual direction for a variety of reasons,” Sister Maureen says. “Sometimes people are dealing with difficult situations in their lives and they’re looking for the presence of God in those situations. Others want to deepen their relationship with God.”

Sister Maureen, along with co-directors Maureen Conroy, RSM, and Trudy Ahern, SSJ, train spiritual directors and offer continuing education in spiritual direction at the Upper Room. “We all have unique gifts, and our wonderful blend of gifts make the Upper Room what it is,” says Sister Maureen, who also facilitates a monthly women’s gathering and Taizé prayer services at the spiritual center.

She enjoys the opportunity to offer mercy to others through her ministry. “Heartfelt mercy and compassion is very much a part of our everyday living here, listening to the stories of others, listening to their faith journeys,” Sister Maureen says.

Reflecting on her ministry at the Upper Room, she says, “I never thought I would be anywhere for 18 years, yet each year has been so fulfilling. I’ve learned so much about God, about myself, about the goodness of people. It has just enriched my life in so many ways.”
Mercy Associate Helps Refugees

Mercy Associate Mary Bartholomew personifies the corporal works of mercy in her work with refugees and victims of trafficking from around the world.

Mary, a senior service director for Lutheran Social Services of New England, helps refugees get the services they need after they arrive in the United States. The agency provides a variety of assistance to refugees, including physical and mental health services and placement in foster care homes.

“The work with refugee children is so rooted in the spiritual and corporal works of mercy,” Mary says. “We’re welcoming people and offering them support, understanding, safety and the best resources at our disposal.”

“Most of the refugees range in age from six to mid-teens, and they are often victims of war,” Mary says. “Many have lost parents and other family members. All of them come seeking safety, and they are hopeful for a better and more life-giving experience in this country.”

When refugees arrive in the United States, Mary and the staff of Lutheran Social Services help the children and teens adjust to American culture. “We help them acclimate to this new country and embrace their own ethnic heritage and traditions,” she says. The agency hosts many cultural events where participants bring food from their home country and dress in native clothing. “We don’t want them to forget where they come from and who they are,” she adds.

Mary, who has worked for Lutheran Social Services for almost nine years, has had a rich and fulfilling relationship with the Sisters of Mercy. Her social work career began at Mercy Center for Developmental Disabilities in Worcester, MA, in 1972. She also worked for McAuley Nazareth Home for Boys in Leicester, MA, Mary continues to work part time at the home.

“Both of those ministries are outstanding for their sense of welcoming toward people who are struggling, people who are sorrowing, people who need hope and respect and dignity,” Mary says. “The staff welcomes and accepts children and parents for who they are and where they are in their lives.”

The values Catherine McAuley embraced are evident in the lives of the sisters she worked with, Mary says. “Those values are alive, tangible and accessible,” she says. “The Mercy charism is a hallmark of the treatment and service provided to children in need as well as to their families and to the larger community.”

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Mercy Associate Helps Refugees

Mary, who has been an associate since 1989, served on a steering committee of the former New York regional community for several years, an experience that was “very meaningful, in terms of the lifelong relationships that were formed and the opportunity to grow in mercy. It was a wonderful gift.”

Mary describes the goodness of the Sisters of Mercy as “God given, reliable, grace filled and the source of real happiness.”

“The graces that have come from those relationships have brought me into a deeper relationship with God,” Mary says. “It is a joy to be with the sisters, and they share that joy with us. I have been really blessed with knowing many wonderful women and men in mercy.”

Mary says her work with refugees and the mercy charism are inseparable. “We comfort the sorrowful, educate those who need to learn, clothe those who need warmth and provide for all of their daily needs,” she says. “There isn’t a day that goes by that there isn’t an opportunity to console, to offer some kind of healing.” She also noted that her work aligns with the Institute’s Critical Concern of immigration.

While engaging in the works of mercy is personally rewarding, Mary says she and her co-workers receive much in return. “Mercy is not a one-way street,” she says. “No matter how much we give, I think each of us who work in this ministry receive back abundantly.”

Marguerite Pessagno, RSM, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community, (fourth from left in front row) joined Sisters of Mercy from across the Institute on a trip to El Salvador in December to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the killing of four churchwomen in that country who were serving people who were poor.
Newer Members Work at Various Ministries

The five newer members of the Mid-Atlantic Community serve at various ministries throughout the Mid-Atlantic Community and the Institute.

Jackie Nedd, RSM, the newest member of the Mid-Atlantic Community, recently finished her canonical year at the Institute Novitiate in Laredo, TX, and plans to begin her second year as an apostolic novice.

Maureen King, RSM, is serving as the vice-president of mission at Mercy Home in Brooklyn, NY. Barbara McGahan, RSM, is serving as the director of parish social ministry at St. Stanislaus Parish in Lansdale, PA. Candidate Kathleen Kearney, RSM, is a primary care nurse practitioner at the Student Health Clinic at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, PA. Catherine Manderfield, RSM, ministers as a case manager at Women of Hope in Philadelphia. She also serves as a member of the Institute Chapter Planning Committee.

Three new novices from across the Institute were welcomed to the Institute Novitiate in Laredo, TX, in August. Because of the increased number of inquiries about religious life in the North Jersey/New York area, the Mid-Atlantic Community plans to open a House of Hospitality in that area. A communal discernment will be held on Saturday, January 22 at Mt. St. Mary in Watchung, NJ, from 10 a.m. to noon. For more information, contact Honora Nicholson, RSM, at hnicholson@mercymidatlantic.org

At the final gathering of the Mercy Development Leadership Program, which took place in November at a retreat center in Lima, Peru, Maureen King, RSM, (front row, right), a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community, portrays the Mid-Atlantic Community during a vignette about the Institute. Seven sisters from the Mid-Atlantic participated in the year-long Leadership Conference which included monthly webinar programs and ongoing integration and application of leadership skills.