History

Northeast Community

In 2006, six Sisters of Mercy Communities became the Northeast Community: Albany, New York; Connecticut; New Hampshire; Portland, Maine; Providence, Rhode Island; and Vermont.

Albany, NY

With a total of 80 cents among them, four Sisters of Mercy boarded the Francis Skiddy, a night boat, to Albany, New York. They departed from St. Catherine’s Convent in New York City to establish a branch convent at Greenbush, New York, east of Albany, on the Hudson River.

Sisters Mary Augustine McKenna, Mary Gertrude Ledwith, Mary Vincent Sweetman, and Clare Galvin arrived at their destination on September 28, 1863. The branch convent was called Mount St. John.

Serving God’s people and taking risks were not new to these sisters. All except Sister Clare Galvin had served during the Civil War at the military hospital at Beaufort, North Carolina, from July, 1862, until May, 1863.

The foundation in Greenbush became independent in 1868. This marked the beginning of what later became the Albany Regional Community of the Sisters of Mercy.

When this young Community numbered only six in 1869, Bishop Conroy asked the Sisters of Mercy to establish a hospital in Albany: St. Peter’s Hospital.

Serving the sick was natural to Sister Mary Paula Harris, the first superior of St. Peter’s, because she had also been a volunteer at the military hospital in Beaufort tending to wounded soldiers.

As the number of sisters continued to grow, so did the hospital. The first hospital was a small three-story building on Broadway and North Ferry Street, but with a Master Expansion Plan begun in 1945, St. Peter's is presently a multi-structured medical complex on Manning Boulevard, well respected in the community for its quality health care. Providing world-class cardiac care, St. Peter's has been named a Top 100 Cardiovascular Hospital for four consecutive years.

A new motherhouse was opened in Albany in 1928. It was also at this time that the sisters' first mission was established in St. Thomas, USVI. In 1966, another mission was established in Beirut, Lebanon. It was necessary to abandon both endeavors after a short time. In 1967, however, the sisters were invited to work in the Diocese of Anchorage, Alaska, and today, Albany Sisters of Mercy continue to serve there.

In 1958, the Albany Sisters of Mercy founded Maria College. In the Mercy tradition, its mission has been to educate for service. The college serves a greater population by offering evening and
weekend courses. Maria College is first in the area to offer studies in bereavement, gerontology, and complementary therapy.

The sisters have educated countless individuals in diocesan schools since their earliest days at St. Patrick's, Watervliet, in 1872.

Catherine's charism continues today through our ministries in health care, education, parish and diocesan work, social services, and spiritual direction.

Connecticut

There was neither a convent nor a school to greet Mother Frances Xavier Warde and the eight Sisters of Mercy who traveled by stagecoach from Providence, Rhode Island, to Hartford, Connecticut, May 11, 1852. Yet, within a day, they opened an orphanage at St. Mary's Parish, New Haven and, within a week, a school in the basement of St. Patrick Church, Hartford.

Despite dangerous times, due to strong anti-Catholicism from the Know-Nothing society, the sisters went about their work, establishing a presence that continues to have a profound impact on the people of Connecticut, particularly through social services, healthcare, education and pastoral ministries.

These Sisters of Mercy were not only the first community of women religious in Connecticut but also the only ones for more than 20 years.

In 1872, Sisters of Mercy from Ennis, Ireland established a motherhouse in Middletown and a mission in Meriden and by 1911, the sisters had expanded their ministries to every corner of Connecticut, founding five institutions and starting 24 parish schools. That year they united the three communities of Hartford, Meriden and Middletown into one Mercy congregation and chose the Hartford motherhouse as their center. Numbering more than 700 members in 1912, these sisters were the largest Mercy congregation in the United States.

Of the original, 18 elementary schools, four junior and senior high schools, two catechetical centers and Saint Joseph College established in the early days—two are still sponsored ministries.

In 1997, the Connecticut area sisters repositioned their healthcare system to offer better services. Four separate ministries located on the West Hartford campus — Saint Mary Home, Mercyknoll, The McAuley Center, and Mercy Community Homecare — became divisions of Mercy Community Health System and part of the Catholic Health East system.

The sisters also launched two ministries with other religious congregations: the Communities’ Law Center, providing legal advocacy to low income people; and the Collaborative Center for Justice, modeling collaborative leadership in justice work.

Together with our Mercy Associates in the Connecticut area, we continue to serve through ministries in social services, healthcare, parish or diocesan work, spiritual direction, retreat work, and education.

Through the years, several Connecticut area sisters established missions or ministered with other sisters in Belize, Guatemala, Haiti and Honduras. The Guatemalan and Haitian missionary works continue today.
New Hampshire
On July 16, 1858, Frances Warde and four other Sisters of Mercy arrived in Manchester from Providence, Rhode Island, a foundation she had made in 1851, in response to the invitation of Rev. William McDonald, pastor of St. Anne Parish. Their convent, at 435 Union Street, was built by the Catholics of Manchester on the slogan, “A Dime a Brick.” Before coming to Manchester, Frances Warde had established 11 houses in the East and Midwest. From the Union Street convent she made foundations within New Hampshire as well as in Maine, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Nebraska, and Vermont. She always returned to Manchester, and she died there in 1884. Frances Warde is buried in St. Joseph Cemetery near Manchester, and Sisters of Mercy consider her grave a place of pilgrimage.

Ministry with poor, sick, and uneducated persons has always been the priority for us as Sisters of Mercy. When Frances and her small band of sisters arrived in Manchester in 1858, they began immediately to instruct the children, the mill workers, and others in the city. They opened a free school for the younger girls of Manchester and in the same year founded Mount St. Mary Academy in the northern wing of the convent. Mount St. Mary Academy continues to this day, now on Elm Street in Manchester.

To respond to the needs of sick and aging persons as well as children, the sisters opened the Sacred Heart Hospital, homes for elderly men and women, an orphanage, and a maternity hospital and infant asylum in Manchester.

In the tradition of their founder, Catherine McAuley, the sisters were concerned about the safety and welfare of women working in the mills and elsewhere in Manchester, and opened the House of St. Martha at 434 Union Street, Manchester, as a residence for working women.

For continuing education, they established Our Lady of Grace Vocational School, Sacred Heart School of Nursing, and Sacred Heart Hospital School of X-Ray Technology in Manchester, as well as Mount Saint Mary College in Hooksett, and later Castle College in Windham, New Hampshire and Marian Court College in Swampscott, Massachusetts, which is still in operation. From the late nineteenth into the twentieth century, they were called upon to open or staff schools in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, South Carolina and California. For many years, sisters served in Colombia, South America, as part of the Diocese of Manchester Mission, and also in Central America and Tanzania, Africa.

Today we continue to respond to those most in need. We serve in schools, parishes, and hospitals; with people in need of food, shelter, and support. We offer religious instruction and adult education programs, as well as English and citizenship classes to immigrant women. We can be found in parish ministry, pastoral ministry and prison ministry, in healthcare, and in social services among young persons, elderly persons, and those in need of special care. Warde Health Center in Windham, provides a licensed long-term care and assisted living. Our retired members continue to take part in the works of the community through their prayer.

Portland, ME
The story of the Sisters of Portland, Maine, began when Mother Frances Xavier Warde responded to a request from David W. Bacon, bishop of the Portland Diocese: "Do you think you could divide your little community so as to take the Bangor mission in May? The parish schools number about 400 children." She answered by sending six sisters, under the direction of Mother Mary Gonzaga O’Brien, in August, 1865. From Bangor, the ministry of the sisters spread to other locations throughout the state.
In May, 1872, Mother Frances again responded to a request from the bishop for sisters to take charge of an orphanage in Portland. On May 31, Mother M. Gonzaga and companions arrived in Portland.

The following year, 12 sisters answered a request to staff the parish schools in Portland. Eventually the sisters worked in 41 parishes throughout the state.

In 1878, at the request of Bishop James A. Healy, they began to work among the people of the Passamaquoddy Tribe and the Penobscot Nation, a ministry which continues today.

When the new Diocese of Manchester was created in 1883, Portland became the site for the motherhouse and St. Joseph’s Academy, a private boarding school for girls.

Responding to the influenza epidemic in 1918, the sisters were called to administer and staff Queen's Hospital in Portland in partnership with the diocese. As healthcare needs increased, a larger hospital, Mercy Hospital, was built on State Street, and the diocese entrusted it to the sisters in 1943.

Today, Mercy Hospital, a private, not-for-profit community hospital is a member of Catholic Health East. The hospital’s Portland Community Free Clinic opened in 1993, offering quality primary care in a welcoming environment to the working poor.

Since 1968, our sisters have also worked in Mangrove Cay and North Andros, Bahamas, serving through education, health, social and pastoral ministries.

**Providence, RI**

On March 11, 1851, Mother Frances Warde and four sisters arrived in Providence, Rhode Island, from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Fearing the wrath of the city's anti-Catholic Know-Nothings, the small group, dressed in lay clothing, entered Providence at night. Moving into a small house, later named St. Xavier's in honor of Mother Frances, the small band established the first permanent convent in New England by celebrating Mass there on March 12, 1851.

Immediately the sisters began visiting the poor, establishing an orphanage and opening St. Xavier's Academy for girls. Joined by 15 other women, the sisters soon came under attack by the Know-Nothings. The violence reached a climax in 1855, when posters appeared announcing an attack on St. Xavier's the night of March 22. The bishop and the mayor of Providence sought to head off a confrontation. Their efforts were rewarded when 400 men came to the sisters' aid.

Beginning with the Providence Diocese, which in the 1850s, included part of Massachusetts and Connecticut, the sisters responded to requests from bishops in Arkansas, New York, New Hampshire, Florida, Georgia, and Tennessee as well as Canada. In 1931, the Belize community of the Sisters of Mercy became part of the Providence community. In 1959, members of both communities established the first foundation in Honduras. Today the Belize and Honduras communities have become part of the CCASA Community.

Our focus has been from our beginnings and continues to be a commitment to assist those in need, especially women and children.

**Vermont**

In a blinding snow storm in Toledo, Ohio, a Sister of Mercy named Frances Warde braved the storm on foot and attended Mass at a parish church early in the morning where the celebrant was a missionary, a French nobleman priest named Louis DeGoesbriand. So impressed was the
priest with this plucky sister's strength and persistence that when he became bishop of the new Diocese of Burlington, Vermont, he wrote to Sister Frances Warde in Manchester, New Hampshire, and asked if she would send some of her sisters to Burlington.

In 1874, four Sisters of Mercy from Manchester arrived in Burlington to staff St. Mary's Cathedral School. In 1878, the sisters opened a boarding school, St. Patrick's Academy, which became Mount St. Mary's Academy and the site of the current motherhouse in 1886. In 1899, the sisters opened their first mission in Montpelier. Subsequent missions were established in Barre, White River Junction, and Middlebury, Vermont.

In the Burlington area, the sisters established Mater Christi School, and staffed Cathedral Grammar School, Christ the King School, Cathedral High School, Rice Memorial High School, and Sancta Maria Home for the Aged. Trinity College opened in 1925 and remained open until 2001. Camp Marycrest was founded and served young girls from 1957 until 1992.

We began sponsoring women's retreats in 1959, and a ministry of hospitality was begun in 1981 to serve women with relatives hospitalized for long term care. Between 1982 and 2001, the Institute for Spiritual Development, Lumen Christ Retreat House, and Mercy Connections were founded as sponsored ministries. The Warde Robe Thrift Shop, begun in 1998, served the poor of Burlington until 2008.

Today, we continue to serve those in need in the spirit of Catherine McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy who have gone before us as pioneers.