Dear Sisters,

Since announcing a direction toward one leadership team (ILC letter; 11-20-14), we have received very affirming messages from you as well as insightful, creative and practical advice. Although we do not yet have a process in place by which all of us will enter into dialogue and direction setting together, the ILT thought that you might be helped by receiving a paper that we first prepared for the CLTs in October. Please remember in reading the paper that it was written from the perspective of the ILT and it was intended for other leaders.

The attached paper “The Journey of Oneness...A Path Forward” sets forth the context and history of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Our story seems to place us now in a new moment whereby each of us individually and all of us collectively are invited into deeper transformation. The initial letter from the Institute Leadership Conference referenced “one leadership team” which really is only a structure to facilitate mission and life in mercy. As the ILT wrote in our January 15, 2015 letter, “The essential question is why we desire a new structure. This movement is for the sake of our life and mission as Sisters of Mercy.”

Your voices are finding us and we welcome your comments and questions. We look forward to how this journey will evolve and how we may be transformed for deeper expressions of mercy and compassion for our world as we enter more deeply into our oneness...with one another, with those who are poor, and with our suffering world.

Please receive this paper as a reflection on our journey as Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and as an invitation to ground ourselves toward more collective energy and compassion for our world. If you find yourselves with
wonderings, questions or observations of any nature, please email or call us, the ILT, or any member of your Community Leadership Team.

During this sacred time of Lent that calls us into reflection on our needed conversion, we are invited to pray and listen to where our God of mercy, wisdom and mystery is leading us now. May our hearts and wills be open to the fresh call of the gospel *that all may be one*.

In mercy,

Pat, Eileen, Anne, Mary Pat and Deborah
The Journey of Oneness...A Path Forward

*Context: Founding of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas*


As symbolic doors parted, the energetic and committed Mercy body walked together to claim a new future as one congregation. Emerging from 17 governance strands of Mercy life, this body chose to forge together a new identity. Amidst shouts of elation within a rich ritual of celebration, the energy and desire for deeper oneness solidified that day.

The celebratory and historical ritual opened with the proclamation of our *Founding Document* by Sisters Judy Carle, Peggy Costa and Amy Hoey, Transition Administrative Group. They asserted the sentiments within all hearts present in these words:

*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.*

Declared in tandem with the words of the canonical approval from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas was established.
We chose in 1991 to create a new Congregation that affirms our single identity as Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, facilitated through a cohesive and effective model of governance in 25 Regional Communities. This model of governance was to foster principles of unity, subsidiarity and collaboration as the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas came into being. At that pivotal moment, we chose to become one canonical entity while also recognizing that each of the 25 Regional Communities would enjoy civil corporation status.

Our approved Constitutions spell out the governance roles of the Institute Leadership Team, the Institute Leadership Conference, and the Community Leadership Teams. The role and responsibility of the Institute Leadership Team is to “lead and govern the Institute” (#62). The creation of the Institute Leadership Conference is “a consultative body which fosters unity and collaboration within the Institute” (68). Among the responsibilities of the ILC are: “facilitate Community cooperation, collaboration and sharing of resources; assist in responding to new needs and challenges in the interim between Institute Chapters; contribute to the development of long range and strategic plans for the Institute” (69).

Central to the decisions affirmed by the First Institute Chapter was the creation of the Institute Direction Statement. The Direction Statement has stood the test of time and remains a foundational document to guide and inspire the Sisters of Mercy in eleven countries and one territory.

In the 23 years since that historic beginning of our Institute, the reading and hearing of our Founding Document has deepened our commitment to be one while our Institute Direction Statement articulated how our commitments were to take shape. At times, though, our becoming one Institute has eluded us.

Growth in our Identity over the Years

Significant steps in the self-understanding of our identity during these 23 years brought us to affirm in our 2011 Chapter Declaration: "We are
growing in consciousness of the interdependence among us...” Key markers during our history include:

- **Re-affirmation and reframing of our Direction Statement** in 1995 and 1999 to include our commitment to Earth and non-violence.
- **Pathways** process (1996-1999) that engaged us in the question: *What can we do better together than alone?*
- **Chapter Acts** of 1999 that affirmed “sharing, reallocating, pooling and/or centralizing financial resources; explore opportunities for collaboration among Regional Communities (e.g., in co-sponsorship and in re-configuration of Regional Communities)” (Action Plan of 1999).
- **Reimagining and Reconfiguring** process (2003-2008) that gave us a new vision of our oneness within six Communities, including the creation of a community for the Caribbean, Central America and South America area.
- **Guyana agreement** among ILC in 2004 that affirmed an understanding among leaders “that all assets within the Institute are for the common life and mission of all in the Institute...” which resulted in the Institute Chapter of 2011 changing **Constitutions #81** to reflect this understanding.
- **Approval of For the Love of Mercy: Vocation and Incorporation Program** for the United States, CCASA and the Philippines resulted in one program for all new members.
- **Mercy Investment Services** became a reality in 2010 and provided us with an Institute-wide socially responsible asset management program.
- **Chapter Declaration** of 2011 in which we state that "we are growing in consciousness of the interdependence among us...”.

All of these initiatives and directions have enlivened us and challenged us as Sisters of Mercy of the Americas to claim our rightful and appropriate identity as women religious poised for the challenges of the 21st century. As importantly, these initiatives and directions propel us toward a future which we urgently need to shape if we are to become a sustainable Institute.
Conscious Commitment to Shared Leadership of the Institute

To facilitate our working better together as leaders and in service of implementing our Chapter Declaration, the Institute Leadership Conference formalized a planning document, Leadership Perspectives on a Sustainable Future for Mercy.

During the past three years (2011-2014), all Institute leaders – the Institute Leadership Team and the six Community Leadership Teams – have affirmed their desire for a "shared leadership" model of working together. In the document on shared leadership, the ILC stated: “We, the Institute Leadership Conference, challenge ourselves to strengthen shared leadership across all dimensions of the Institute. We believe that we must move forward adopting common practices, actions and directions in order to sustain the Institute.”

As we continue to embrace more Institute-wide initiatives we have come to know the benefits of working well together. More examples of these very important collaborative ventures include Women of Mercy, Women of Hope, financial planning, Mercy Fund for Ministry, Visioning Process for Mercy Secondary and Elementary Education, a common website, a common vocation and incorporation program, and collaborative justice efforts to respond to our Critical Concerns.

Yet in the same experience of significant collaboration, we have also become much more aware of the challenges inherent in our current governance model and administrative structures.

Our Experience Is Pointing to Bigger Issues

At the ILC gathering in March, 2014, a proposed planning effort for aligning the Institute Chapter and Community Assemblies was put aside by the ILC. The discussion of the proposal led to a pressing awareness that aligning the meetings would not be enough, would take too long, and would not address the more significant issues leaders were facing. In our discussion, leaders articulated "bigger issues" that need to be addressed to facilitate
more effective governance, strategic planning and optimum use of human and financial resources for a sustainable Institute.

Some of the "bigger issues" named by the ILC underpin our desire for a deeper embodiment of our oneness as Sisters of Mercy of the Americas:

- Addressing demographics – increasing age, gradually decreasing numbers, geographic dispersion of new and younger members;
- Developing new ways of meeting and interacting that use technology more assertively and effectively;
- Recognizing the reality of seven centers of authority (one ILT; six CLTS) that doesn’t always foster effective decision-making;
- Assessing an administrative infrastructure that, at times, results in redundancy and will not be sustainable for the future;
- Analyzing unsustainable structures – especially noted in the number of trained and willing members available for elected leadership and effective committee infrastructures throughout the Communities;
- Evaluating diminishing resources, both human and financial;
- Articulating clear roles of authority, canonically and civilly, to simplify decision making;
- Enhancing and benefitting from our identity as an international Institute;
- Naming a vision now that can be operative in the next 3-7 years;
- Attending to project management and coordination;
- Considering the potential of Mercy Hubs as a new way of relating and carrying out our mission of Mercy.

While none of these realities is new, what is new is the sense of time-urgency that the ILC has expressed about the need to engage these realities. We left the March 2014 ILC meeting feeling that we must come together soon to address the future in a very intentional way.
A Way Forward

In June 2014, the Institute Leadership Team discussed the importance of being at the three-year threshold of their six year term (2011-2017). Having reflected deeply on their own experience as leaders of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and what they observe among and around them, they set forth a new articulation regarding our identity. A new vision about oneness was considered and affirmed by the Institute Leadership Conference in October 2014 (see letter of ILC to members 11-20-14).

From a governance perspective, the Institute Leadership Conference affirmed to begin conversations now to consider one center of authority and one leadership team for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas by 2023.

At the heart of this critical consideration, however, is the pivotal question: Who do we, as Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 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?

Readiness for Becoming One: Why Now?

From our perspective, there are several factors supporting this proposal at this time.

1. Chapter Call: The Chapter Declaration of 2011 affirms that “we are growing in consciousness of the interdependence among us” while calling us “to act in ways which contribute to a sustainable future for our Institute.”

   After 20+ years of Institute life, many Sisters have come to know one another in other Communities and have formed strong bonds of friendship and connection. Often these bonds cross multiple cities and countries. Technologically, we have the ability to connect and support one another across great distances. Many of our younger members and our seasoned RSMs claim one identity as Institute and desire processes and structures that facilitate Institute identity and oneness.
From a cosmological, spiritual and gospel foundation, we believe that everything is connected and we are to witness to a sacred oneness among us and with all people.

In our Chapter Declaration we hear the call “to liberate and redistribute our human and financial resources.” However, too often our processes and structures fall short of helping us put our aspirations into action.

2. Implementation of Chapter Acts: In 1991 we articulated our Institute Direction Statement that continues to inspire Sisters of Mercy for mission and community. The 2011 Chapter Declaration is the framework for our current commitments and decisions.

In 1995, because of our learning from the experiences of our sisters in the Philippines, we added the concept of our oneness with Earth and all creation. In subsequent Chapters, the Institute Direction Statement gave clarity to our affirmation of five Critical Concerns: women; anti-racism; immigration; Earth; and non-violence, our current articulation of the mission of Mercy. The interconnection among these Critical Concerns is evident as we stretch to implement actions that further the Critical Concerns. At the heart of the Critical Concerns is our assumption that poverty is the significant dimension reflected in these concerns.

Our desire to find better ways to use our human and financial resources to address the Critical Concerns through our ministries and our advocacy efforts could be enhanced if we were to view planning through one central lens. Currently, the Chapter Declaration is that lens, setting a direction and a framework for us as Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Efforts among our Sisters, our ministries and other Mercy persons are advancing the Critical Concerns. Every day, Sisters of Mercy in all of our local areas are finding better ways to address the needs of those who are impacted by poverty. We are inspired by each other’s commitment and we need to focus our best energies toward these Critical Concerns.
Sometimes our Institute and Community processes do not always facilitate our ability to implement our Chapter directions. Our Community Assemblies and gatherings, as wonderful as they are in creating and renewing relationships among us, sometimes are not able to realize in an integrative manner the work of our Chapter within a Community setting. One center of authority and one leadership team holds better potential for collectively establishing priorities, coordinating efforts and then redistributing resources in service of what we deem priorities.

3. Experience of members: Sisters desire to connect more easily and effectively across our Institute in service of our mission of Mercy.

We have heard the voices of our members who desire to intensify their relationships with one another, locally and throughout our Institute. We have also heard the voices of our members who seek stronger and more effective participative processes to give direction to our life in Mercy. These desires are focused toward how we might be ever more responsive to the Gospel and to find creative ways to strengthen our capacity to be more nimble and effective in ministering to God’s people.

Our members and leaders together have experienced the richness of contemplative dialogue as a way to deepen our spirituality and to be in service of enhancing our community conversations and our planning efforts. We yearn to animate religious life now and into the future facilitate our resources (people and financial) toward our priorities. We desire to be and to strengthen our identity as women religious.

Inviting women into this life of Mercy is a heartfelt desire for us personally and a way to ensure the mission of Mercy into the future. Sisters, especially new members, have a capacity and a longing to connect substantively and creatively via technology as well as face to face. We must find better ways together to integrate and facilitate these desires for the richness of the life among us and in service to our mission.

4. Experience of leaders: The growing experience of leaders is that our system of governance does not always facilitate timely, effective and satisfying work.
The management of collaboration and Institute-wide projects is excessively time-consuming. Decision-making processes are sometimes vague and clumsy. Redundancy of effort occurs too frequently. Good stewardship of resources sometimes suffers as we seek to work through Institute-wide initiatives.

ILT and CLTs are currently hesitant to hire new staff, lacking assurance that certain positions could be developed differently to serve in a more efficient, collaborative and effective way. Leaders and their administrative staffs wonder whether similar functions and services ought to be replicated in every Community and again at the Institute office.

A vision of governance, that holds one center of authority and one leadership team, might streamline decision making and focus administrative planning functions.

Moreover our new leaders speak of an “extensive learning curve” and a “complexity of issues” that seem wearing to some current leaders and unattractive to potential leaders. If we could create a simple governance structure with a highly developed and effective administrative infrastructure that is pastorally directed toward the needs of our sisters and our mission of Mercy, could leaders be freed to serve our sisters, our church and our world differently?

Remembering that creating a sustainable future for our Institute is the call of the 2011 Chapter Declaration, we seek to create a governance model and a parallel administrative and organizational arrangement that will serve our current and future needs.

5. Institute Governance Work Group: The Governance Work Group was formed to address the 2011 Chapter Act that the ILT initiate a study to examine the future governance needs of the Institute with consideration of the current number, role and composition of the ILT.

The members of the Institute Governance Work Group in taking up their charge from the Institute Chapter formed assumptions that include an
affirmation that “the current Constitutions provide the necessary authority and flexibility to respond to the demographic realities and future needs of the Institute.”

Although the Work Group’s assumption regarding the adequacy and flexibility of our current Constitutions seems reasonable, the experience of leaders has given rise to the question of the ongoing existence of “seven centers of authority (one ILT and six CLTS).”

Recently, the Governance Work Group moved forward a proposal regarding alignment of the Institute Chapter and Community Assemblies. “This was seen as a governance need of the Institute that would foster continuity within the ILC and would provide a smoother transition should further consolidation of Communities happen in the future” (report to ILT, January 2014).

In a section of their report, the reasons for considering alignment seem to mirror the thinking of many leaders: there is a desire to be an integrated whole; there is an evolving consciousness of what it means to truly be an interrelated community; there is a concern for future governance structures and how they will respond to the needs of the Institute.

As noted above, when the ILC considered this proposal, they concluded that “bigger issues” needed to be addressed rather than initiating more work about possible alignment.

The ILC perceives that in our collective ownership of shared leadership, we are thinking and acting our way into a new mode of relating and governing. However, the question before us is whether this way of proceeding is sufficient for the urgency we feel to create a clear and timely path of governance toward a sustainable Institute.

6. Demographics: Our shifting demographical picture requires us to think freshly about our governance model and administrative functions.
Currently, some Communities are facing challenges in securing appropriate leaders for Community leadership, for leading new membership efforts, for various pastoral roles within the Communities, and for committee functions.

Additionally, we became acutely aware that our current demographic profile suggests that in 2023 (the year of the next Institute Chapter following the conclusion of our term in 2017) there will be approximately 150 Sisters of Mercy of the Americas under the age of 70. We recognize that these numbers do not take into account that new members will join us.

The ILC, with the assistance of our planning facilitator Marisa Guerin, entered into a visioning process where we spoke to one another of our experience as we imagined ourselves in 2023. That visioning process resulted in the above reflections and the articulation of our recommendation that we initiate conversations with members about this direction of deepening our identity as Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

*An Invitation to Take the Next Step*

Planning collaboratively for these realities is in fact occurring and must be enhanced. However, we seriously desire and need to address our challenges systematically. If we act now, we do so from a position of strength and possibility. The urgency for serious conversation, reflection and action is upon us.

Our current contemplative processes are rich and can ground our thinking and planning for a sustainable future. This moment calls us to gather together to name our visions in bold and fresh ways in service of our life and mission.

We invite you, our sisters, to join us in discussing this direction and discerning our path, together.