History

Northeast Community

In 2016, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas – Northeast Community celebrates its 10th anniversary. In 2006, six local Sisters of Mercy communities—Albany, New York; Connecticut; New Hampshire; Portland, Maine; Providence, Rhode Island; and Vermont—came together into one Community. Read the histories of each of these communities below.

Albany, New York

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 east of Albany (in Greenbush) 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 convent 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 thanks to a master expansion plan begun in 1945, St. Peter's became a modern-day 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” by U.S. News & World Report for 10 consecutive years.

Beginning at St. Patrick's School in Watervliet in 1872, the sisters educated countless individuals in diocesan schools in the Albany area.

A new motherhouse called Convent of Mercy was opened in Albany in 1928. It was also at this time that the sisters' first mission was established in St. Thomas, United States Virgin Islands. In 1966, another mission was established in Beirut, Lebanon. Although both endeavors turned out to be short-term ministries, the sisters began working in the Diocese of Anchorage, Alaska, in 1967 and continued to serve there until 2013.

In 1958, the Albany Sisters of Mercy founded Maria College. In the Mercy tradition, its mission is to educate for service. Maria College is the first in the area to offer studies in bereavement, gerontology, and complementary therapy.

The sisters' commitment to social justice is embodied in Circles of Mercy, a ministry they have sponsored since 1997 that provides hope, hospitality and empowerment to individuals in need, especially women and children, in the Rensselaer community.

The Sisters of Mercy celebrated 150 years in Albany in 2013 with a series of events that culminated in a commemorative Mass in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and a joyful reception afterwards.

The charism of Catherine McAuley, the founder of the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin, Ireland, in 1831, continues today in Albany through 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, on May 11, 1852 and, on the following day, to New Haven, Connecticut. Despite difficult circumstances, the sisters immediately began their ministries to the poor Irish immigrant population they found there.

In Hartford, they opened a school in the basement of a church (St. Patrick's) and took in orphans at their temporary residence. Following the same pattern, the sisters also began an orphanage at another parish (St. Mary's) in New Haven. By so doing, the Mercy sisters became one of the first congregations of women religious to serve in the Diocese of Hartford, which then included both Rhode Island and Connecticut.

Despite dangerous times, due to strong anti-Catholicism from the Know-Nothing movement, the Sisters spread their ministries across Connecticut. In 1872, another missionary group of Sisters of Mercy, this one from Ennis, Ireland, established two more convents in Middletown and Meriden. At both sites the Sisters visited the poor and sick. In addition, they provided religious instruction for the children of immigrants.

Of significance as well in these early years was the purchase of Terry Farm in West Hartford in 1880. The sisters took in several destitute elderly residents and called the establishment Saint Mary Home for the Aged. Together with The McAuley on the same campus, this nonprofit is now part of a larger entity, Trinity Health, and offers a continuum of care to seniors.

By 1911, the Sisters had expanded to every corner of Connecticut, founding a number of diverse institutions, including St. Francis Orphanage (later Highland Heights) in New Haven. The number of Sisters increased dramatically. Reaching over 600 members, the Connecticut community could easily boast on being the largest Mercy congregation in the United States.

In 1914, the Sisters added a unique project to their list of schools and care of children—taking charge of St. Agnes Home for unwed mothers in West Hartford.
Several sisters in the community were trained and received diplomas as “baby nurses” or neonatal nurses there. Although this particular ministry ended in the 1970s, the important work of supporting young mothers and children in need in Connecticut is carried on by others today.

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The most important mission of the Connecticut sisters always remained education. By the time that the Sisters merged into one single Connecticut congregation in 1912, with a central motherhouse in Hartford, they were already teaching in at least two dozen parish schools. They founded two academies in 1874 (Mt. St. Joseph in Hartford and Notre Dame Academy in Putnam) and have staffed a diocesan high school—now called Mercy High School—in Middletown ever since that school opened in 1963.

By the 1940s, Sisters of Mercy were in charge of more than 50 parish schools in the state. Today, Our Lady of Mercy Academy, also known as Lauralton Hall, in Milford and the University of Saint Joseph (established in 1936 as Saint Joseph College) in West Hartford flourish as lasting monuments to the emphasis that the Connecticut sisters has always put on education as a key spiritual work of Mercy.

The Connecticut sisters continue to have a powerful impact on the people they serve, especially through education, pastoral ministry, and a variety of spiritual and social services.

The spiritual works of Mercy were particularly attended to by the sisters in Connecticut in the 20th century. In the late 1950s, they were invited to staff a retreat center in North Carolina that served sisters and laypeople alike for several decades. In the 1970s, the sisters converted their Long Island Sound property in Madison, which had served as a novitiate since 1949, into a retreat and conference center. Now called Mercy by the Sea, it offers a range of retreats and other programs, including a two-year Spiritual Direction Practicum, which trains and supervises those who are discerning a call to the ministry of spiritual companionship.
Social justice has always been a focus of the Connecticut sisters. Since 1983, the sisters have sought to empower people who are homeless at Mercy Housing and Shelter, located in Hartford. In addition, the Collaborative Center for Justice in Hartford, which is sponsored by diverse women’s religious orders, including the Sisters of Mercy, serves as an advocacy office to encourage change on diverse issues that affect the common good.

Through the years, several Connecticut sisters established missions or ministered with other sisters in Belize, Guatemala, Peru, Nicaragua, Haiti and Honduras, as well as in Appalachia and rural Maine. The ministries outside the United States continue today as part of the Caribbean, Central America, South America (CCASA) Community.

An initiative called the All Africa Conference: Sister to Sister, which was formed in 2002 by African sisters/theologians in conjunction with Connecticut and Detroit Sisters of Mercy, continues to help shatter the silence of shame and fear that surrounds the HIV and AIDS pandemic in Africa. Prison ministry is also an ongoing focus of several Connecticut Sisters of Mercy.

Most recently, two Connecticut sisters have moved to Vermont, where they help run one of the newest ministries of the Sisters of Mercy, a working farm and eco-spirituality center called Mercy Farm. (See the Vermont section of this article.) Today, the Connecticut Sisters of Mercy, together with many Mercy Associates and a Companion in Mercy, take great joy in continuing the ministry of Mercy begun more than 160 years ago in their state.

**New Hampshire**

On July 16, 1858, Mother Frances Warde and four other Sisters of Mercy arrived in Manchester, New Hampshire, from Providence, Rhode Island. Their convent, at 435 Union Street, was built by Catholics in Manchester who readily responded to the slogan, "A Dime a Brick."

Before coming to Manchester, Frances Warde had established 11 houses of Mercy in the East and Midwest. From the Union Street convent, she started additional foundations (as convents or houses of Mercy as they were known in those days) within New Hampshire as well as in Maine, Pennsylvania, New
Jersey, Nebraska, Vermont and California. Mother Warde always returned to Manchester, and she died there in 1884. She is buried in St. Joseph Cemetery near Manchester, and Sisters of Mercy consider her grave a place of pilgrimage.

Ministry with those who are poor, sick, and uneducated has always been the priority for the Sisters of Mercy, as this was the mission of their founder Catherine McAuley. The New Hampshire community was no exception.

When Frances and her small band of sisters arrived in Manchester, they began immediately to instruct the children, the mill workers, and others in need in this city. They opened a free school for young girls in Manchester and also founded Mount Saint Mary Academy in a wing of the convent, a school that continues to this day (now on Elm Street in Manchester).

Concerned about the safety and welfare of women working in the mills and elsewhere in Manchester, the sisters opened a residence for working women (called the House of St. Martha at 434 Union Street) right near their convent. They also started a hospital (Sacred Heart Hospital, which merged with Manchester’s Notre Dame Hospital, forming Catholic Medical Center, in 1979), homes for elderly men and women, orphanages, and a maternity hospital and infant asylum (as homes for infants without parents or guardians were called at the time). During the early 20th century influenza epidemic, they volunteered at an isolation hospital.

To encourage continuing education, the sisters established a vocational school, an academy (Our Lady of Grace) a school of nursing and a school of X-ray technology, as well as a college in Hooksett (Mount Saint Mary) and in Windham (Castle College), and in Swampscott, Massachusetts (Marian Court College).

From 1907 into the 1960s, they published a literary magazine called The Magnificat. During the 1950s, they offered weekend retreats for women at Searles Castle in Windham.

From the late 19th into the 20th century, Sisters of Mercy in New Hampshire were called upon to open or staff schools not only in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, but also in South Carolina and California. For many years,
sisters served as well in Colombia, South America, as part of the Diocese of Manchester Mission, and also in Central America and Tanzania, Africa. In the 1980s, they became involved in the sanctuary movement, hosting a Central American family who had fled violence and fled to the United States illegally. The sisters helped this family to eventually find a permanent home in Canada.

Today New Hampshire Sisters of Mercy continue to respond to those most in need, serving in schools, parishes, nursing homes, shelters, prisons, and social service ministries, as well as protesting New Hampshire’s death penalty and offering English and citizenship classes to immigrant women through the Manchester Immigration Project. They carry on their history of commitment to action on behalf of social justice.

Until recently, the Sisters of Mercy sponsored Warde Health Center (now Warde Rehabilitation and Nursing Center) in Windham. A number of retired sisters still live here and support the works of the Northeast Community through their ministry of prayer.

Portland, Maine

The story of the Sisters of Mercy in Portland, Maine, began when Mother Frances Xavier Warde responded to a request from Bishop David W. Bacon, Portland’s first bishop, in 1865: "Do you think you could divide your little community so as to take the Bangor mission…? The parish schools number about 400 children." She answered by sending six sisters, under the direction of Mother Mary Gonzaga O’Brien in August of that year. From Bangor, the ministry of the sisters spread throughout the state.

In May 1872, Mother Warde again responded to a request from the bishop—this time for sisters to move an orphanage (St. Elizabeth’s) from the small town of North Whitefield to Portland approximately 50 miles away. On May 31, Mother O’Brien and some sisters arrived in Portland; a year later, a dozen sisters answered a request to staff the city’s parish schools. Eventually the Sisters of Mercy ministered in more than 40 parishes throughout Maine, providing education, health care, social services, advocacy and pastoral ministry.
In 1878 Bishop James A. Healy urged the Sisters of Mercy to serve among the people of the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot Nations. The close bond that developed between the sisters and the native people was evident when an elementary school on the Pleasant Point Indian Reservation in Perry, Maine, was named for a beloved Sister of Mercy who had served as a longtime teacher and principal. Today the Beatrice Rafferty Elementary School is a thriving center of learning where Passamaquoddy children also come to better know their native culture and language.

The Northeast Community had to end its ministry with the Penobscot Nation on Indian Island in 2014, after nearly 140 years of service. The connection with the native people was a treasured experience for many sisters, and friendships between the sisters and native people still abound.

When Portland became a diocese in 1883, separating from the Manchester diocese, the sisters established their first Motherhouse on Free Street. They built a spacious new Motherhouse in the North Deering neighborhood of Portland in 1909, and opened St. Joseph Academy, a private boarding school for girls, on the grounds. In 1969, St. Joseph Academy merged with the diocesan Cathedral High School to form Catherine McAuley High School, a sponsored ministry of the Sisters of Mercy until 2016.

Sister Xaveria Toohey obtained a state charter to establish Maine’s only Catholic women’s college in 1912. Saint Joseph’s College eventually moved from Portland to a large estate on the shore of beautiful Sebago Lake in Standish. The liberal arts institution, which is now coed, offers undergraduate and advanced degrees through its residential and online programs to approximately 3,000 students.

Responding to the influenza epidemic of 1918, the sisters were called to open, administer, and staff a new hospital—called Queen’s Hospital—in partnership with the diocese. As Portland’s healthcare needs increased, the Mercy community educated itself for leadership roles and oversaw the new—and larger—Mercy Hospital on State Street, which the diocese entrusted to them in 1943. Today, Mercy Hospital belongs to the Eastern Maine Health System, a network of providers and hospitals from Presque Isle in northern Maine to Portland in the south. Mercy, a community hospital with a broad spectrum of
medical, surgical, and outpatient services, is planning to consolidate and expand all its services at the new Fore River campus for its 100th anniversary in 2018.

In 1968 the Sisters opened a mission on Mangrove Cay, Andros Island, in the Bahamas. The mission spread to South and Central Andros and to Eleuthera Island, where the sisters served in education, health care, social and pastoral ministries. The Mercy presence on the islands ended in 2010.

The Sisters of Mercy in Maine celebrated their 150th anniversary in 2015 with a series of events that included a parade, a celebratory gala, and a day of reflection, as well as special anniversary Masses in Portland (at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception) and in Bangor (at St. John's Church).

**Providence, Rhode Island**

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 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 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 Caribbean, Central America, South America (CCASA) Community.

The sisters’ focus from the beginning was to assist those in need, especially women and children. The Sisters of Mercy in Providence are involved today in education and social service ministries. The sisters sponsor Saint Mary Academy – Bay View, an all-girls Catholic school that serves grades pre-K through 12 in Riverside; Mercymount Country Day School, a co-ed pre-K through Grade 8 Catholic school in Cumberland; and McAuley Ministries, an independent nonprofit in Providence that provides the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, health services, emotional support and guidance to the most vulnerable in the community. (Sisters of Mercy are also in leadership positions at Salve Regina University, a Catholic institution of higher learning in Newport.)

Vermont

In a blinding snowstorm in Toledo, Ohio, in the early 1870s, Mother Frances Warde braved the weather and attended Mass at a parish church where the celebrant was a missionary, a French nobleman priest named Louis DeGoesbriand. So impressed was the priest with this sister's strength and persistence that when he became bishop of the new Diocese of Burlington, Vermont, he wrote to Frances 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 Saint 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.

Vermont sisters have also ministered in Saipan, Taiwan, and in Peru to further the mission of Mercy.

In the Burlington area, the sisters established Mater Christi School, which today is a sponsored ministry for grades pre-K-8, and staffed several schools and a home for the elderly (including Cathedral Grammar School, Christ the King

The sisters began sponsoring women's retreats in 1959. A ministry of hospitality was begun in 1981 to serve women with relatives hospitalized for long term care; to this day, women can stay at Mount Saint Mary’s Convent on a long-term basis while visiting relatives in the nearby hospital.

Between 1982 and 2010, the sisters founded the Institute for Spiritual Development (now based at Mount Saint Mary’s Convent), the Warde Robe Thrift Shop, which served the poor of Burlington from 1998 to 2008, and Mercy Farm and Mercy Connections as sponsored ministries.

Mercy Connections, started after the closing of Trinity College and located in Burlington, is an educational nonprofit with a mission to empower people, especially women, to make significant life changes by compassionately nurturing self-sufficiency through education, mentoring and community.

Mercy Farm in Benson is part of Mercy Ecology, Inc., a new ministry of the Sisters of Mercy that focuses on nurturing the sustainability of Earth, one of the sisters’ Critical Concerns. Numerous programs and retreats are offered at Mercy Farm throughout the year connecting people with nature and healing Earth through school and community outreach, farming and gardening.

One of Mercy Farm’s goals is to help alleviate the problem of food insecurity by donating produce it grows to a local food pantry. The sisters support approximately 50 families a month by doing something they love dearly—farming the land.

Sisters of Mercy have served over the years in more than 50 cities and towns in Vermont, in schools, parishes, colleges, diocesan and public service agencies, hospitals, and prisons, in roles as diverse as registered nurses and nursing assistants to spiritual directors, retreat directors, chaplains and pastoral care ministers.
Many sisters have also held state and civic positions: Secretary for Human Services for Vermont; Deputy Commissioner for Corrections; case manager, Vermont Department of Labor; director of the Shelter for Women Helping Battered Women; executive director of COTS (Committee on temporary Shelter), and co-founder of (and active participant in) Pax Christi.

These days one can find some "senior" sisters making peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches for people at a local shelter. Vermont Sisters of Mercy are also to be found on a regular basis in downtown Burlington demonstrating against the School of the Americas (now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation or WHINSEC) or against the use of nuclear weapons. A Vermont sister based in the Southwest serves as an advocate for unaccompanied minors and other undocumented immigrants detained by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Although a small community, the Vermont Sisters of Mercy continue to serve as a vibrant presence to people in need, both in the state and around the country.