

## Responding to a Call: The 2018 Partners in Ministry Leadership Academy

“You are not in your current position at a Mercy school by chance or by coincidence. I believe every one of you has responded to a call, whether you knew it or not.”

With these words, Sister Regina Ward, associate director of mission integration for MESA, introduced the powerful theme of vocation to the 50 administrators and educators attending the 2018 Partners in Ministry Leadership Academy, July 23-24, in Baltimore, Maryland. The theme of vocation echoed throughout the two-day event as participants engaged in panels, presentations, reflection and dialogue around Mercy education’s past, present and future.

### The Past



*Sisters Mary Reynolds (left) and Anna Nichols hosted a virtual tour of Mercy International Centre.*

Participants in the Leadership Academy had a unique opportunity to take a virtual tour of the place where Mercy education started: Catherine McAuley’s house on Baggot Street in Dublin, Ireland, which is today the home of Mercy International Association (MIA). Sisters Mary Reynolds and Anna Nichols in Ireland virtually hosted the group via Lifesize technology, sharing powerful stories of how Catherine broke through the impossibilities of her day and prioritized compassion over rules. As Sister Mary Reynolds noted, “Nothing beats coming,” yet the lively tour

offered the virtual visitors an opportunity to connect with the roots of Mercy at its source and renew their commitment to the mission of Mercy in their present-day educational ministries.

### The Present

These educational ministries boast some impressive numbers, as shared by Sister Lisa Griffith, MESA’s executive director, on the opening day:

- ❖ Last year MESA schools enrolled approximately 27,300 students.
- ❖ These schools employed more than 10,000 faculty and staff members.
- ❖ Twenty-six MESA schools in the United States gave over \$20 million in financial aid for the 2017-2018 school year (not inclusive of all MESA schools).



*Leadership Academy speakers. From left are Anne Knapke, Sister Anne Marie Miller, Maria Mutidjo, Jeff Mayer and Jennifer Kramer.*

Presenters from several of these ministries offered reflections on their call to Mercy leadership in education. Jennifer Kramer (Mercy High School – San Francisco) talked about empowering students to become leaders in their own educational journeys.

Jeff Mayer (Merion Mercy Academy) talked about the power of solidarity, exemplified in Merion Mercy's ongoing partnership with Catholic Relief Services that enabled both students and faculty to connect to the broader world.

Maria Mutidjo (Convent of Mercy Academy) shared her passion for inspiring leadership skills in her students. By clearly articulating the school's values and mission to students, Maria said, the faculty at Convent of Mercy Academy has witnessed a reinvigoration of the call to Mercy.

The group also heard from Anne Knapke about her path to Mercy leadership. As principal of Gwynedd-Mercy Academy Elementary, Anne shared her experience of rebounding from a school crisis and developing plans for a sustainable future for the school. Her candid presentation gave educators and administrators a practical and mission-focused model to follow in considering how to lead their schools into the future.



*Participants received a glass teacup (center) as a sign of Mercy hospitality.*

Echoing Sister Regina's words about being called to serve in Mercy, Anne noted, "A small number of us in this world have an occupation we can call a vocation."

In the evening, Sister Anne Marie Miller, who serves on the Leadership Team for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, reflected on how Mercy leaders and educators can respond to negative situations in our world today. Drawing references from the poem "Turning to One Another" by Margaret Wheatley, Sister Anne Marie indicated that we can't face these situations alone; we need community to move

forward. "Leaders must invoke people's generosity, creativity, need for community," she said, adding that community "promotes passion for justice, solidarity and truth."

### **The Future**

Animated by presentations and group discussions, Leadership Academy participants spent the last session envisioning the future at their respective ministries. In a large group sharing of ideas, participants offered ideas including:

- ❖ Embracing Catherine McAuley's concept of putting compassion before the rules, an idea which speaks to equity instead of equality.
- ❖ Enlivening students with the spirit of Mercy such that they become contemporary "walking nuns" in their own community.
- ❖ Researching opportunities to invite displaced immigrant children into Mercy schools.
- ❖ Fostering skills in addition to academics, in the spirit of Catherine McAuley's work.
- ❖ Connecting students more to both Sisters of Mercy and Mercy Associates.

### **Students at the Heart of Leadership**

Kim Baxter, associate director for programs and services for MESA, noted on the opening day of the Leadership Academy, "We hope that this will be an opportunity to gain a deeper appreciation of the Mercy charism and mission and a more profound

awareness of your role as lay leaders in strengthening Mercy education and carrying forward Catherine McAuley's vision into the future—living out your vocation as teachers and mentors who nurture our students to become highly competent and deeply compassionate leaders ready to serve a vulnerable world."



*Group photo from the 2018 Leadership Academy.*

Catherine Glatts (Mercy Career and Technical High School) embraced the Leadership Academy as "an opportunity for all of us to share stories and best practices as to what makes

us Mercy and how, as lay Mercy ministers, we instill the Mercy charism into our students and our school culture."

Andrew Stairs (Assumption High School) agrees. "In our increasingly divided world, our students crave the true belonging and direction that a Mercy education provides," he said. "Being able to discuss and share our unique educational practices with other Mercy schools, educators and administrators is essential. As we share in and entrust

the ministry of Mercy to our young leaders, inviting them, too, to be ‘shining lamps’ in their lives, I am grateful for the chance to deepen my witness to enrich theirs.”

For Ingrid Peart Wilmot (Mount St. Joseph Catholic High School), the Leadership Academy was an awakening—and a challenge. “The heart of mercy was opened for me to peer in,” she said. “I was propelled to new level of knowledge on mercy; I saw what it really looks like. … I am empowered to be a better educator in a Mercy School.”

Other highlights from the Leadership Academy included:

- ❖ All materials for the Leadership Academy were shared electronically, with no print-outs, as a way to protect our Earth (a Mercy Critical Concern).
- ❖ Celebrating the diversity of MESA schools, prayers and reflections were offered in both English and Spanish.
- ❖ Participants enjoyed a “comfortable cup of tea” as a sign of Mercy hospitality as well as a gift exchange of items from their ministries.
- ❖ As part of the tour of Mercy International Centre, educators and administrators got a sneak peek of a new film on Catherine McAuley that is being filmed there.

[Materials from the Leadership Academy are available here.](#) Please consider attending next year’s Academy and encouraging your colleagues to attend as well.