

It's a Time to Be Bold – Reflecting on the 2018 Mercy Education Conference



“It’s a challenging time in our nation and our Church. It’s also a time to be bold.” With these challenging words, Kimberly Baxter, associate director for programs and services for MESA, opened the 2018 Mercy Education Conference. This event was held October 12-13 in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, hosted by Merion Mercy Academy (Merion Station, Pennsylvania).

This year the gathering focused on the Mercy Critical Concern for women—how education, health and spirituality can empower our Mercy students, young women and men alike, to embrace equality and be agents of change in our world.

Educating the iGen

On the first day of the conference, keynote speaker Amie Konwinski discussed the theme of educating the “iGeneration”—today’s kids and teens who have grown up with easy access to an array of technology. Amie is the founder and CEO of Smart Girl Society, a nonprofit based in Omaha, Nebraska, that works to educate and inspire young women and their families. She discussed some of the pitfalls of technology: anxiety, obsession and isolation. Amie noted that a “thirty-second mistake”—such as posting an inappropriate photo—could hurt a student’s chances to get into their desired university and, down the line, could impact their employment. “Once a picture is out there,” she warned, “it’s out there forever.” Furthermore, many apps popular among students today directly contrast the Catholic identity and Mercy charism embraced by MESA schools. The Smart Girl Society app offers free tools for parents and educators to make decisions about potentially harmful smartphone apps, as well as other resources.

Technology’s Impact on Mental Health



Amie next led a panel discussion with four school counselors: Emily Cady of Our Lady of Mercy School for Young Women (Rochester, New York); Kristin Fromal of Gwynedd-Mercy Academy Elementary (Spring House, Pennsylvania); Kathleen Ketofsky of Mount Saint Mary Academy (Watchung, New Jersey); and Mary Terese Lopata of Mercy Career and Technical High School (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania). They noted the reality of increased mental health issues at their schools and shared their

strategies to help boost the mental health of students and faculty. Some strategies

included encouraging parents not to answer calls from their children during the school day, turning off grading portals at certain times to discourage obsessive behaviors and encouraging staff not to answer emails on the weekend.

Encountering the Gentleness and Mercy of God



Sister Janet Ruffing, RSM, was the keynote speaker on the second day of the conference. Because “educators can help open a way to the sacred for their students,” Janet shared ways that participants could nurture their own spirituality and foster nonviolence as a way to spread peace in an age of technological interruptions and dehumanizing public discourse.

In response to Janet’s presentation, educators shared some of the challenges their students face in fostering their own spirituality—perhaps because they are not interested, perhaps because of issues at home. Mercy educators must help students embrace the gift of spirituality. As Salome Tillett from Saint Catherine Academy (Belize City, Belize) said, “When these students are able to know the love of God, they will become better people who can help transform the world.”

Sister Angela Perez from Academy of Our Lady of Guam (Hagatna, Guam) reflected, “Incorporating our new reality as a system, the challenges of our global reality especially from the lens of nonviolence, and the new frontier journey of technology helps us navigate our schools in the spirit of Mercy.”

With Gratitude for Mercy Hospitality



In addition to the challenging and inspiring topics at the conference, participants also enjoyed diverse opportunities to learn more about the schools in the local Philadelphia region. The first night of the conference, Mercy Career and Technical High School hosted nearly 50 guests for a tour of the only Catholic, co-educational career and technical high school in the United States. The tour included dinner prepared by students at the school.

At the conclusion of the conference, participants were welcomed to Merion Mercy Academy. Following a liturgy at the Convent of Mercy chapel, conference attendees enjoyed tours of Merion Mercy, interactions with students, mock trial demonstrations,

musical and dance performances and a special “taste of Philadelphia” reception. Many also toured Waldron Mercy Academy, located on the same campus.

Thank you to Merion Mercy Academy and to the 2018 Planning Committee for all the hard work, dedication and planning that made this year’s event so fruitful for participants. Save the dates – next year’s Mercy Education Conference will be held October 18-19, 2019, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, hosted by Mount Saint Mary Catholic High School.

[View more pictures here.](#)