

Introducing Mercy Partners



A talk given to the Mercy Partners Leadership Gathering, Thursday 10th March, 2016, by **Ray Campbell, PhD**, Chair, Council of Mercy Partners.

A VERY WARM welcome to you all to this gathering. This is an historical occasion. It is the first time since the formation of Mercy Partners that we have had representatives of the leadership of all our ministries together, and it includes one or two ministries that are in the wings. Our invitation went out to members of Boards, to CEOs and Principals, and to Directors of Mission and/or their equivalent. You have in your papers a record of all the ministries represented. We are also pleased to welcome a number of Steward representatives who have joined us. I thank you all for giving up your time to be here with us and hope you will find it worthwhile.

A meeting such as this is perhaps long overdue, but there have been good reasons why it has not occurred before this, and I believe good reason why now is a good time for such a gathering.

We have set ourselves three objectives for this gathering, and they summarise the reasons why we are coming together. Our three objectives are:

1. Mutual understanding of the role of Mercy Partners as a sponsor of Catholic Ministries.
2. Report the response to the 2015 Formation Review and future plans.
3. Networking, shared learning and collaborative opportunities between and among Council and the Ministries.

This evening and in the first session tomorrow morning we will focus on the first objective. Then during the day tomorrow we will look at formation, and also give you an opportunity to discuss possibilities for working together.

In the room we have people who have been part of Mercy Partners from the beginning and we have people who are only just becoming part of Mercy Partners. So we have a range of understanding about Mercy Partners, and I know that much of what I say will not be new to many of you. However I thought it important on this occasion to try and set out something of our understanding of Mercy Partners, in the sense of the big picture.

By way of introduction I am going to retrace a little of the history of Mercy Partners. Most of you are familiar with it at least from the point of view of your own ministries, but there are now some who have come to Mercy Partners after the transition, and there are very few who have been part of the whole story.

In recalling our origins I want to highlight some of the things that make Mercy Partners rather distinctive, if not unique, at least as far as the Catholic Church in Australia is concerned. That uniqueness is both our opportunity and our challenge.

Mercy Partners originates with the four Queensland Congregations of the Sisters of Mercy – Brisbane, Rockhampton, Townsville and Cairns. Remember that although they were all Sisters of Mercy these were four separate congregations. In order to ensure the future of their ministries as ministries of the Catholic Church into the future, the leadership of these four congregations decided to create a new Public Juridic Person which would take on canonical responsibility for their ministries. And so Mercy Partners was born.

So now rather than report to the congregational leadership of the Sisters of Mercy Brisbane, or Sisters of Mercy Rockhampton, or Townsville or Cairns, all these ministries that were transferred into Mercy Partners would report to the one sponsoring body. And the sponsoring body is not a Congregation. This was a new experience for everybody.

Also, right from the beginning, the founding congregations made it clear that the “Mercy” in the name “Mercy Partners” referred to the Mercy of God, not to the Sisters of Mercy, and that Mercy Partners was open to receiving ministries from other congregations under its sponsorship umbrella. And so it happened. The Presentation Sisters of Queensland, and then the Missionary Franciscan Sisters approached Mercy Partners to place their schools under the Mercy Partners umbrella. The latter are still on the way, but they are close to being fully incorporated.

So not only did we now have diverse congregations, but we now had diverse charisms, and a whole ensemble of different traditions and previous ways of operating.

To help appreciate the uniqueness of Mercy Partners we might just think of another PJP, figurative or real. Think of a PJP set up by a Congregation that was a national body while resembling Mercy Partners in the diversity of ministries which it now sponsors. In such a situation the ministries would have already been under the one sponsoring body, and were responsible to the congregational leadership of the congregation.

So although there would undoubtedly be changes in the structure when the PJP was created, they would more or less already have a central structure reporting to the one body. This was not the case for Mercy Partners.

Now from the point of view of the ministry this might not seem like a big deal. After all, from your point of view you still only report to the one sponsoring body. But from the point of view of the sponsoring body it is a very different situation.

Certainly we relate to every ministry as an individual ministry with its own history and charism. But from the point of view of the whole we, Mercy Partners, are *a communion of ministries and a communion of charisms*. Indeed I see one of the key roles of the Council of Mercy Partners is to facilitate this communion of ministries and charisms.

I am very attracted to the idea of communion in describing Mercy Partners. I first mentioned it at a very early meeting of Mercy Partners Council. In the last few years as I have read more on the development of the new Public Juridic Persons I discovered that many of the commentators see the theology of communion as the proper context for understanding PJPs.

As many of you would know, “communion” in this context is a theological concept. It was one of the favourite words of St John Paul II. He spoke regularly of “communio” and “missio”, communion and mission, and saw the two as interrelated. The Second Vatican Council described the Church as a “communion”. A communion is different from a simple union. In a complete union what were two or more become one, and the originals lose their identity into the new single entity. It is something like what happens when you amalgamate two football teams. In a communion two or more become one, but without losing their original individual identity. Something new is added but nothing is lost. The supreme paradigm for communion is God, three persons in one. But it is perhaps easier to think of the example of marriage. In the Church marriage is described as a communion of persons. In marriage two become one, but neither spouse loses their individual identity. Something new is added – being spouses.

So in Mercy Partners, no ministry loses its identity, but something new is added. What is the “something new” in terms of Mercy Partners? Is it just a formal relationship between each individual ministry and the Council of Mercy Partners, or is it something more?

That I think is the question for us to answer as we move on. It is our opportunity and our challenge. In a sense it is we who will create the “what is added”.

There are different relationships within this communion of Mercy Partners. There is the relationship between the Council and individual ministries to which I have already made reference. But as well as the relationship of the ministry to the Council there is the relationship between ministries. This is part of the new because until the creation of Mercy Partners most of you were not part of the one entity. Mercy Partners Council seeks to facilitate the relationships between ministries and that is one of the objectives of this gathering. In the area of health care, our hospitals already have a good working relationship. In other ministries such as education, we have the opportunity to explore ways in which we might support each other. But there is also the possibility of cross-ministry collaboration, for example between health care and education.

Then there is the relationship as a whole, that is, of all the ministries and Mercy Partners Council together. The Council believes that it is important to provide opportunities for representatives of the members of Mercy Partners to come together, such as the gathering this evening and tomorrow. This has already been one of the side effects of our formation program, but as I said at the beginning, this is the first time we formally meet as the one body. Finally there is our relationship to the wider Church and the wider community, not just as individual ministries but as Mercy Partners. It is in fact part of the responsibility of the Council to ensure that Mercy Partners maintains its communion with the wider Church. What is that to mean into the future? This also raises the question of how we promote the identity of Mercy Partners while not compromising the identity of the individual ministry.

From what I have said you can appreciate that when Mercy Partners was created it was an abstract idea. It would only become enfolded as that idea took shape, and that meant that we would all be learning as we went along.

We have now been going six years nearly to the day as it was on March 10, 2010 that the first Mercy Partners Council was commissioned at a Mass in Townsville celebrated by the late Bishop Michael Putney. And after six years we are still learning, and tomorrow will continue that learning experience.

We had somewhat ambitiously named this session “a vision for Mercy Partners”. That was not only ambitious, but perhaps presumptuous. What I have tried to outline is what I understand to be fundamental to Mercy Partners, to who we are as Mercy Partners – a communion of ministries and charisms. That for me is both our opportunity and our challenge. It is part of my contribution to our mutual understanding of the identity and role of Mercy Partners.

Tomorrow I will speak more specifically about the role of the Council as sponsor of Church ministries.