



# The Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland

## Mercy Associates

Image of Catherine McAuley from Book Two – “Be as Shining  
Lamps” by Caroline Thompson



## **Chapter 6: Mercy Associates and The Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland**

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## **6.0 Mercy Associates and The Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland**

From what we know of Catherine’s story, it could be said the first Mercy associates were those women and men of Dublin who supported her in ways that led to setting up the original House of Mercy in Baggot Street. When the Order of Mercy was founded in 1831, they continued to give freely and generously of their time, prayer and skills, sometimes ministering alongside the Sisters. Some used their influence within the Church and society to promote wider appreciation for the critically important work in which Catherine and her first Sisters had totally, unconditionally invested themselves. This pattern of lay women and men working alongside the Sisters in so many ways was manifest in the many other foundations established over time, and continues to this day.

One of the most important aspects of being a Mercy Associate is to understand the relationship between the Sisters of Mercy, who are vowed members of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland, and Mercy Associates. Mercy Associates are lay women and men, and as such are not members of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland – they choose on a voluntary basis to associate with each other and with the Sisters of Mercy, but are separate from the Sisters. The information below will help to clarify this. *(In Church law, vowed religious women are lay too, in that this word is used to describe all people in the Church who are not in Holy Orders. To avoid cumbersome wording however, the word ‘lay’ as used in this resource does not include Sisters of Mercy or other vowed religious).*

### **6.1 Background: Membership of a Religious Congregation**

Every religious congregation is a gift to the Church. Its primary purpose is to nurture and demonstrate the charism of its founder whose life and ministry reflected a particular expression of the life and ministry of Jesus. Membership of a congregation comes with a candidate’s first profession of vows.

For religious women and men, these vows are at the heart of their life-long commitment to God, to the tradition of mission entrusted to them by their founder, and to each other.

All members of a congregation are responsible for its integrity. That is to say, a congregation’s authenticity depends on its members’ fidelity to God and the vows they have professed, their regular prayer and worship, their readiness for ministry and their constant care for true communion of life.

Likewise, throughout their religious life, members depend on their congregation to provide for their temporal needs (for example a living allowance, housing, health care) as well as for their ongoing professional and personal formation.

## **6.2 Associates of Mercy Congregations**

One of the blessings for the Church over the past few decades is that countless numbers of lay people have claimed their baptismal right to work explicitly for the coming of God's reign within the context of their commitments to family, friends, career, and so on. Significantly, some of these women and men find affirmation in their lay vocation through association with a religious congregation whose charism resonates with their own deep desires and values. This is so with congregations of Sisters of Mercy.

For the past few decades, groups of lay people around the globe who are inspired by Catherine McAuley in their own lives of faith and service, and who cherish a spirituality animated by God's mercy, have been forming groups that are closely connected to particular Mercy congregations. Essentially, through this connection they wish to participate more intentionally, although informally, in the prayer and ministries of the Sisters of Mercy, contributing from the richness of their own primary vocations and life experience.

This movement, welcomed by the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland, is immediately reminiscent of Catherine McAuley. She commenced her enterprise for the poor, bereft people of Dublin as a lay woman with lay companions.

Typically, the structures for Mercy Associates groups, their 'programme' and the way they are named differ from congregation to congregation within the 'Mercy world'. And while the relationship between associates and congregations is mutually beneficial, it is always mutually free. In that sense, individual associates may disassociate at any time. Likewise, for good and just reason, disassociation can be initiated by the congregation.

It is important to understand that between the congregations and their associates there are no canonical (legal), fiduciary or financial obligations or expectations – the Sisters are not responsible for providing financial or other support for individual Mercy Associates, nor are Mercy Associates responsible for providing such support for Sisters. It is equally important for Mercy Associates to appreciate that their words and conduct must be of such integrity that they cause no damage to the reputation of the Congregation, e.g., when involved in advocacy.

## **6.3 History of Mercy Associates in Newfoundland**

Generally groups were set up in places where the Sisters of Mercy lived and conducted a ministry such as a school, hospital, aged care facility or community services. Usually the groups were established by one or more Sisters from that location, who invited women and men with a strong commitment to furthering the Mercy charism to attend meetings from time to time to nurture their faith and support their commitment to ministry.

## 6.4 Renewal of the Mercy Associates Movement

As noted previously, Mercy Associates groups were usually founded and supported by individual Sisters of Mercy in the various former congregations around Newfoundland, and the involvement of local Sisters has always been much appreciated.

The Congregational Leadership Team in 2005-2009 recommended that a formal evaluation of our Associate Relationship be undertaken. In their Leadership Report for that period, they noted that “the Associate Relationship continues to grow and expand. We are challenged to assess our present program to determine its ongoing development into the future and at the same time keep alive the legacy of Mercy”.

In response to that recommendation in November 2010 the new Leadership Team for 2009-2013 established a process for this evaluation which had five components:

1. A separate survey to all Associates and Sisters;
2. Recommendations from this survey drafted by the Leadership Team based on the responses, and circulated to the Sisters and Associates;
3. A redrafting by the Leadership Team of the recommendations following this conversation;
4. A further review by the Associate Committee;
5. The Leadership Team finalization of the recommendations.

A couple of Sisters from the Congregation oversaw the completion of the survey and the compilation of the survey responses. All Sisters and Associates were sent copies of the survey and encouraged to read the document carefully and discuss it with members of reflection circles, local communities, and Associate Groups. Then each Sister and Associate was asked to complete the survey on their own and return it to the Leadership Team. The responses from the Sisters and Associates were essential to the evaluation they were doing and all were asked to give careful thought and consideration to completing it. The shape of the future of the Associate Program would be guided by the results.

The Sisters and Associates were then asked to review the compilation of the results.

In October 2011 this completed study contained a strong message from the Sisters and the Associates that the Congregation continue the Associate Relationship. There were eleven recommendations for the enrichment and future growth of the Associate Relationship.

In 2018 the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland Congregational Leadership established a working committee to assist in the review and redevelopment of the model of leadership for Mercy Associates. That committee completed its work in 2019 when a transitional leadership model, with a two-year term, was established. Two Associate Coordinators were appointed, one

a Sister of Mercy and the other a Mercy Associate. In addition, a Mercy Associate Advisory Committee, comprised of representatives from each Associate group in NL, was established. The mandate of the Advisory Committee was to advise and make recommendations to the Congregational Leadership regarding future leadership of the Mercy Associate relationship. Further, the committee was to provide and make recommendations to the leadership of the Associate relationship, the Coordinators, on matters relating to the life and work of the Associate relationship. With the Epidemic, Covid 19, which struck early in 2020 the mandate was extended from two to four years to allow time to complete work in progress exploring what the future Associate relationship would be like and necessary leadership required.