

Coffee & Doughnuts with Sister Helen Amos

The Catholic Review catches up with Mercy Sister Helen Amos, executive chairwoman of the board of trustees at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore.

CR: What and where are your Catholic roots?

Sister Helen: My roots sprang from rich Catholic soil in the Deep South - Mobile, Ala. My devoted Catholic parents raised six children (I was the fifth-born) in a house less than two blocks from St. Mary's Church and school. For 12 years, every one of my teachers was a Sister of Mercy, and when I finished high school, I traveled to Baltimore to become a Sister of Mercy myself. My father, who liked to speak in baseball metaphors, sent me off with this blessing: "Go be a hard hitter for the Lord."

CR: You have multiple college degrees in mathematics. How did you wind up running a hospital?

Sister Helen: The curriculum I followed in college and in graduate school was directed by my religious superiors. They did their best to match our aptitudes to the needs of the ministries to which they had commitments, so slots requiring math teachers probably influenced my program of studies.

Thanks to those wise women, I actually received an excellent liberal education that prepared me for other ministries, as well as for my relatively short career teaching high school math.

I picked up numerous administrative responsibilities and, eventually, leadership positions within the Sisters of Mercy and membership on many boards. That set the stage for my fellow trustees (at Mercy Medical Center) to request my taking on the formidable task of succeeding the legendary Sister Mary Thomas Zinkand, who had been Mercy's president and chief executive for 35 years. I held that post for seven years before turning it over to Tom Mullen, a peerless leader.

By the grace of God I work with exceptional civic leaders who constitute Mercy's board, and with extraordinary clinicians and staff. This is the team who own Mercy's mission today.

CR: How is Mercy Medical Center distinct from other hospitals?

Sister Helen: Its Catholic culture has always been accented by a particular spiritual heritage. As one of her biographers put it, the first Sister of Mercy, Catherine McAuley "animated many to walk with her ... to do the work of God on earth."

At a time when many healthcare institutions have had their identity subsumed by larger systems, Mercy's board remains committed to independence and local governance. The Catholic-Mercy culture abides in a community of persons with a compelling sense of mission supported and evidenced by their daily demonstration of a set of defined core values: dignity, hospitality, justice, excellence, stewardship and prayer.

CR: Your numerous boards include an association with the city's effort to end homelessness. Can you quantify, in human and monetary terms, the toll of homelessness in Baltimore?

Sister Helen: It can't be quantified in monetary terms because, in addition to more than 3,000 of our neighbors living on the streets or in emergency shelters, tens of thousands are paying more than they can afford for housing - people just one small

misadventure away from becoming homeless. The goal of “The Journey Home,” Baltimore’s plan “to make homelessness rare and brief,” is the right vision. The fact that we are even tempted to think that’s an unattainable goal is a measure of the human toll of this tragic reality.

CR: Favorite saint?

Sister Helen: Mary. The rosary ends with the petition: “Pray for us, o holy Mother of God, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.” For me, that’s the best way to begin each day.

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