

# St. Agnes Hospital has changed over 150 years, but mission remains same

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St. Agnes Hospital turned 150 May 22 – a milestone the hospital commemorated by adding a historical marker to its facility.

Throughout the decades, the southwest Baltimore hospital has been at the forefront of medicine, said Daughter of Charity Sister Ellen LaCapria, St. Agnes' vice president for mission integration.

"We have been able to be the pioneers in many cutting-edge medical procedures and events," she said. Among those accomplishments was the world's first chest pain emergency room, which opened at St. Agnes in 1981 under Dr. Raymond Bahr.

The Daughters of Charity opened St. Agnes during the Civil War, at a time when cholera and other diseases plagued the city's poorer denizens. At the suggestion of Cardinal James Gibbons, the hospital became a sanitarium in 1898 for mentally ill and drug-addicted patients. In 1906, it resumed its general hospital status under the renowned Dr. Joseph Bloodgood, and hosted the country's second oldest surgery residency.

Over the decades, it opened a nursing school and grew its facilities along with its treatment methods. This year alone it expanded its chest pain emergency department and added a liver and pancreases center. It also purchased the Cardinal

Gibbons High School property in Baltimore for a development of “mixed-use” health care services.

Although the hospital has changed throughout its history, its mission is the same, Sister Ellen said.

“We see Christ in persons who are poor,” she said. “That sense of really helping our associates and physicians see (in) even some of the most difficult patients and family members that Jesus is in them ... that’s our mission.”

St. Agnes continues to offer charitable care and connects its eligible patients with public assistance for continued health care.

“It’s not just about giving, it’s about empowering our patients,” Sister Ellen said.

One of the hospital’s models is St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, who founded the Sisters of Charity, who later joined with their French counterparts to become the Daughters of Charity.

In 1952, the hospital’s connection to Mother Seton was driven home when it treated 3-year-old Ann Theresa O’Neill, who was diagnosed with acute lymphatic leukemia and not expected to recover. The sisters and her family prayed for Mother Seton’s intercession for the girl’s healing, and her leukemia disappeared. The Vatican accepted the healing as a miracle required for the saint’s canonization.

O’Neill attended the hospital’s sesquicentennial Mass in April at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Sister Ellen is proud to know that the Daughters of Charity’s legacy has continued at St. Agnes, she said. She is one of nine sisters who live on the hospital campus, five of whom work at the hospital.

“We continue to stand on the shoulders of those who came before us,” she said. “They left us a wonderful legacy that I hope we can continue to keep strong, even in the midst of all that’s happening in health care in the United States,” she said, referring to the complicated economics of the U.S. health system.

Although Sister Ellen admires the sisters who worked in the hospital's early years, she doesn't have a romantic view of their hard work, she said.

"I would have loved to have gotten to know those sisters who were pioneers in many ways," she said. "I'd love to be a fly on the wall."

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