In Mission in Philadelphia for 75 Years

Medical Mission Sisters have a special tradition of ringing every bell we can find when our members are leaving for a new mission. But on August 18, 1939, our reason for bell ringing was different. As the bus loaned to us for the day turned into 8400 Pine Road in Northeast Philadelphia from Washington, DC, bells loudly and joyfully were rung to welcome 31 Professed Sisters to our new home. Then both travelers and greeters alike went into the Chapel to sing the Te Deum, a hymn of gratitude for what now been “home” for us in North America for 75 years.

The Journey from DC to PA

When our Community was founded in 1925, Washington, DC, was a very good place to be. Many of our Sisters went to school at area colleges and universities. Wonderfully generous Women’s and Men’s Religious Communities and lay benefactors helped us to meet our basic needs. But we soon outgrew the space we had. Dennis Cardinal Dougherty of Philadelphia, a former missionary himself who had greatly supported our mission from the start, invited us to move to his archdiocese. The timing seemed perfect for our Foundress Anna Dengel, so she traveled to Philadelphia to find a suitable place. The property of Clarence Illingsworth in the Fox Chase section of the city was for sale in late 1938. Although it would need some work to accommodate a growing Community of Sisters, Mother Dengel was taken by its farmland and hills and purchased it.

The Early Years in Philadelphia

At what was then called our Motherhouse, our Sisters lived simply, growing their own food and fruit trees, raising and butchering farm animals, and fishing in the lake. New members learned what it means to be a Sister and a missionary. Those who had made First Vows prepared for their work overseas or completed their medical school, nursing or allied health education programs in area institutions. Other Sisters were assigned to “Making the Cause Known” through talks in schools and parishes throughout the United States. Still others were involved in the important areas of fund raising for both overseas and home front needs, and in membership promotion.

At first, when all travel overseas was by ship, trip after trip was made to the Philadelphia docks to load them with crates full of the medicines and supplies needed to treat patients in our hospitals and health centers. Many of these crates were packed with the help of local students from area Catholic schools who came weekly to Fox Chase as eager participants in our mission of healing.
During World War II, when it was extremely difficult to get visas to some nations, Medical Mission Sisters in Philadelphia began responding to the needs at home. In the 1940s, Catholic Maternity Institute, the first school of nurse-midwifery and first freestanding birthing center in the United States, was opened in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Soon after, our Sisters helped staff the Catholic Colored Clinic and then Holy Family Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. Later, in Philadelphia itself, we administered St. Vincent’s Hospital for Women and Children, helping to deliver healthy babies to unmarried young women.

A Worldwide Mission

In 1957, our Community’s General Chapter decided to move our international headquarters to Rome, Italy. Mother Dengel and her administrative team relocated to that city, while activities in Philadelphia continued and grew. Increasing numbers of women joined our Community and were missioned to Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well. Our Fox Chase property itself saw the addition of a new Novitiate Building in which Sisters in early formation lived and received religious training.

At our 1967 General Chapter, delegates affirmed what we already were experiencing: that our mission of healing was to people of all continents and not only to those overseas. Many of our Sisters had seen firsthand the aching needs for healing and justice that were part of life for too many in North American cities, towns and rural areas. A number of our responses to these needs now expanded or locally began.

Several Medical Mission Sisters became faculty members at area universities and/or part of their hospital staffs, among them, the University of Pennsylvania, Temple University and Thomas Jefferson University. Sharing our experiences in other lands offered coworkers and students a more global view of issues related to health and healing, and injustices related to them. Working in social service, pastoral and health activities in the Philadelphia Archdiocese and in local neighborhoods also gave us opportunities to help others learn more about the one world in which we all live.

Other Ministries in Philadelphia

North Philadelphia, a very depressed area of the city, claimed our healing presence over the years...and still does today. Founded by one of our Sisters, New Jerusalem Now houses and supports in recovery those who have been addicted to drugs or alcohol. For years, Interim House, a halfway house for women being released from prison, enabled a number of our Sisters to share hope and the possibility for a better future with those who once could hardly get through the day.

Our Center for Human Integration, CHI, was begun by two Medical Mission Sisters in 1981 and for 27 years served hundreds of women and men through a variety of wellness programs and client services. CHI also became a well-recognized and licensed learning center in the area, offering a 600-hour program in Integrative Body/Mind Therapies leading to a diploma.

Since 1987, our property at 8400 Pine Road has welcomed many persons to our Peace Hermitages, simple one-room lodgings, nestled in the woods. These are available for daylong or extended stays and serve as
quiet places for contemplation and retreat. On adjacent land, members of the Hmong community who live in the city farm each summer. Once Laotian refugees, they are pleased to have land on which to grow their own traditional vegetables that are not available in local markets. “Down the road” from our Peace Hermitage and the Hmong Gardens, our Medical Mission Sisters’ Thrift Shop has provided affordable clothing and household goods for many years, as well as a safe, welcoming place for area shoppers and passers-by.

**Healing Ministries of Today**

Over the years, a number of our North American Sisters have completed or turned over their ministries to trained colleagues in other areas of the world and have returned to Philadelphia. They have become involved here in hospice care; in outreach to those infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS; to women who are trafficked or are victims of any form of violence; to immigrants needing assistance with English as a Second Language or Citizenship Tests; in interfaith work; in non-violence training, and in a wide variety of administrative and supportive services for our Community. Many have become very active in local and national efforts for justice in our world. Some also have had time to develop their talents for art and its many expressions, and to develop new ways of practicing holistic health and ecological living…and to share these with others.

Sisters now needing some assistance in living also have come back to Philadelphia. A loving group of caregivers sees to their needs and involves them as much as possible in our Medical Mission Sisters’ events and activities. A few Sisters needing more skilled nursing care live in nursing homes in Philadelphia or nearby.

Continuing education programs and meaningful liturgies continue to nourish our minds and souls, as does the beauty of nature around us at 8400 Pine Road.

For Sisters in transition in ministry, for those from other nations attending meetings at our North American Headquarters and for others in our Community in need of a little time away from their busy ministries, our Philadelphia home is a special place to be.

**Continuing to Respond to the Needs of the Day**

As we look back with gratitude on our 75 years in the city of Philadelphia, Medical Mission Sisters also look ahead to many more years of healing presence…here and emanating from here around the world. In late 2014, Mission Green, a 61-bed, affordable, independent-living residence for seniors, will open on our property. Some of our Sisters will move into it and begin new ministries of presence and companionship with fellow residents. Other areas of our property will be looked at for their best future use for our Community and the local community, as well.

Mission for Medical Mission Sisters has no boundaries, only opportunities. The needs of so many women, children and men in our world will continue to impact our lives and call us to respond with all we have and all we are. Joyful mission bells of sending and welcoming…in the spirit of Te Deum…will always be important to us, as they have been throughout our past 75 years of life in mission in what many like to call “The City of Sisterly-Brotherly Love.”
PHILLY FACTS

- In addition to welcoming the Medical Mission Sisters to Philadelphia, Dennis Cardinal Dougherty was a very generous donor to our Community and opened many doors for Anna Dengel to speak in parishes and schools about our mission, even before we officially began. Cardinal Dougherty had been a missionary bishop in the Philippines for 12 years, often visiting his diocese on horseback. He was instrumental in having the Vatican change the Church’s Canon Law that kept Religious Sisters and others with vows from practicing medicine in its fullest scope.

- When the ban was lifted and Medical Mission Sisters were able to make public vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, Cardinal Dougherty officiated at the first Vow Ceremony in Philadelphia in 1941.

- Several years after we moved to 8400 Pine Road, Mother Dengel was able to purchase property “across the road” at 8403 Pine Road. This land had once belonged to the Crawford family, very well known in Fox Chase for many years. The property’s “Ury House” had an interesting past, having hosted a number of important guests, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. It also served as a refuge during Colonial and Revolutionary times. It became and was used as our Novitiate in Philadelphia from 1946-1960.

- In the past 75 years, several hundred Medical Mission Sisters received their religious training in Philadelphia and left from here to serve those who were sick, poor and without access to care in over 30 nations around the world. Very active Women’s and Men’s Auxiliaries and Decade Groups—persons who gathered monthly to say a decade of the Rosary for our mission work—supported us and our healing mission for many years. Our property was the site of numerous Garden Parties and Horse Shows, run by these dedicated partners in mission. Card parties and other fund raising events also were held on a regular basis in several downtown Philadelphia locations.

- Joy Is Like the Rain, the well-known Medical Mission Sisters’ album of Sister Miriam Therese Winter’s songs, was written at our Philadelphia headquarters. Its CD and additional music, and books by Sister Miriam Therese and several of our other Sister-authors, can be purchased at our Administration Building in Fox Chase during business hours. Also for sale at our Administration Building and at our Thrift Shop at 8400 Pine Road are lovely note cards created by our Sisters.

- For over 42 of our 75 years in Fox Chase, The Bridge, a residential treatment program for high-risk teenagers with histories of substance abuse and behavioral problems, shared part of our property. In early 2014 it moved to a new location in the city, noting that, since its origins in 1971, it had helped over 15,000 adolescents and their families to better health and wholeness.

- We began our own recycling program at 8400 Pine Road in the 1980s, long before the city of Philadelphia began one for its residents. This effort grew into an active Integrity of Creation Group of Sisters, Associates and friends that researches and suggests a variety of habits to help preserve the Earth for future generations.

A HEALING LEGACY

Medical Mission Sisters are very grateful to those who choose to help us carry on our mission of healing in the future by remembering us in their Will.

Such gifts can be an exact dollar amount or a portion of the residue of your Estate after other personal and/or family distributions have been met.

For more information on how to remember Medical Mission Sisters in your Will, please contact our Planned Giving Director at the address or phone number below.

We thank you and promise you a special remembrance in our daily prayers.

MEDICAL MISSION SISTERS 8400 PINE ROAD PHILADELPHIA, PA 19111
Writer and Editor: Monica M. McGinley
Phone: (215) 742-6100
www.medicalmissionsisters.org Facebook: Medical Mission Sisters
©2014
Printed on recycled paper