

# Covenant

My experience as a leader during this Covid season is that leaders are constantly pivoting. Pivoting is a way of life for committed and engaged leaders. Seasoned leaders develop anticipatory skills and attitudes so that they act from a posture of readiness. However, when the external realities of an immense, global disease like Covid-19 became part of our daily considerations, constant pivoting became exhausting. Many of us find our energies are always ones of trying to retrieve balance...being caught off guard...seeking to regain control...never quite feeling grounded.

For a few of you, you are entering your last semester of Mercy leadership in higher education. You have created very substantial and significant commitments, relationships and ways of wanting to bring your tenure to closure. And Covid is disruptive and causes us to keep having to adjust well-thought out plans and activities, like this celebration today. For those of you who are enjoying your first year in a Mercy institution as a president, I know that you came focused with a list of priorities and strategies that you wanted to implement or explore during this first year. You have multiple constituencies with whom to foster new sets of relationships. And the uneven roll out of Covid impacts your trying to gain a firm sense of this new landscape to which you are giving your best energies.

Additionally, Covid is impacting our future planning and the trajectories of the institutions that we serve and many of us have come to love. This Pandemic is seriously unveiling and impacting our present vulnerabilities and giving rise to new questions about our future sustainability as institutions, including cherished ways of serving and engaging our students as well as responding to our total campus communities – faculty, staff, trustees, benefactors to name the most significant.

Yes, all of us are constantly pivoting – more than is our normal and natural ways for keeping focused and balanced in our leadership roles. It is into this environment that an intentional focus on Covenant is welcomed and ,I believe, will provide a foundational wellspring from which to continue to draw our energies and to enhance our vigilance to Catholic and Mercy identity as our anchor.

Earlier this week, I signed each Covenant and I was very moved as I did so. The words of the Covenant and the shared responsibility that we all hold here today was palpable to me. So, it is in that sacred attentiveness that I now reflect on three aspects of the Covenant: relationships; embodied commitment for mission; grounded hope.

## COVENANT IS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

The words of the Covenant provide us direction for these troubling and promising times. Early in the document, we read “The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas have promised to carry out their mission and witness to Jesus Christ’s mission in their sponsored colleges and universities. The (elected) leaders of these treasured institutions (and I would insert here those of you who serve as presidents of our colleges and universities as well as you who serve in leadership roles as board members as well as those of you who hold significant roles for Mission effectiveness) join with the Sisters in that mission, which is of immense value to the Sisters of Mercy and to the Church. A mutual recognition of that value and an ownership of that mission are the foundations of a covenant relationship.”

I take note from this introductory paragraph that this Covenant is about relationships; actually, the two words – covenant and relationship – are often literally linked together. This paragraph speaks to a collective, a circle of Mercy, leaders of these treasured institutions with the Sisters of Mercy, all in service to deepening our ownership of a common mission. Recognizing the importance and value of this leadership role is at the heart of making covenant possible. We also recognize the distinct and valuable role of the Conference for Mercy Higher Education, acting in the name of the Sisters of Mercy, as a critical component of and link to this circle of covenantal partnerships. We, as the leaders of our universities and colleges, and, leaders of CMHE and leaders of the Sisters of Mercy – symbolically and with great intentionality initiate this Covenant today and affirm that its potential and effectiveness will evolve only through intentional relationships.

Key words in the Covenant speak to the quality of our relationships: partnership; mutuality; respect and collaboration; trust and understanding among the Member institutions. We read the words: “This Covenant calls forth a spirit of willingness to participate in collaborative and creative activities across the

network of Mercy colleges and universities, all in service to a further deepening of the Mercy mission in American Catholic higher education.”

The invitation is to come to the table as equals in our differing roles and to work toward goals and outcomes that benefit all in a spirit of collaboration, mutual trust, and creativity.

Here we are speaking of a constellation of relationships where all participate and interrelate among a network of Mercy colleges and universities in conversation and collaboration with the Conference for Mercy Higher Education and the Sisters of Mercy. It takes all of these partnered relationships to actualize a covenant and to contribute to the furthering of the Mercy mission in Catholic higher education.

I want to remember and proclaim that Covenant language is God language. God initiated and entered into partnerships; God dialogued with individuals and with communities for covenantal purposes; God awaited responses oftentimes of a people that went astray and, yes, God kept fidelity. I used to have a tea mug that said, “God’s promises are forever.” God’s stance and promise are what we hope to embrace in this constellation of relationships – qualities of fidelity, initiation, responsiveness in good times and in challenging times.

From a faith perspective and from a very human perspective, being in covenant together is reassuring. We are, gratefully, not solo initiators or keepers of this Covenant. We have colleagues of expertise and of deep commitment to turn to, to learn from and to work together for mercy and justice within our campuses and for our world.

### COVENANT IS ABOUT EMBODIED COMMITMENTS

Our covenant is in service of our mission. In the *Constitutions* of the Sisters of Mercy, we state that we sponsor institutions “to address our enduring concerns.” Those enduring concerns are known by most of you quite well and are articulated in various ways, including the articulation of your own particular mission statements. At the heart of our “enduring concerns” is the Sisters of Mercy commitment to accompany those who are poor, especially women and children, and to address the systemic causes of such poverty. At

times, we might speak of living the gospel vision of mercy and justice with particular attention to what we name today as our five Critical Concerns: women; Earth; non-violence; anti-racism; immigration.

These enduring concerns are already alive on your campuses. These concerns have been integrated into your curriculum and throughout your service opportunities as well as other aspects of campus life. Embodied commitment is demonstrated by your mission leaders, your campus ministers and certainly through the efforts of your faculty and staff as they seek to live the mission of Mercy. Your leadership conversations, as Boards and Administrative Teams, demonstrate a priority for mission-based decision making and planning.

We return to the words of the Covenant to inspire us: “A Covenant describes the intentions, aspirations and assurances that enliven and inform the relationship between the Sisters of Mercy and the Mercy colleges and universities, with the Conference for Mercy Higher Education acting on behalf of the Sisters of Mercy.”

Our relationships need the quality of witness from one another whether that comes in the forms of intentions, aspirations or assurances. Again, we remember that the Covenant is a “WE” document – the Covenant is about a constellation of relationships and we all seek and need to know the intentions, aspirations and assurances among us that will enliven the Covenant and that will inform the quality of our mission response to address the needs of our students and our communities.

Gratefully, each of us individually and all of us together as one community of leaders, have a rich history of those who have given witness to embodied commitments. We can lean into that wisdom and learn from those stories. That history might belong to one of your predecessors as president or board member or a particular Sister of Mercy that was or is part of your campus community. The stories of embodied commitment of those who have named themselves Mercy are literally inexhaustible and it is that treasury of the Communion of Saints or the contemporary companions that join us each day that will inspire our fidelity and enliven our responses to this Covenant and to our living our mission more vigorously and with credibility.

What I believe will keep the mutual dynamics of our Covenant alive is embodied commitments. Very simply, each of us has a role to contribute to the quality of this Covenant, to draw strength from the embodied witness of each other as each of us lives this Covenant and, in those times of explicit connection and collaboration, to speak to one another of the challenges and life sources found in this Covenantal partnership. Processes and structures support commitments; accountabilities and implementation steps will give testimony to our commitments. At its heart, though, is what keeps a Covenant alive is embodied commitments; people form commitments, a Covenant. Individuals and communities give witness to the life energy of the Covenant.

### COVENANT IS ABOUT STANDING FIRM IN HOPE

We are in a covenantal partnership – you and I and all of us together. In this critical phase of how Catholic and Mercy identity and mission will remain viable, palpable and credible lies our future challenges. These challenges belong to Catholicity itself and to the various ministries that Sisters of Mercy today sponsor. Once more, we can be heartened and stretched by the words of our Covenant:

“This Covenant reflects a desire to strengthen a shared vision and mission of Mercy colleges and universities standing firmly in the spirit and ethos of the Sisters of Mercy and the rich heritage of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. A Mercy-sponsored college or university has the obligation to keep the Mercy heritage and Catholic identity of the institution robust and credible among conflicting worldviews, and to engage with peer CMHE institutions on the means to do so.”

Let’s linger on this statement and its key words: shared vision and mission; standing firmly in the spirit and ethos of the Sisters of Mercy and the rich heritage of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition; keep the Mercy heritage and Catholic identity robust and credible among conflicting worldview; engage with others to do this.

We are not without vision and mission language or commitment. The stark invitation is to remain robust and credible within an environment of shrinking resources (including students), a suspicious milieu where values-laden

conversations and assumptions need to be examined and probed; an arena in which a sharp critique and skepticism for the very value and place of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition is questioned.

Our current world story, and young people growing up as global citizens, present us with extraordinary new questions, different thirsts for knowledge that are soul-searching and pragmatic, and dynamics among themselves that literally reflect the Critical Concerns of the Sisters of Mercy: the dignity of women; immigration realities and securing a college degree; addressing racism with integrity; demonstrating that our response to Climate Urgency is credible and sufficient; witnessing to non-violent practices of engagement. Our embrace of these Critical Concerns in relevant and merciful ways will engender hope for our communities and secure our place as a meaningful institution in our communities.

Mercy leaders believe in possibilities – that is the language and spirit of our Covenant. Our response as leaders, as poet Emily Dickinson penned in 1890, is “I dwell in possibility.” Seeing possibilities will demand that we, as our Covenant notes, “commit to a process of reflection, informed discernment and values-driven decision-making.” Is not this process worth our best efforts?

This is our Covenant. We are blessed by a rich and ever gracious legacy that weaves dedication, merciful presence to one another, and a grounded hope that motivates our best efforts.

As we continue our celebration and ritual today, we remain steadfast that this Covenant seals us to one another in committed relationships that will nurture hope among us for all those whom we serve now and for many years to come.

May your paths be blessed by our God of Mercy who accompanies you as you stay faithful to the Covenant that invites your response this day.

Pat McDermott, RSM  
CMHE Ritual, February 5, 2022