

A Sign of God's Presence

BY JEAN M. LAMBERT & SR. M. CATHERINE LABOURE, SP

Much effort has gone into defining the role of mission. In the past, people have equated mission with sponsorship, they have focused attention on *mission effectiveness*, or they have isolated certain programs as "mission services." Yet many remain uncertain how to go about "doing" mission.

Now we are finally calling the work of furthering the mission "mission." This is significant because it suggests people have reached a consensus that mission is something concrete and definable. And if we can all agree on how to define it, we will be better able to develop a bona fide mission discipline and perhaps even create educational programs that prepare people to fulfill the roles and adopt the attitudes mission requires.

SEARCH FOR A DEFINITION

At the Sisters of Providence Health System, Springfield, MA, we have searched for a definition that can give us direction, as well as preserve and enhance the legacy of the Sisters of Providence. We believe that the more clearly we focus on our role, the more confident our sponsors will be that their mission will continue.

The experience of preparing an orientation video on the history of the Sisters of Providence clarified some notions regarding mission for us. One line in the video's script was particularly striking: "Whenever anyone enters through the doors of any of the Sisters of Providence Health System facilities and experiences God's love because of us, we are assured that the legacy of the Sisters of Providence will continue."

Hearing the words "experiencing God's love because of us" helped us realize that mission begins in our own hearts. That is where it started for our founders, and that is where it must start for those of us who carry on their work. Sharing in the healing ministry of Jesus demands from us only one thing: to be the sign of Jesus' loving presence in the world. So for us, the definition of mission is as clear as it is simple: Mission is being God's presence in the world.



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To give credence to this definition, we went to the Sisters of Providence archives. What we discovered was not new, but rather renewing. We were reminded that our pioneer women, like *most women religious*, founded or entered religious congregations to be God's presence to those they met along the way. Because these women loved their God, they cared for the poor, the sick, the orphaned. Their mission was *not* simply to found institutions such as orphanages or hospitals. Rather, their service was an outcome of their real mission—to be God's presence.

RECOGNIZING AND NAMING

Once we discovered the definition of mission, we realized that mission is really a process of recognition. It is coming to understand that being a believer (whether we are Catholic or not) means we are called to be holy, which involves both doing our work the best way we know how and knowing why we do what we do. Holiness is made real when we remember to connect our daily work with the fact that, in doing it, we are, in fact, God's presence for one another.

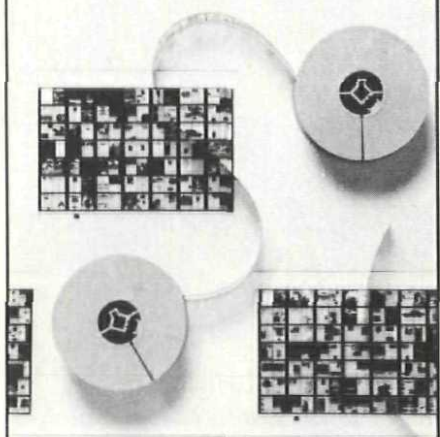
Part of the process of understanding mission is helping employees see that their daily tasks—passing trays, cleaning floors, giving injections, taking x-rays—are no different from those performed by employees at other healthcare facilities. Rather, it is *how* they work—guided by the values of compassion, justice, and respect for the dignity of the person—that makes them distinctive.

Each of our facilities has a mission committee. Committee members, who come from all parts of the organization, find ways to integrate the mission into the facility's daily life. A committee member from the Administrative Council ensures that a direct line remains available to the facility administration.

The future of Catholic healthcare depends on how well we translate our mission—on our ability to connect the language of mission to the delivery of healthcare. Terms such as "vision," "healing,"

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MISSION

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"interrelationships," and "social mission" clearly name mission issues. For the term "Catholic healthcare" to have any meaning in the future, we will have to learn to name our daily experiences as holy.

For example, one of our system values is compassion. When supervisors notice that someone has been especially caring to a patient or resident, they are encouraged to use mission language to communicate their perception of the act. In such a situation, a supervisor might say, "What you did helped me better understand the meaning of compassion." Naming the act in this way reminds employees of why they are at the facility.

Mission is the motivator for such naming. It does not ask anything unusual from us—only that we occasionally remember why we do what we do. If our definition is correct—if fulfilling the mission is being God's presence in the world—then mission is not a program but a way of life for everyone in the organization.

LIVING THE MISSION

Is it possible to get excited about mission's role in an organization? We invite you to come to mission committee meetings at the Sisters of Providence Health System, to see the energy that flows from knowing that mission is everyone's responsibility, and to see people making connections between the mission and their daily work.

Living the mission helps people understand what compassion and justice and respect are all about. People who live these values every day have no need for definitions, but they do need to know their behavior is mission driven. They need to be able to rename their actions in mission terms. And they need to understand that they are God's presence in the world. □

MARKETING

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A second report to the community was produced with new copy and new financial statistics after the fiscal year 1991 annual report came off the press, and once again it was circulated in the *Des Moines Sunday Register*.

BUILDING A COALITION

Other Des Moines hospitals have now become part of the reform effort. The seven members of the Hospital Association of Greater Des Moines are planning to hold a Medical Mission Day in January 1994, when they will offer free care to anyone in the city who cannot afford to pay for care. The idea has worked well in smaller Iowa cities, and expanding it to the capital city will demonstrate the hospitals' commitment to improving access to care.

Montet says that outreach efforts to help facilities with fewer staff and resources is the next phase of the plan. The Mercy public relations and marketing staff has made its consulting services available to 12 rural hospitals in the Mercy Network of Health Services, as staffs of those facilities try to address their own unique community needs. The department's physician referral and health information service, the Mercy Nurse, has already offered free community health screenings for prostate and skin cancer to more than 1,000 area residents, and more are planned for next year. Speakers bureau activities have stepped up, as have free healthcare programs and partnership programs with area schools.

Mercy leaders are also becoming involved in other community-benefit programs. Chief Executive Officer Sr. Patricia Clare Sullivan, RSM, is chairing a downtown Des Moines renovation plan, the Hillside Project, to improve the city's use of its downtown space. Other Mercy administrators and public relations and marketing department staff serve on key community boards.

"From the beginning we've had the full support of administrative staff, and that has made all the difference," Montet says. "We'll be continuing this effort well into the future. We've just begun to scratch the surface." □