

Mission Integration Leaders

A System Draws From Many Streams

BY BETH MCPHERSON, M.B.A.

George Avila always knew he wanted to serve others, but he realized early on that his lack of enthusiasm for calculus and chemistry would keep him out of medical school. After college, he found fulfillment supporting the community while working at a grassroots non-profit. But it wasn't until he joined St. Joseph Health System and was tapped for a unique formation process that his ideal career path materialized. Avila found his calling in mission leadership.

St. Joseph Health System, headquartered in Orange, Calif., encompasses 14 hospitals and medical groups serving California, Texas and New Mexico. Our health care system began developing a pathway to mission integration leadership several years ago when it became clear we could not rely solely on a decreasing number of religious community members to assume mission leadership roles.

We also understood that in order to develop potential mission integration leaders, we would need to identify individuals by their sense of calling rather than by their formal education in Catholic theology. The result — a program for individuals like Avila, those who tended to lack formal theological preparation but clearly possessed the passion and potential for mission service work.

My colleague, Sr. Suzanne Sassus, CSJ, senior vice president of sponsorship, was influential in developing the St. Joseph Health System formation

program for mission integration leadership, as well as formation programs for the management team. Sr. Sassus' university background helped us understand formation as an integrated process that shapes the heart as well as the mind. "Formation is about changing the way we see and live," she says.

"Formation helps us shape a new set of lenses through which to see reality," says Sr. Sassus. "Yes, there is a body of knowledge, but that is only the preliminary path to formation of the heart."

We developed a new, director of mission services role as one of the mission integration career path's essential elements. The role's purpose was to build

our investment in mission integration capacity and to help individuals perform the operations activities of mission leadership and learn more deeply about the role of being a mission leader. It is a formative position, in

that some directors report to the mission integration vice presidents at each of our ministries, learning about the strategic and operational parts of the role while directing programs such as Values in Action, Ethics, St. Joseph Day, Sacred Encounters and ongoing formation for leaders and staff. Other directors assume operational duties in departments focused on community outreach, such as translation services and community benefit programs.

We championed this role, despite the fact it is somewhat unique in Catholic health systems. Most organizations have a vice president of mission integration, but we knew there had to be

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a step in the formation process during which the director could learn from that vice president, as well as build his or her background in Catholic teachings.

The director role also assumes many non-traditional job responsibilities. Along with the day-to-day, management-oriented assignments, directors are expected to immerse themselves in the formation experience, engaging in significant self-reflection as well as in the study of Catholic social and moral teachings. As an example, during his first week of work, Avila was given the book *The Path* by Laurie Beth Jones (Hyperion, 1998) and was asked to spend a few days reflecting on his life's personal mission.

"It was clear from the start this was not going to be just a job with a specific set of tasks, but I had found my calling," Avila says.

Additionally, we encourage mission service directors to pursue theological education by participating in the master's program in Catholic health care mission offered through Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis. The program is designed to develop future leaders who not only grasp the complexities of health care but also have a sound knowledge of the church's theological underpinnings. It focuses on building a strong foundation in the Catholic theological tradition, particularly as it relates to the church's mission of healing. Other goals of the program include

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sustaining and nurturing Catholic identity while bringing about systemic change; developing an ability to grapple with complex ethical, legal, organizational and policy issues in light of the Catholic tradition and teachings and attaining the spiritual maturity needed to serve as an effective ministry leader in Catholic health care.

To date, the health system has 11 individuals in the mission service director position, and we have sent participants to six cohorts of the Aquinas program. Terri Dente, director of mission integration at St. Joseph Health System's Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital in Santa Rosa, Calif., says, "Aquinas provided me the needed background in

Catholic theology and deepened my commitment to Catholic health care. I would probably go so far as to say I fell in love with Catholic health care, and I cannot imagine doing anything else."

Aquinas isn't the only preparation directors receive. The health system is actively involved in global pilgrimage experiences and frequently asks mission service directors to participate. Avila, who has traveled with the health system to both Guatemala and El Salvador, says he was profoundly influenced by these experiences which strengthened his commitment to mission service. "It was an incredible honor and responsibility to walk in solidarity with the people we were privileged to meet and now help to share their sacred story," he says.

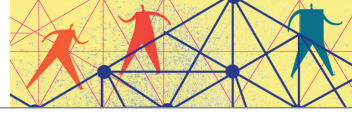
A CALLING

Clearly, the individuals who gravitate toward mission integration are unique in their commitment and character. But we are careful not to profile the likely candidate too rigidly, given that most men and women join the health system in a much different role and gradually find their way to mission integration. Some self-identify as they matriculate through our formation preparation for management, known as Mission and Mentoring. Others have been nominated by their peers in an annual recognition of those team members exemplifying St. Joseph Health System values.

It may sound unscientific, but we have a very good sense of who is right for the role. Over the years, these individuals have come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Since the St. Joseph Health System program began, individuals selected by mission integration leadership for further mission leadership formation have included human resources professionals, nurses, community benefit managers and rehabilitation specialists.

Dente, a registered dietitian, found her calling when she attended an internal formation program for managers. She says, "[The program provided] a time for personal and professional growth and is probably what changed my career path. It's where I learned more about Catholic health care and the ministry of the Sisters. I learned how they were preparing us to continue on into the future, and I was struck by how much their faith in us, and me in particular, translated into a huge responsibility."

Cindy Mueller, now vice president of mission



services at the health system's Mission Hospital in Mission Viejo and Laguna Beach, Calif., gravitated to mission leadership in mid-life, after a highly successful career as an operating room nurse and director of cardiovascular services. She describes an eventful career path that eventually led to her selection for a prestigious cardiovascular fellowship program, which involved research on the health care needs in underserved neighborhoods.

"I recognized that the people in these neighborhoods needed so much more than heart care. Their needs were so great, and I wanted to devote my life to making a difference for the underserved," she says, adding, "I truly fell in love with the concept of reaching out to the dear neighbor."

Mueller, who has helped mentor several mission service directors, including Avila, believes that the people who are most successful in the role are those who continually challenge themselves to help others apply the mission and values to their daily activities.

"I look for people who have competencies around leading people," she says. "You have to be able to help others understand how a particular experience can illuminate and animate mission — that's not always easy to do, especially as a lay person."

Naturally, not everyone selected for mission leadership formation ends up a vice president of mission integration at his or her ministry. However, we believe that all formation benefits the individual and the common good and builds capacity for leading the mission in all areas of the ministry. Developing mission leaders is just one part of our overall strategy to assure all our leadership understands and extends the ministry. By providing our managers with a more theological lens, we know that they can integrate their learnings in their own sphere of influence.

If we can accomplish that, I believe we still have had an enormously positive impact on our organization.

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SUSTAINING SUCCESS

For St. Joseph Health System, testimony to the program's success is found in the words of those participating and clearly growing from the experience. I am especially inspired by the words of Gabriela Robles, executive director of the St. Joseph Health System Foundation, who wrote:

Like many first-generation Mexican-Americans, my parents immigrated to the United States in search of better opportunities. I grew up in El Monte, Calif., a low-income suburb of Los Angeles. However, even as a child I understood that poverty was not an indication of my potential. While neither of my parents attended school beyond the fourth grade, they impressed upon me the importance of an education. They also instilled in me a sense of service and of giving back ... The main reason I chose to further pursue a career in mission integration at SJHS is because of the commitment to serving our dear neighbor.

Although Robles already holds a graduate degree from New York University, she has since gravitated to mission integration and will graduate from the Aquinas program this year. Clearly, Robles was a natural for the mission leadership career path. As with our best leaders, she understands that education and formation never end.

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