

# PeaceHealth Employees Benefit from El Salvador Health Missions

BY SR. ELEANOR GILMORE, CSJP, & ALAN YORDY

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**T**he Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace celebrated a Year of Jubilee in 1984 with more than 300 members gathering for a general chapter meeting in Leicester, England. At that meeting, the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for Religious asked congregations to examine their current mission and ministry.

In doing so, the sisters reclaimed and received approval to return to their original title, Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace. Following the approval of the first constitutions, the Vatican named the congregation, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Newark.

This examination set the course for the next six years. The Chapter Acts included the following call of ministry that would take the sisters to El Salvador:

*"In keeping with our documents, which call us to solidarity with poor, powerless*

*and oppressed peoples, as a Congregation we specifically commit ourselves during the next six years to give special attention to critical needs in Central America and Northern Ireland. This shall involve: direct solidarity with the peoples of these areas; various actions promoting systemic change; and continued education for our membership."* (Acts of the 17th General Chapter, August 1984)

This simple act of faith had a profound effect on the congregation and now on PeaceHealth, the Northwest health care ministry of Our Lady Province. Within a year, two sisters responded to a call by the Archbishop of San Salvador to work in a newly established "refugee camp" on the outskirts of that city. This camp was to replace church basements and other locations the church had opened to meet the emergency needs of thousands of displaced Salvadorans. Many were seeking protection from the "civil" war.

Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) for Central America was also initiating its work in El Salvador as thousands of exiled Salvadorans began returning home. Health, education, housing and other services were not available in the war zones, the primary locations of these communities of "repopulation." A sister from Our Lady Province initiated a health service in the JRS headquarters, and this unique ministry coordinated medical services for the refugee populations in many parts of the country.

When the Peace Accords were signed in 1992, JRS re-focused its mission on development, and the sisters missioned in El Salvador returned to ministry in the Pacific Northwest and Great Britain. Four sisters, representing the three provinces of the congregation, served in El Salvador. Their experience had a profound impact on the life of the congregation.

## PEACEHEALTH MINISTRY

PeaceHealth ([www.peacehealth.org](http://www.peacehealth.org)) is an integrated health care system in the Pacific Northwest. Headquartered in Bellevue, Wash., it operates six hospitals, medical groups and other services in Washington, Oregon and Alaska. PeaceHealth's mission statement and values reflect the character



Employees of PeaceHealth, a health care system based in the Pacific Northwest, visit El Salvador yearly to offer medical assistance to citizens in the Central American country.

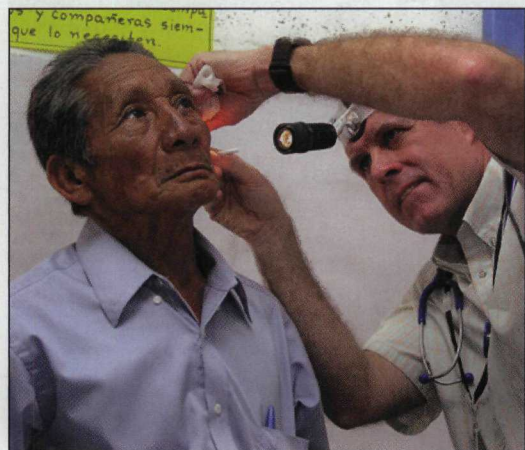


and mission of the sponsors, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace. From their founding in 1884, the sisters have followed the progressive ideals and practical spirituality of foundress Margaret Anna Cusack. Four sisters traveled across the country to Fairhaven (Bellingham), Wash., in 1890, bringing with them a message and commitment that exist in PeaceHealth today. Their work resulted in the opening of the first PeaceHealth hospital in 1892.

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace firmly believe lay colleagues play an equal role in the important mission of carrying out the healing ministry of Jesus. The leaders of each PeaceHealth regional ministry also serve as chief mission officers, a title formally conferred in a special ceremony. This role carries with it the responsibility to uphold in word and deed the mission and values that are rooted in the tradition of the congregation. Additionally, each caregiver makes a commitment to embrace the spirit, mission, values and vision of PeaceHealth.

### EL SALVADOR HEALTH MISSION

In 1999, seven members of the PeaceHealth Leadership Team and three sisters went on a 10-day investigation visit to El Salvador. The vice president of mission integration had proposed that Our Lady Province and PeaceHealth jointly sponsor an El Salvador mission program. Conceptually, it would provide an opportunity for PeaceHealth employees to experience and reflect on the reality of health care in a developing country. Locating this opportunity in El Salvador honored the history and work of the congregation. The knowledge of the sisters who had been missioned there would be invaluable in cultivating relationships and service opportunities. The group unanimously agreed the program would support "mission integration." A second and more definitive visit followed, and a business plan was



Above and below, PeaceHealth medical staff assist residents with medical care.

approved. The El Salvador mission ([www.pazsalud.org](http://www.pazsalud.org)) opened its doors in late 2000, and the first PeaceHealth employee volunteers arrived in March 2001, immediately after two devastating earthquakes.

### THE MISSION "MODEL"

Now in its seventh year, two full-time persons staff the program. The director, a sister with previous experience in El Salvador, resides in the San Salvador base house. The second team member is a long-term PeaceHealth employee based at Sacred Heart Medical Center in Eugene, Ore. Via e-mail, they plan the missions, select and prepare volunteers and the necessary supplies, and obtain the necessary permissions of the Salvadoran Ministry of Health to host missions and related activities.

The service model has been modified based on the country's needs and employee interests. During the first three years, the San Salvador base house hosted 28 volunteers, substantially more than expected. In 2002, the group responded to requests to provide short-term rural medical missions. As requests from Salvadoran municipalities, communities and non-governmental agencies increased, so did the size of the mission teams.

Today, two 26-member mission teams, comprised primarily of PeaceHealth caregivers, travel to El Salvador each year. These teams consist of general medicine, pediatric and gynecologic physicians, optometrists and support services personnel. Spanish-speaking, non-medical employees help translate for non-fluent physicians and other medical volunteers. A cataract surgical team, in collaboration with SEE International, follows the medical mission. The enthusiasm of returning volunteers has spread throughout PeaceHealth, resulting in a waiting list of volunteer applicants.

The depth of the experience is best summa-



rized up by Craig Rixon, a mission volunteer in 2007. He said, *"God speaks to us through His word and this was God's way of confirming in my heart the calling that we all have to not be passive, but to boldly defend the rights of the poor and disenfranchised. Every member of the brigade was deeply moved by the experiences of those who were martyred for the cause in El Salvador. It is still sometimes almost too much for me to talk about, as the emotions are overwhelming. For those who have the privilege of this experience, I believe it helps us to connect with the charisma of the sisters and the foundation of PeaceHealth."*

## GROWING INTEREST

Through the efforts of an optometrist who has participated in all of the missions since the program's founding, the mission hosted a delegation of Lions Club members from Bellingham, Wash., in 2007. That club has established a sister relationship with a San Salvador Lions Club, and provides them with "low vision" equipment and supplies. Such aid supports the work of the San Salvador Lions Club in its affiliations with the University of El Salvador School of Ophthalmology and organizations working with low-vision patients. A second delegation of Lions members from the Pacific

Northwest will travel to El Salvador in April.

The first mission of 2008 included a medical student from the Oregon Health and Sciences University, Portland, Ore. Through an affiliation with Sacred Heart Medical Center in Eugene, Ore., the university now offers fourth year medical students the chance to participate in the mission. Those who go receive elective credit for work in international medicine. These students practice under the supervision of a physician appointed by the director of the Center for Medical Education at Sacred Heart Medical Center.

## PURPOSE

A survey of mission participants was conducted recently. Their positive responses encouraged us to continue the ministry in El Salvador as conceived by the founding leadership group:

*Through the service of PeaceHealth and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace volunteers, the mission brings basic health care to people who have limited access to care and presents opportunities to:*

- *enrich the soul of our organization by realizing our sense of the PeaceHealth mission.*



A PeaceHealth employee checks the ear of a baby during a recent mission trip.



- *offer a personal growth and development opportunity to participants that will enhance their work within the regions.*
- *to assist us in defining and implementing opportunities to further our mission with the underserved in PeaceHealth service areas.*

Survey participants responded overwhelmingly that they “agreed” or “agreed strongly” the experience was meaningful to them personally and in their work environment:

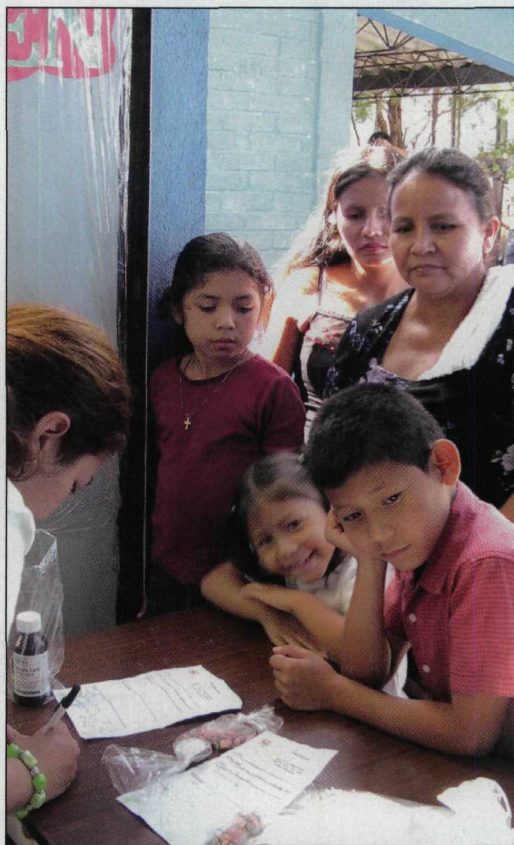
- 100 percent agreed or agreed strongly that the experience “energized me and renewed my spirit”
- 97 percent agreed or agreed strongly that it “made me a better caregiver when I returned to my regular work in PeaceHealth”
- 100 percent agreed or agreed strongly that “it had a positive impact on the way I interact with patients and their family in my work back here in PeaceHealth”
- 97 percent felt they came home with “a deeper understanding and appreciation of the PeaceHealth mission and core values”

The supervisors of the participants also responded:

- 100 percent of the supervisors said that “... returning from El Salvador, volunteers bring an enthusiasm from their experience that inspires others in the department about the importance of caring and compassion in their work”
- 92 percent felt that “having staff go to El Salvador as a volunteer is of value to their department”
- 100 percent feel that “... having people in the department who have had the experience helps the department as a whole to understand what caring and compassion for others means”
- 92 percent agreed or agreed strongly that the long-term value to the department of having staff come back with the experience outweighs the short-term cost (e.g. replacement of personnel) to the department.

One supervisor commented, “A benefit that you didn’t address is that of recruitment. As we seek applicants who are good ‘fits’ for our organization, we often find that the discussion of the El Salvador Mission helps candidates see that PeaceHealth ‘walks its talk.’”

These results are gratifying and personal testimonies are even more so: A physician says, “The benefit I gained is in realizing that in primary care a lot can be done with relatively few resources; just knowledge, simple equipment and supplies.... I want someday to return to that



**El Salvadorans wait in line to receive medical care by PeaceHealth employees.**

type of culture of simplicity in medicine.”

Another relates, “The El Salvador experience ... has had a profound impact on my practice here. It reminds me of the original goals I had in entering medicine and now my practice more closely reflects those goals.”

A volunteer was deeply moved as she saw a young woman patient “who was not interested in looking at the eye chart (to test her new glasses), but instead reached into her purse and took out a needle and thread and proceeded to thread the needle ... this would help her to make a living.”

The El Salvador Mission began with a small group of PeaceHealth leaders who took a leap of faith, trusting that such a program would provide one more opportunity for employees to experience the PeaceHealth mission and values. Involvement and support of top leadership was key to the decision to establish the mission. This support gives encouragement to continue this program. It not only enriches the lives of those who are served and those who serve, but it also makes each caregiver a more dedicated servant in the healing ministry of Jesus here at home. ■



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# Arizona Medical Center Shows How to Be a 'Healing Hospital'

## Technology, Culture Shift, and Quiet Nights Lead Transformation

**BY LAURIE EBERST**

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**W**hen a new hospital is being planned and built, much of the focus is placed on how many beds it will house, where each department will be located, how many it will employ, and the bottom-line cost to build it.

This is not necessarily the case for Catholic Health Care West's (CHW) Mercy Gilbert Medical Center ([www.mercygilbert.org](http://www.mercygilbert.org)) in Gilbert, Ariz., which opened its doors in June 2006. Although these considerations were important to CHW's plans for the hospital, the leadership team worked hard to ensure the facility was built to reflect, in every way possible, a *healing environment*. One that helps patients feel safe and comfortable, one that reminds staff why they chose health care as a line of work. The staff at Mercy Gilbert Medical Center prides themselves not only as a *healing facility*, but also a *healing culture*.

With this in mind, we earned the Healing Hospital designation during our first year of

operation. The honor is awarded by the Baptist Healing Trust, Nashville, Tenn., and includes three key components:

- A healing physical environment
- The integration of work design and technology
- A culture of "Radical Loving Care"

### A HEALING PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Mercy Gilbert conjoined aesthetics with improved performance. We took into consideration not only how *we* would care *for* patients, but also how employees — as caregivers — would engage with families. We have learned that providing a loving and compassionate environment that is aesthetically pleasing promotes healing. True healing environments are constructed in ways that help patients and families cope with the stresses of illness.

I have worked in health care for many years, most of them as a registered nurse. But it was during a personal experience that I came to value a healing environment.

While Mercy Gilbert was under construction during the early phase, my mother was admitted to a hospital in California for emergency open heart surgery. I spent many hours with her post-operatively supporting her physical as well as emotional well-being. I would get her comfortable and positioned for sleep when the intercom would announce that a doctor was on the phone, or a nurse was wanted at the front desk. It wasn't much longer before a loud floor cleaning machine swooped next to her patient room startling her and causing her additional anxiety. All she needed was some sleep.

That's when it hit me. If I influence anything during the construction of Mercy Gilbert, it will be the aesthetics of the hospital and the noise level in patient care areas. I wanted Mercy Gilbert to be free from overhead paging, in-room intercoms, loud machines rolling down hard, long hallways or voices calling to each other at the nurse's station.

For a hospital to promote healing, it needs to provide a quiet environment that allows patients to sleep. Patients' bodies perform the most repair during sleep. Cells regenerate faster during sleep.



Caregivers at Mercy Gilbert Medical Center in Gilbert, Ariz., are encouraged to place a hand on "Touch Pads" installed outside each patient room to promote the healing process.



Laurie Eberst, middle, president and CEO of Mercy Gilbert Medical Center, shakes hands with staff after they received certificates of recognition.

## Contact Information

For more information on this hospital, contact Laurie Eberst at [laurie.eberst@chw.edu](mailto:laurie.eberst@chw.edu).



So why, in the very setting where healing is most needed, do hospitals allow for high levels of noise and sleep deprivation?

Mercy Gilbert promotes a quiet environment. All patient hallways are carpeted. Cleaning machines have a special silencer to avoid startling patients while passing by patient rooms. There is no overhead paging except for emergencies. Nursing staff carries a wireless phone to allow for direct connection with physicians, patients and families. The noise-free environment not only promotes healing for patients, but also has a secondary advantage of promoting a calmer, more stress-free environment for employees and physicians. In health care, we repeatedly hear that medication errors are often due to distractions. By providing a noise-free environment caregivers are less apt to get distracted. It results in a reduction of errors.

## INTEGRATING WORK DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY

A second key component of a Healing Hospital is the integration of work design and technology. Working with our designers, we found ways to enable staff to work more efficiently, to provide additional privacy and security for patients and to use technology to promote the healing environment.

Mercy Gilbert was designed with a separate "back of house" bank of elevators for staff to navigate through the hospital and for patient transfers, providing privacy and security. A patient on his way to radiology, for example, is

free from worry that he will run into a neighbor in the elevator. Patients deserve the dignity of preserving their privacy during what is often a stressful time.

Technologically advanced equipment allows Mercy Gilbert not only to provide the very best in health care services, but also to expedite processes and results. Patients cared for at Mercy Gilbert can take advantage of the latest digital technology in radiology, pulmonary testing and cardiology. Physicians are able to access test results from their office, which expedites decision making and treatment.

Each patient room features the Skylight system, which provides in-room entertainment. But more importantly, it also provides them with in-room education specific to their needs. The Skylight system provides periodic surveys of our patients to monitor their satisfaction levels. This provides real-time feedback and as a result provides service recovery opportunities if the results are less than satisfactory. Patients can listen to healing music and even a comedy channel to promote laughter — another mechanism to stimulate healing. Live harp music is played in the hospital's main entrance and in various patient departments throughout the week, providing a calm and relaxing environment for staff, physicians and patients.

A good healing hospital offers highly technical advancements, but is able to integrate the technology into a caring environment delivered by a compassionate staff.



## A CULTURE OF "RADICAL LOVING CARE"

The third and most critical component of a healing hospital is embracing a culture of "Radical Loving Care," a philosophy championed by health care industry leader Eric Chapman. It is easy to promote a beautiful building, artwork, gardens and technology. But if a hospital lacks the culture of compassionate care and the people committed to that philosophy, it is not a healing hospital. Instead, it is a pretty hospital.

At Mercy Gilbert, our strong culture of compassionate care is based upon the principles of "Radical Loving Care." This philosophy takes all health care workers back to our roots and reminds us why we first went into health care. It promotes the healing of patients through a holistic approach that meets not only the patient's physical needs but also his or her's emotional and spiritual needs.

Mercy Gilbert does not *hire* employees. We *choose* them. We choose our staff based not only on skill level but also based upon their gifts at delivering loving care. Does the employee display a passion for others and desire to go the extra mile to help others? Each new employee at Mercy Gilbert goes through orientation outlining the philosophy of "Radical Loving Care" and illus-

trating that every encounter with patients and their families is a sacred encounter.

To remind every caregiver who walks into a patient room of the sacred nature of their work, we have installed "Touch Pads" outside each patient room, engraved with the words "Pause, Reflect, Heal." Employees are trained to stop and touch the pad before crossing the threshold of the room; the words encourage each person who will interact with a patient to take a moment to reflect on their role in helping that patient heal.

Each month our leadership team shares an acknowledgement from a patient about her or his experience at Mercy Gilbert. All caregivers are included, from the physicians to nurses, radiology technicians to environmental services staff, and each is rewarded and recognized by the hospital's executive leadership team. This monthly recognition reinforces the role each individual can play in making a difference in a patient's life.

As health care workers, we are invited into the lives of our patients during one of the most stressful times of their lives. A healing hospital's environment helps to make that stressful time a positive one through compassion and commitment to service and excellence. ■



**Patients like this mother with her newborn child enjoy the comforts of the new medical center.**