

## CHAPTER 5

### PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS ON THE FOUR SELECTED ORGANISATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

In the previous chapter in which questions of research plan and methodology were addressed, several research methods were examined to find an appropriate approach for investigating the research problem. Choice of the case study was made on the assumption that it would give the researcher the best opportunity to grasp the pattern of life in the Mercy community since a substantial body of data about many facets of that life would be collected. To gain an understanding of the complex nature of the religious organisation, data were collected by several methods, through interviews with delegates at the first formal meeting of the newly-constituted Mercy Institute, through questionnaires distributed to a random sample of Sisters in each Mercy group, through analysis of archival material, and from the experience and insights of the researcher, herself a Sister of Mercy and participant observer.

In this chapter and in Chapter 6, the data are presented and analysed. As the research problem was investigated through three sub-problems, the findings are organised in the order in which those subproblems were treated. The subproblems are as follows:

1. What did the Sisters of Mercy perceive as the distinctive characteristics of their organisation?
2. What was the change process which led to the adoption of the new structure of governance?

3. What was the relationship between the distinctive organisational characteristics and the process of change which led to the adoption of the new structure of governance?

In investigating the subproblems, important aspects of the research approach were highlighted. First, as each subproblem was addressed, the collection of different kinds of data on the same phenomenon provided a check on the accuracy of the findings. Second, research on each subproblem concluded with the formulation of a series of conclusions derived from analysis of the data. Third, data gained through interviews, questionnaires, document analysis, and participant observation, were analysed to discover the extent to which the conceptual framework constituted a means of guiding research into the process of change in the religious organisation. Further, a number of general conclusions were formulated after application of the conceptual framework to the data.

In this chapter, findings are presented which are relevant to the first subproblem, that is: What did the Sisters of Mercy perceive as the distinctive characteristics of their organisation? Each of the four sections centres on one of the selected organisational characteristics, namely, focus on mission, commitment of membership, servant leadership, and ethos of the community. When the Sisters spoke of these characteristics during the interviews, they described them as dynamic rather than as static features of the religious organisation; that is, they discussed them as being subject to the process of change. As a result of this emphasis, and to gain similar data through the questionnaires, the researcher asked two very broad, open-ended questions: "During your time as a Sister of Mercy, what major changes in religious living have you experienced within your

group?" and "What further changes in religious living would you hope to see in the future?"

The researcher placed these two questions at the beginning of the questionnaire to remind the respondents that change in the religious community was the focus of the research. Further, the researcher believed it would be possible, through the first question, to discover the Sisters' perceptions of the basic characteristics of Mercy life over time, and through the second question, to gain insights into the direction which Sisters hoped that change in Mercy life would take in the future. The researcher also asked specific questions about the organisational characteristics, mission, membership, leadership, and ethos, each of which generated data about a different perspective of the religious organisation.

In this chapter, the presentation of findings for each organisational characteristic takes the following form:

1. Description of the overall patterns and trends in the data, that is, an aggregation of data for the whole Mercy community from the individual responses of the Sisters, and from the insights and experience of the researcher.

2. Formulation of conclusions on the nature of the organisational characteristics and change in these characteristics.

In the first section, findings about the focus on mission in the Mercy community are presented.

#### FOCUS ON MISSION

From the data on Mercy mission, the following themes were identified: the understanding of Mercy mission, the significance of the vow of service, diversification of ministries, determinants of need in mission, and future directions in mission.

### Understanding of Mercy Mission

To gain the Sisters' perceptions of the nature of the Mercy mission, the researcher had asked the following question: "To someone who knows nothing about the Sisters of Mercy, how would you explain the mission of your Mercy group?"

The initial and common response stressed the difficulty of making an explanation. One Sister expressed it in these terms:

I should find this most difficult . . . . I think maybe I couldn't explain. I would have to say: "Come and experience it!"

Part of the difficulty was seen to be related to the ignorance of people who were not members of a religious community about the significance of the vows, and, in particular, the vow to serve the poor, the sick, and the ignorant, taken by all Sisters of Mercy. Many Sisters saw the need to find ways to convey the meaning of mission as it was understood by the members of their group. The following responses were given by four different Sisters.

If he/she knows about the Gospel, I'd talk about the mission of Jesus, that is, to bring the good news to the poor. Then I would relate our mission to that of Jesus.

If he/she knows nothing about the Gospel, I'd talk about society today and its needs, joys, sufferings; human-beings and finding their basic needs, from physical to spiritual. I'd then relate our mission as a response to those needs.

Maybe I'd ask him/her to describe society, his/her family, street, environment today and his/her dreams for them. I'd relate our mission to the fulfilment of social hopes, and hopefully lead on to an experience of wonder, of mystery, of God . . . the one to whom we basically respond.

I would like to bring him/her to meet and talk with some of my Sisters and let the message "rub-off".

A high degree of unanimity was found in the way the Sisters expressed their understanding of Mercy mission. A large number of Sisters perceived the Mercy community as drawing its identity in

part from a sense of participation in the missionary character of the Roman Catholic Church. They did stress, however, the emphasis which their community placed on the "mercy" aspect of mission. One Sister expressed it this way:

Our mission is the expression of our Mercy charism, which we see as a living spirit calling forth an authentic response to the needs of our times in Church, society, family and individuals.

Sisters articulated their understanding of the Mercy mission by identifying active elements of this characteristic of their religious organisation. The mission of the Mercy group is as follows:

1. To imitate and reveal to others Christ's compassionate love and mercy. For this reason, Catherine McAuley chose the title "Mercy", the basis of our spirituality as well as of our apostolate.
2. To express this mercy in loving kindness to other Sisters and then to all those with whom we come in contact in the various areas of our apostolate.
3. To show the loving forgiveness of the God of mercy in our own community and the wider community of the Church, the state, and the world.
4. To show to the world the Christ of the Gospel.
5. To participate in the saving mission of Christ by works of mercy, in the fields of education, especially of the poor, visitation of the sick and those in need, both spiritually and temporarily, and in various areas of social welfare work.

When speaking of the way in which mercy was expressed, many Sisters highlighted the corporate nature of mission. According to a respondent, one Mercy group described their community mission in the following way:

The expression of Mercy in our group includes many activities, which we see as "corporate" rather than "individual" ministries. On one occasion, we took the concept of the mosaic. Each piece is valuable in itself, but is enhanced and enriched, acquiring a new dimension, when placed in relation to other pieces . . . . So it is with each Sister, in herself a precious unit. In constant relation to others, her life contributes to our total Mercy mission, given stability by the Congregation.

Several Sisters made the point that, during the General Chapter in each Mercy community in 1980 and 1981, the Mission Statement expressed this "corporateness" explicitly. The following extract, quoted by one Sister from the Mission Statement of her group, exemplifies this:

Apostolic service is a central and unifying force pervading every aspect of our lives together as Sisters of Mercy . . . . Our apostolic service rests fundamentally in the power of the community as a corporate body and in the unique abilities, gifts, and interests God has given each member.

In each group, many Sisters' understanding of the broad concept of mission was rooted in the traditional and communal expression of Mercy. Other Sisters, while not denying this, spoke of Mercy as a dynamic concept so that each group of Sisters had to bring the standards of the Gospel to the issues of the time.

Several Sisters saw the need to look beyond their group to deepen their understanding of mission in general and of Mercy mission in particular. One Sister spoke of this need in her own Mercy group:

I don't think that our theology of mission has changed all that much except where we've been following it through the Church. I don't think we've done enough ourselves to educate ourselves to a better theology of mission through our own resources and reflecting on our own situation.

This lack of interest in and knowledge of the theology of mission was not true of all Sisters. Sisters spoke of small numbers of Sisters in each Mercy group who did have a vision of mission "not merely within restricted Church circles, but to un-churched and non-Christian people".

From almost all respondents to the questions on Mercy mission, an essential element in their understanding was the obligation placed on Sisters to examine seriously the ways in which they thought about and lived out their vow of service. They did not underestimate the influence of this vow in their attitude to and understanding of Mercy mission. They made the judgment that, without the idealism of the vow of service, the Mercy organisation would be more vulnerable to "drift" into the future.

#### Significance of the Vow of Service

In speaking of the Mercy mission, many Sisters emphasised the need to come to a renewed understanding of the vow of service. They distinguished two aspects, the official stance on the vow as it was expressed in the Constitutions, and the operative aspect as it was evidenced in the Sisters' day-to-day activities. The official stance was expressed broadly enough to allow for interpretation by individual groups and the operative aspect was conditioned by contingencies in the local Mercy group and by the demands of local need.

Several Sisters said it was necessary to explain this vow very clearly to a person to whom such a concept was quite unfamiliar.

As one respondent observed:

I think the preaching of the Good News to the poor is one very strong, if not central, thing for the Sisters, in words and I think that it is there in fact. It may not have reached any kind of realisation, but I think it's in the hearts of the Sisters. And we're moving towards that -- or certainly in that thrust -- not without difficulty. But I think that it's there. So it's forcing us, I think, to really take stock of things. And when I say "it", it's a thrust that comes from the Sisters, and the thrust seems to gather momentum almost beyond ourselves and therefore it calls us all to something.

Sisters pointed out that, during the 1980 and 1981 General Chapters, members of the Mercy Order had heeded the challenge of the

Church given to all Catholics, and particularly to members of religious Orders, to show a "preferential option for the poor". The Sisters of Mercy took this challenge seriously, to the extent that one Sister was prompted to declare: "We say we serve the 'poor, sick, and ignorant', but I believe we are thinking more and more of the poor". Other Sisters saw the mission to the poor in a rather broad sense, and said:

Our mission is to reach out to the poor in whatever walk of life they may be -- the materially, the physically, the academically, and the spiritually poor. Somehow we have to be approachable for these people, available to them, and in empathy with them.

An overwhelming number of Sisters spoke of the importance for them of working with people in real need at particular times and in particular places. To identify the needy posed problems to individual Sisters and to Mercy groups. As one Sister said, finding a definition of the poor would always be difficult, but less difficult than finding the poor themselves. She remarked that:

Many of Catherine McAuley's sayings were centred around tenderness and care for the poor. In our Australian culture it is perhaps a little harder to "see" the poor, but I feel that we as individuals and as groups must always seek them out and care for them with the ideal of Christ's tenderness before our eyes.

The difficulties experienced by one group were summed up by one Sister in these words:

Our Mercy group seems to be struggling to find new ways to bring Christ's love and mercy to our world. We are caught in old models and old institutions, which many Sisters cannot reconcile with the crux of our mission as a corporate group, that is, 'an option for the poor'.

One way of finding where the mission is has been suggested by another Sister:

Perhaps it's again in the needs that are in society, and that are deeply personal in an age that has become depersonalised. And the respect for persons will be all-important.



This respect for persons is also seen from another point of view, as one Sister claims that:

The actual preaching of the good news to the poor is influenced strongly, I think, in its methodology, by the Sisters' understanding of development -- the human development. And so that receiving is as much part of it as giving, and insertion with the local church and in the local neighbourhood is receiving quite strong emphasis at this time.

A number of Sisters also commented that working with the needy demanded a re-orientation in their personal lives. One Sister expressed the feelings of many Sisters when she said:

I want to live my community life and my apostolic life in a way that parallels more closely what I am saying. If I say I'm for the poor, sick and ignorant, I'd like to be fairly obvious that that is indeed where I stand. I want to be able to match the words and the actions. There are many areas where I just feel quite out of kilter with what I say about it and how it actually is.

Another Sister suggested a way of matching the words and the actions by pointing out that:

We say we have an option for the poor. The poor need us to experience real poverty before we can understand, and give real compassion.

Many Sisters expressed the opinion that a very deep personal conversion would have to take place within the members of each Mercy group if the total Mercy Order was truly to live and be seen to live Gospel values, particularly Mercy.

#### Diversification of Ministries

Linked to the Sisters' understanding of Mercy mission, particularly in the light of the significance of their vow of service, was an awareness of the various ministries carried out by the Sisters. The realisation of the diversification of ministries in their groups was widespread among Sisters of Mercy. One Sister explained that:

As we were preparing for our last Chapter, we began to understand that mission was definitely our orientation, and that we were going to be called into a variety of ministries. It seemed to me to be something that was coming up right from the grassroots, and that that needed to be looked at very carefully. As a result of that movement, we now have a formation program throughout our Mercy group for an understanding of what diversity, ministry, and corporateness within communities may mean for us.

Other Mercy groups took a different view. One Major Superior commented that:

One of the big words that was tossed around in the pre-Chapter sessions and in the Chapter itself was this whole thing of diversity and how to deal with it, because it was apparent that there was a lot of hurt and suffering being caused by this in local communities. One thing that surprised me was how much people, in what you might call traditional ministries, were being threatened by those who were moving out into other ministries.

In referring to the increasing diversification of ministries, several Sisters related it to a deepening of their own knowledge of needs in society and a growing confidence that they could move into newer works of Mercy and still be within the Mercy mission. One Sister explained that:

We're beginning now to come to a more responsible and corporate understanding of what mission is all about, and a sort of glimmer of an understanding that the work I do certainly grows out of my talents and my individual gifts, but it's not just for me; it's for those that I serve.

In every Mercy group, the Sisters spoke of their service to the traditional Mercy works of education, health care, and social welfare, but also discussed the movement towards what several Sisters described as an individual, rather than a corporate, mission. While most Sisters expressed a real appreciation for what was happening with diversification of ministries, others wondered why they did not remain in traditional and well-tried ministries. One Sister explained it this way:

The vast majority [of our Sisters] support diversification of ministries, but there are always those who don't understand it. They see it as breaking down our strength.

For these Sisters, psychological bewilderment and disorientation were often the result when the rate of change into new ministries outstripped their adaptive capacity. Diversification of ministries revealed new emphases in the mission of each group and of the whole Mercy Order. Many Sisters perceived changing emphases in mission as peculiar to their group, but the picture for the whole Mercy Order throughout Australia showed remarkably similar patterns and trends.

The Sisters spoke of their continuing commitment to the Mercy mission in the areas of education, health care, and social welfare. They also described the ways by which a renewed awareness of the Mercy mission, as expressed in the light of Gospel values, the charisms of Catherine McAuley, and changing societal demands, often encouraged the Sisters to adopt a fresh approach and take a different direction within the traditional ministries. Finally, they discussed the movement into new ministries which were the Mercy response to the suffering, needs, and life questions of people in the present age.

In different dioceses in Australia, the Sisters perceived their work in education as an important part of their Mercy mission. At the same time, they pointed out that the numbers of Sisters in the traditional primary and secondary school apostolates had decreased quite dramatically during the period being studied, that is, between 1957 and 1981. They noted that the decline in numbers had begun in the latter part of the 1960's, in the years immediately after the Second Vatican Council. The statistics below (Table 1) show that, while the number of Sisters in some areas, for example, the administration of both primary and secondary education, has increased, the general picture of the number of Sisters in education shows the

Table 1

Australian Sisters of Mercy in Education:  
1966, 1971, 1976

| EDUCATION  | 1966 |       | 1971 |       | 1976 |       |
|--|------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|
|  | N    | %     | N    | %     | N    | %     |
| Administration: Primary                            | 98   | 2.56  | 117  | 3.24  | 160  | 4.78  |
| Administration: Secondary                          | 45   | 1.18  | 47   | 1.30  | 62   | 1.85  |
| Primary Teaching                                   | 1403 | 36.69 | 1189 | 32.92 | 725  | 21.67 |
| Secondary Teaching                                 | 662  | 17.31 | 589  | 16.31 | 388  | 11.60 |
| C.C.D./Adult Education/RE Co-ordination            | 15   | 0.39  | 20   | 0.55  | 59   | 1.76  |
| Tertiary/Research                                  | 9    | 0.24  | 12   | 0.33  | 27   | .81   |
| Special (eg Schools for Handicapped)               | 1    | 0.03  | 9    | 0.25  | 10   | .30   |
| Para-Professional (eg Librarians, Teachers' Aides) | 2    | 0.05  | 6    | 0.17  | 39   | 1.17  |
| Other (please specify)                             | 233  | 6.09  | 191  | 5.29  | 128  | 3.83  |
| <u>TOTAL</u>                                       | 2467 | 64.51 | 2180 | 60.35 | 1598 | 47.77 |

(Statistics Selected from the  
National Survey of Religious  
Personnel. 1976)

decline remarked upon by the Sisters. (Statistics for the five-year period, 1976-1981, were not available on a national basis. As statistics for many individual Mercy groups were incomplete, they provided a general impression of further decrease in numbers, but did not present a complete picture.)

In the years immediately after the Second Vatican Council and in response to Council directives, the Sisters of Mercy undertook radical personal and community renewal and adaptation. The Sisters said they were guided by the two broad principles prescribed by the Council: first, a continuous return to the original inspiration of a given community of religious, and second, an adjustment to the changed conditions of the times.

Speaking of this period, several Sisters recalled their difficulty in explaining to members of the clergy and to lay people why many Sisters of Mercy had moved out of traditional roles in schools. When Sisters discussed their mission in education in the more recent past, the picture that developed showed great diversity. Teaching in

a Catholic school is still high on the list of mission priorities for some groups. Sisters gave particular reasons for this emphasis. The Major Superior of one group said:

Whatever our Sisters may wish to do, education is not to lose personnel. For our diocese, our bishop can't see anything else but education in schools.

From a Mercy group in a country area, the Major Superior said that:

Quite a number of our Sisters are in schools, many of them still trying to keep the country schools open. The Bishop has been quite supportive in this.

Many Sisters expressed the opinion that education would always be an important area of mission for Sisters of Mercy, but that the way the Sisters were engaged in education had changed and would change even more. The Major Superior of a group of Mercy Sisters in a very large diocese spoke with some enthusiasm of their work in education, when she said:

Our Sisters are moving into a different form of education from what we've had in the past, one that challenges. In our schools, we have been making social justice awareness a very important part of the curriculum . . . . We're not necessarily educating people to be a success in life. We're educating them to accept the fact that they may even be unemployed. Both the structure and the emphasis in education will have to change.

A further development in education is the use of the school as a centre for all kinds of Mercy ministries. One practical example of this came from a Sister in an urban centre who said:

I think good things are happening in schools. We have one very poor school which we are trying to make a centre from which we move for apostolic service. We have counsellors in the school to help families with disturbed children or families who are in other kinds of difficulties. Some Sisters work with migrant families and move out in visitation. We would like to have Adult Education Centres for parents.

The movement of Sisters out of the traditional ways of being involved in ministry, and often into new ministries, has also been perceived in the fields of health care and social welfare. One Major Superior put it this way:

In recent years there's been much more diversification in ministry, but the common mission seems to be to try and make the Mercy of God present to the poor. And the tension is there between those who want to define the poor as the materially poor, and say that we should be there almost exclusively, and those who define the poor much more broadly.

Many Sisters perceived the movement into new ministries as lacking planning by the Order. In one group, the Sisters, both Major Superior and delegates agreed that:

In our group, many of us believe that we're moving into new ministries in a very haphazard fashion. We have no concerted plan of ministry for which there has been research to discover the needs of the poor. Most of our changes of ministry have been to meet a personal need in a Sister. While Sisters must be at home in their ministry, I think we're becoming more self-centred than reaching out. But maybe we have to go through that stage, and then to reach out, we will have to move out.

In other groups, Sisters described how their group had worked with lay people and with local priests to discover the mission of the local Church. One group noted that, in their local area, the people wanted to see the Sisters in Education. When they realised that this was not possible, the lay people said it was important that the Sisters remain to witness to the Gospel value of Mercy. The Sisters believed that the lay people realised that there was more to the mission of the Sisters of Mercy than teaching in a school. In earlier times, if the Sisters left the school, the lay people expected that they would also leave the town.

It was also true of Sisters in hospitals, that if they had to give up nursing, they also left the hospital. Today, pastoral care of patients and their families and counselling of lay staff are two major emphases of Mercy mission in the area of health care. In Table 2, the numbers of Sisters in health care and related ministries are indicated. As with the numbers of Sisters moving into administration in education, there is an increase of Sisters in administration in health care and also in nursing education. Although

Table 2

Australian Sisters of Mercy in Health Care  
and Related Ministries:  
1966, 1971, 1976

|   | 1966 |      | 1971 |      | 1976 |      |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|   | N    | %    | N    | %    | N    | %    |
| <u>HEALTH CARE AND RELATED MINISTRIES</u>     |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Administration (eg Matron) ... ..             | 29   | .76  | 35   | 0.97 | 47   | 1.41 |
| Medicine (eg Doctor, Chemist, Radiologist)... | 6    | .16  | 3    | 0.08 | 2    | .06  |
| Nursing in Hospitals (except for Geriatric)   | 227  | 5.94 | 195  | 5.40 | 149  | 4.45 |
| Home Nursing ... ..                           | 8    | 0.21 | 4    | 0.11 | 10   | .30  |
| Geriatric Nursing ... ..                      | 15   | 0.39 | 16   | 0.44 | 18   | .54  |
| Para-Medical (eg Nurses' Aide, Lab. Asst.)... | 12   | 0.31 | 18   | 0.50 | 21   | .63  |
| Clinics for Alcoholics, Drug Dependents ...   | 1    | 0.03 | -    | -    | 1    | .03  |
| Nursing Education ... ..                      | 8    | 0.21 | 14   | 0.39 | 14   | .42  |
| Other (please specify) ... ..                 | 31   | 0.81 | 40   | 1.11 | 25   | .75  |
| <u>TOTAL</u>                                  | 337  | 8.81 | 325  | 9.00 | 287  | 8.58 |

(Statistics Selected from the  
National Survey of Religious  
Personnel. 1976)

Major Superiors indicated that they found it increasingly difficult to persuade Sisters to take positions of authority, in actual fact, the number of Sisters in such positions has increased.

Sisters in every Mercy group specifically mentioned that the social welfare and pastoral care ministries were attracting increasing numbers of Sisters. This increase is noticeable in the figures listed in Table 3. Other changes, such as work with youth and with women, which the Sisters described as becoming more and more important to them as it was to the Foundress, does not appear in any of the tables of statistics.

In attempting to account for the movement of Sisters into social welfare and pastoral care ministries, one Sister said that:

Many Sisters feel called to work very closely with the materially poor. They think that in many ways their schools and hospitals serve the middle-class, whom they believe are well able to do without them.

Mercy groups with Sisters working in country areas stressed the importance of their continuing presence among the people. Different

Table 3

Australian Sisters of Mercy in Social Welfare  
and Pastoral Care Ministries:  
1966, 1971, 1976

| SOCIAL/PASTORAL CARE                              | 1966 |      | 1971 |      | 1976 |      |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|   | N    | %    | N    | %    | N    | %    |
| Administration                                    | 18   | 0.47 | 15   | 0.42 | 21   | 0.63 |
| Pastoral Care (eg Retreats, Renewal, Parish Team) | -    | -    | -    | -    | 28   | 0.24 |
| Counselling                                       | -    | -    | -    | -    | 5    | 0.15 |
| Home for Unmarried Mothers                        | 6    | 0.16 | 7    | 0.19 | 2    | 0.06 |
| Caring for Handicapped Children                   | -    | -    | 2    | 0.06 | -    | -    |
| Caring for Aged/Ill (includes Hospital Visits)    | 10   | 0.26 | 19   | 0.53 | 52   | 1.55 |
| Child Care  | 61   | 1.60 | 64   | 1.77 | 51   | 1.52 |
| Work with Migrants                                | -    | -    | -    | -    | 1    | 0.03 |
| Work with Aborigines                              | -    | -    | 2    | 0.06 | 6    | 0.18 |
| Other (please specify)                            | 9    | 0.24 | 11   | 0.30 | 19   | 0.57 |
| <u>TOTAL</u>                                      | 104  | 2.72 | 120  | 3.32 | 185  | 5.53 |

(Statistics Selected from the  
National Survey of Religious  
Personnel. 1976)

aspects which the Sisters mentioned included "keeping the Faith alive in various little parishes", and "expressing Mercy by contact with and compassion for the people".

The Sisters perceived that many members of the Mercy Order are moving out of the schools and hospitals and into a ministry in which they would be working closely with the poor in Australian society and overseas. The works include a number of short-term apostolates where the need is to make a response to a particular "moment in history", for example, refugees, flood relief victims, development of a parish, spirituality for solo parents, shelters for homeless youth. The work carried out at General Chapters helped Sisters to identify needs. From one urban group of Mercy Sisters, there was this comment:

One of the main thrusts, that is theoretical thrusts, was to get back to our roots, to look to the poorer areas, have an eye to lay people, to leadership of all lay people, to women, not only the needy and to get them into leadership positions.

Several Sisters pointed out that many of Catherine McAuley's sayings were centred around tenderness and care for the poor, for whom she showed special affection.



In all Mercy ministries, the Sisters believe that there is a "Mercy way", described by one Sister in the following words:

I think I would see the most important service that, as Mercies we can offer, is in the quality of our relating to people. We must relate to them in a human way and in an incarnational way.

Many Sisters were puzzled about finding ways to meet the need for creativity and initiative when they and their clients were grappling together with real-life problems. They sometimes felt inhibited from acting in the way they felt was the Mercy way. They gave the example that once they receive funding from the Government for schools, hospitals, and welfare institutions, they are cautious and reluctant to be critical of the way in which the Government acts. They experience a tension between what is required by the "letter of the law", and what they believe is an appropriate Mercy response to need.

A growing consciousness of the outside world was also noted among the Sisters and, in particular, a developing national consciousness. One Sister identified the present major emphases in Mercy mission in the following comments:

We respond to those forces in society which are working for the building up of the Kingdom and we endeavour to witness and work against those forces at work in our world which destroy the Kingdom. Hence we have a special mission to the poor, sick and ignorant, to those disadvantaged in any way.

Many Sisters had expressed concern that their Mercy group found difficulty in identifying needs to which individual Sisters or the group could adequately respond. They remarked, also, that official community decisions about mission were unduly influenced by groups outside the Mercy community. The Sisters noted that their work in various ministries has had, in the past quarter of a century, an increasing number of the middle-class as clients. As a result, they saw a need for clear articulation of the Mercy option for the poor,

as well as fundamental changes in the places where they work and the clients whom they serve.

### Determinants of Need in Mission

The Sisters explained that an appropriate body in the Mercy community decided what were authentic needs, and which Sister or Sisters would respond to a particular need. At the same time, they described how Church members, in a parish, the parish priest, or the Bishop, were capable of influencing community decisions by expressing a strong wish that Sisters stay in or move out of a particular ministry.

In many cases, the influence took the form of expectations about what the Sisters would or would not do in the parish. Public expectation is keenly felt in some areas, as one Sister demonstrates in this quotation:

Public expectation in our diocese (that is, about what work Sisters should do) arises largely out of a very conservative church. It's one that we're highly aware of because we're aware of differing from it, trying to close the gap and trying to be sensitive to it, trying to educate the people at the same time. I think we are particularly sensitive to it and possibly it conditions us in sorts of little ways that we'd be unaware of. I think we're prepared to be creative in the midst of it, but it's been a source of a lot of pain for us actually that we have gone ahead and we've made our changes.

Many Sisters pointed out that the need for Sisters of Mercy in a particular area and with certain people was not always apparent. One Sister gave an explanation for this when she said:

In the everyday working world, you really just go on doing, don't you? A few of our Sisters may be doing a bit of seeing of people's needs and what they want and things like that, but the rest of mankind is just doing, you know, the everyday thing in one way or another.

Other Sisters pointed out that it had been the policy of their community leaders and members that, as they were part of the local

Church, they would consider very seriously any desire or request expressed by the hierarchy, and also by the people. The Sisters would make their decision, then, in the light of the mission of their group and their resources of different kinds. Usually, the community leaders had been able to respond positively to requests that Sisters should engage in a particular ministry. However, this was not always possible. One Sister explained that:

We are not so much withdrawing from the schools to go somewhere else. We're withdrawing from the schools because we have no one else to put there. We're not against schools in any way, but we've rationalised and have consciously tried to use our personnel resources in the most effective way.

In many areas, as was mentioned earlier, Church expectations, as well as public ones, are that the Sisters should be teaching or working in hospitals. One Sister would like the expectations to be different:

I have a feeling that we would like them to be asking us more of the right questions. And putting the pressure on us to respond in more of the areas which we think are the right areas.

Many Sisters spoke appreciatively of the encouragement their Major Superiors gave to members of their communities who appeared to have a special insight into the needs of the poor. As one Sister said: "Our Major Superior nurtures sparks of growth in our Congregation, rather than always making pronouncements on high". Speaking of Sisters' moving into ministries with the poor, a Major Superior gave this insight into the attitude of many Sisters in her position when she explained that:

I feel there is flexibility in the Sisters and opportunities at hand. I'm convinced that, if Sisters are dedicated and determined to do something, it should be allowed to happen and would happen. You know, sometimes people complain, but I think they lack the initiative and perseverance to do anything.

Difficulties for Sisters in a Mercy mission are primarily related to the expectations described earlier. Some Sisters felt that they are kept in a mould by people's expectations "out there". They said that, if they were trying to live up to expectations, they could be prevented from seeing other needs and responding to them.

The Sisters saw as crucial the necessity to determine when and how ministries change if the changes are to be both effective and authentic. One Sister said that she thought that the main challenge facing the Sisters was to look at the kind of people with whom they were working. If they found themselves with groups other than the needy, they would have to examine the reasons for such a choice.

Sisters also expressed their feelings when they had to move out of a work that had been traditionally "Mercy". In speaking of one instance, a Sister commented:

There's a feeling that there's a drain off from schools, and we don't easily give away what we've already had, so it's always painful for us to withdraw Sisters from school or close an operation that's an institutional operation. We've always had a long history, like all Sisters of Mercy, I think, of having difficulty in saying no.

It has not been easy for all groups to sustain institutional works nor to keep Sisters in them. One Major Superior described the dilemma in her group:

In the past few years, the people and, to a lesser extent, the Bishop have begun to see other places, valuable places other than schools, for Sisters to be ministering. But we are very limited because our only source of income are stipends and social security. We have no other, which means you can only manage to support Sisters in other ministries up to a point and then it's virtually impossible to take more Sisters out of school because we can't support them . . . . We do have a Sister earning a wage as a nurse in a hospital, and the money she brings in supports two other Sisters. So we're looking to that kind of future.

All groups found that one way in which pressure to remain in certain works was exerted indirectly on them was that some works such as teaching attracts a stipend and other works do not. One Sister with the title of counsellor in the Diocese was on something less than half a teacher's stipend.

Several Sisters remarked that the pressures to remain in traditional areas at a time when there were decreasing numbers of Sisters were mostly of their own making. Sisters of Mercy, they said, seemed in the past to have an inability to say "no" to new ministries. Another Major Superior said that, if Sisters did not teach in a school or nurse in a hospital, they were not welcome in a certain diocese. At least, that had been her feeling in trying to place Sisters. Another Major Superior had similar experiences, and claimed that one of the reasons she sent Sisters to mission work outside the diocese was that they could have the opportunity of really using their creative gifts which they could not do at home. Several Sisters mentioned the attitude of the local Bishop as an influence on the choice of ministry for their group. In one instance, in the late '50's, a Major Superior wanted to establish a centre for aboriginal women, at their request. The Bishop would not permit this. Attempts have been made repeatedly since then, and it is still not permitted. If any Sister of Mercy in that diocese wants to go to that group of poor, she would have to leave the diocese.

The situation is very different in other dioceses. Several Major Superiors said how lucky they were with the Bishops in their dioceses. One Sister said that she did not believe that they thought the Sisters should be back in the schools; they were willing to let the Sisters do what they thought was the best thing to do. Most Major Superiors, however, wished that there was more pastoral planning

so that the Sisters would know the Bishops' priorities and be able to take them into consideration when planning their involvement in various ministries in their dioceses.

In the past, it was not a common practice for Mercy Sisters to go on mission far from their own community. Furthermore, in all the ministries in which Sisters of Mercy engaged, there was little evidence of past exchange of Sisters or lending of personnel to other Mercy groups. When Sisters moved outside their own group, it was usually for reasons of health or to offer particular apostolic expertise. Other Sisters went as members of groups to serve in overseas "mission" countries, but exchange within Australia was not a common occurrence. Sisters explained this on the grounds that different Mercy communities "tailored" their needs for personnel in a particular ministry to the personnel available in their particular group.

Many Sisters experienced personal difficulty in not having the support of their group when they wished to respond to a need outside the accepted Mercy work of their group. One Sister discussed the particular difficulties in her group when she said:

In the appointments next year, it's almost taken for granted that there'll be a few more working out. Yet our observable policy, as it comes through from our present provincial council, appears to be that it's only done on sufferance, that it's very important that the Sisters come back to their own province before too long. "You've worked enough for the people out there. Come back and give something to our own group".

Several Sisters expressed the opinion that an attitude, such as the one just quoted, reflected an understanding of Mercy mission which was not in the tradition of Catherine McAuley. These Sisters related this attitude to questions about directions which the Mercy mission would take in the future. Issues, such as identification of the poor, would help determine priorities in ministry.

### Future Directions in Mission

Sisters were convinced that the future in Mercy mission is related to the struggle they will experience coming to a common understanding of both "Mercy" and "mission". Many of them thought that the new structure of governance would widen the mission field and open up new areas of need, particularly among the materially poor. They felt that the various aspects of the pastoral apostolate will develop, and that traditional ministries will become more dynamic. They look to the new structure of governance to facilitate the creative energies of the Sisters to respond to real needs for Mercy.

Sisters said that each Mercy member and each Mercy group must search for the meaning of Mercy and Mercy mission for the 1980's. They expected that the new Institute of the Sisters of Mercy would challenge all Sisters to critical self-examination and to respond to need beyond their present vision; that it would alert Sisters to the vision of other groups and to the practical working out of ideas; and above all, that it would remove complacency and cowardice in dealing with major issues of mission.

They questioned the desirability and feasibility of centralised planning and the integration of Mercy ministries, and identified the Plenary Council of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy as the most appropriate forum, outside the local Mercy community, for interchange of ideas about mission.

From the data on Mercy mission, a high degree of unanimity was evident in the way the Sisters expressed their understanding of Mercy mission. The perceptions of some individuals and groups differed in several respects from this overall pattern. Major Superiors, delegates, and a representative sample of members of the Mercy Order agreed that Chapter meetings were used by Mercy groups

to redefine mission and articulate its corporate nature. Major Superiors and delegates recognised the need, too, to clarify the Mercy understanding of "the poor". Some few Sisters, particularly those who said they were engaged in traditional institutional works of Mercy, expressed the opinion that the total group of Sisters of Mercy were in danger of emphasising "service to the poor" and forgetting "service of the sick and ignorant".

All Sisters were most articulate about the significance in their lives of the vow of service. Most Sisters realised that work in the Mercy mission, as they lived out their vow of service, would change with places and circumstances. Again, a small number of Sisters revealed their fear that increasing age and decreasing physical stamina and mobility would, as one Sister said, "turn her into a useless old woman". For these Sisters, the vow of service was equated with active work, in particular, in some kind of institution.

These same Sisters disagreed, in general, with the new emphases in Mercy mission, especially the ministries in which perhaps only one Sister was working with a group of lay people. Some respondents spoke quite vehemently about Sisters working in isolation as "people doing their own thing" who would not persevere in religious life. They were critical, too, of the leaders of the various Mercy groups who permitted Sisters to undertake such work.

Sisters, who, in general, took a view of Mercy mission which differed in a marked way from the view of other Sisters, were slow to accept that difficulties in mission should be examined and resolved. If, for example, the difficulty related to the attitude of a parish priest or bishop, these Sisters gave the impression that the clergy and hierarchy were always correct in their judgments and that the suffering Sister had to put up with what she perceived as injustice.



While all Sisters agreed that the future of the Mercy mission was related to the struggle to come to a common understanding of both "Mercy" and "mission", some Sisters made a judgment that the new Institute of the Sisters of Mercy would be detrimental to the local Mercy groups. Again, fear was expressed that the central Secretariate group would interfere in local matters. On the other hand, the majority of Sisters, and particularly the Major Superiors, had great confidence that the new structure of governance would facilitate the creative energies of individual Sisters and Mercy groups to respond to real needs for Mercy.

One Sister spoke very forcefully of the impact which she hoped the Institute would have on the mission of the Sisters of Mercy when she said:

I feel that if in fact the Institute make no significant difference, not for us but for the people whom we were founded to serve, then it's failed. Let's say, not so much failed, as that it's not a helpful structure.

Mission is important in understanding the nature of the Mercy Order as an organisation. From the evidence collected about this organisational characteristic, the following conclusions were drawn. Each conclusion is preceded by a short preamble to place the conclusion in context. Where appropriate, a brief reference to relevant literature follows each conclusion.

#### CONCLUSIONS: FOCUS ON MISSION

The mission of the Mercy Order is service of the poor, the sick, and the ignorant, and is based on the vow of service. The mission is corporate in the sense that Sisters have a common understanding of its meaning. Ministry is the manner in which the mission is carried out. Within the corporate mission, Sisters are able to undertake individual ministries to meet particular expressed needs by

using their unique abilities, gifts, and interests.

*Mercy mission is corporate in nature in that all Sisters take a vow to serve the poor, the sick, and the ignorant. The expression of this mission takes the form of a variety of group and individual ministries.*

In the literature reviewed in Chapter 3, the concept of the corporate nature of mission was supported by Chittister (1980:84), while the distinction between mission and ministry was argued by Gottomoeller (1980) and Neal (1977). This is an example of the way in which Sisters of Mercy as an organisation have coped with the tension between organisational demands and individual needs (Argyris, 1962).

The official stance of the Mercy Order about mission is expressed in the vow of service in the Mercy Constitutions and is broad enough to allow for interpretation by individual groups. In their day-to-day ministries, Sisters are able to exercise autonomy to meet contingencies in their local group and the demands of local expressed needs.

*The importance of autonomy in mission, for individuals and for Mercy groups, is evidenced by the inclusion of the vow of service in the Mercy Constitutions and the freedom of individual Sisters and local communities to engage in a range of ministries.*

The importance of autonomy in serving clients for a human service organisation, such as a religious community, has yet to be researched and discussed in the literature.

At each Mercy Chapter, Sisters re-evaluate the expression of their vow of service. They identify an increasing diversification of ministries, and relate this to a deepening knowledge of needs expressed by societal groups and to a growing awareness of their ability to meet these needs. Diversification of ministries reveals new emphases in the mission of each group and of the whole Mercy Order.

*Sisters justify increasing diversification of ministries, within the Mercy mission, by emphasising the importance of the vow of service in responding to expressed needs.*

The importance to a religious community of responding to contemporary needs through a variety of ministries is acknowledged in the literature by writers such as Dondero and Frary (1979:32). This is consistent with the review of literature on human service organisations which emphasises response to needs.

The Second Vatican Council mandated that all religious institutes undertake personal renewal and adaptation by a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration of a given community of religious, and second, an adjustment to the changed conditions of the times. The Sisters of Mercy responded to these directions and a later mandate from the Church to show a "preferential option for the poor" by involving all members of the Order in a process of examination and re-evaluation of the vow of service. As a result, Sisters of Mercy emphasise service to people in real poverty as the focus of their mission.

*The involvement of all Sisters in the process of examining and re-interpreting the vow of service leads to a clearer expression and a shared understanding of Mercy mission. The focus on service to people in real poverty in society provides firm direction for Mercy mission.*

This change of emphasis in the service of the poor to the most needy in society has also been the subject of discussion in the literature on human service organisations. The writings of Pollak (1976:5) are one example.

Individual Sisters are becoming aware of an increasing diversity of expressed needs. They believe that the Mercy Order, by planning the use of its resources, can respond to some needs while other needs will be more efficiently met if the Order collaborates and plans with individuals and groups in the Church and in the wider society.

*To respond more efficiently to expressed needs, Sisters look for increasing collaboration and planning within the Mercy Order and with people in the Church and in the wider society.*

### COMMITMENT OF MEMBERS

The voluntary nature of membership in a community of women religious has always been one of its distinctive characteristics. The initiative is taken by the woman applying for membership; the religious organisation reserves the right to accept her or not. Once a woman has gained admission to such a community, her commitment to the organisation is strengthened through her assent to the vowed life in community. As one respondent put it:

The day I took my vows, I really felt that I was accepted as a Sister of Mercy, not only by the other Sisters in the group, but also by people in the Church and in the community at large. I also experienced a very strong sense of commitment to the goals of the group.

#### Significance of the Vows

Among the major changes in religious living experienced by the respondents in this research, the manner of living the vows was mentioned by almost every Sister. The Sisters stressed the place of the vows in their commitment to the religious organisation. As one respondent put it:

Opinions differ, but there is no doubt in my mind that we must be constantly redefining our understanding of the vows. However, as long as we remember what we profess to be, that is, witnesses to God's love and mercy, we shall be all right.

Several Sisters outlined the stages through which their understanding and living of the vows were changed, and their commitment to the religious organisation was strengthened. There was a high degree of consensus among the Sisters that a change of attitude towards the vows was experienced as they studied the documents of the Second Vatican Council. They spoke of the renewed emphasis by the Church

that each religious community was to define in its Constitutions the manner in which the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience were to be observed in its way of life. For the Sisters of Mercy, the aspect of mercy in relation to their vows was an important issue. During the Special General Chapters which the Vatican Council mandated to be held after the closing of the Council, the Sisters of Mercy of each Australian group made decisions about the living of the vows for their particular group. In addition to the three vows mentioned by the Council, the Sisters of Mercy also studied their vow of service to the poor, the sick, and the ignorant.

While the Mercy groups were studying the vows in the light of directives from the Council, changes in society outside the religious community provided a fresh perspective against which to measure the impact of the Council documents. Developments in understanding the functioning of individuals and of people in groups were found in both psychology and sociology. Their application to the understanding of members of religious communities was quickly made. In this section on the commitment of members in the Mercy Order, the influence of the Sisters' understanding of the vows is mentioned more often than any other issue related to commitment.

The data revealed that the organisational commitment of the Sister respondents was not homogeneous and unidimensional, but was a multidimensional phenomenon, which was a reflection of the Sisters themselves. One respondent was convinced that the commitment of members was the most significant aspect of the Mercy group, and that the strength of the Order came from the vitality of the individuals.

### Spiritual and Professional Development

Sisters today, the respondents claimed, are very different, spiritually and professionally, from what they were in the 1950's. They attributed this to a variety of renewal programmes which were available around Australia. One respondent spoke of the influence of one programme:

In our program, we had a group of Sisters of Mercy under forty years of age. They felt so much at one with other Mercies that for them that Federation and Union thing just went; they still felt just Mercies. This is the wonderment that they felt they brought back with them.

In some groups, rather than sending people away to programmes, Sisters waited until certain needs were evident and then worked with other Sisters on a type of self-help programme.

Many Sisters remarked that the different kinds of renewal were important to the group as a whole. As one Major Superior expressed it: "You can't see much with what you're doing at the time, but over a period of time you can see people just gradually opening up and able to cope with new ideas". Another Sister presented a different point of view on the influence of renewal programmes and on the leadership of their group. The following opinion was shared by Sisters in several groups. The Sister said that:

No matter how authoritarian the structures happen to be, if you start educating people, a sort of democratisation process begins in the group. I don't think that we have ever really considered that, as a result of the process, inevitably tension must develop between the newly educated and those in authority.

This point of view was recognised by one Major Superior who spoke of the renewed Sisters as a "more informed proletariat". As a person vested with formal power, she said that she found the renewed Sisters to be very open to change and cooperative in the implementation of change.

The Sisters recalled that spiritual renewal and an upgrading in qualifications and professional training often occurred at the same time. Both types of renewal did go on in all the Mercy groups, but at different rates of growth. Some groups, with access to tertiary institutions, found it easier to move quite quickly into professional development of the Sisters, while some country groups found it very difficult to get their Sisters to an educational centre where they could upgrade their qualifications. Many Sisters were full-time teachers, and efforts at correspondence programmes placed a great psychological and physical strain upon many Sisters.

Speaking from her personal experience of professional development, one Sister recalled that:

I started in 1963, or something like that, and did one University subject a year. Towards the end, I did a couple and nearly killed myself because, at that stage, I was looking after boarders and also teaching.

The researcher's own similar experience tends to confirm the view that some Sisters in country areas were at a serious disadvantage in not being able to pursue tertiary studies.

One Major Superior of a group with most of its communities in a large urban centre pointed out that:

The focus for us in the late 1950's and early 1960's was much more on professional development and updating than on spiritual renewal because, at that stage, there were few renewal courses available.

The following remarks by one Sister highlight the problems experienced by many Sisters who saw the need for renewal.

There was a desire prior to the Vatican Council for greater professional development and further study so as to equip ourselves better. The desire was certainly there, but the pressures of our works prevented anything from taking effect.

The movement out of the convents for spiritual and professional renewal gave Sisters the opportunity to meet with people who held

very different views from those they held themselves. One Sister explained that, for her group,

. . . it made mixing possible. We were very isolated and we began to get to know some of the Sisters from further north, who began to drop in to our place when travelling through. It was getting to know people, meeting them at seminars, and sharing with them.

Several Sisters mentioned that moving beyond their own group was an important experience for them. One Sister commented that:

There was a gradual breaking down the barriers of Sisters who had never travelled. We didn't even have a holiday outside the diocese until more recent years. I say recent, well I entered in 1950, and all of this has been happening only since the late 1960's.

Other renewal experiences came slowly, too, as one Sister described in the following quotation:

In the forties and to the end of the sixties, there was a great deal of "moulding", so that by the seventies there was much dissatisfaction and a movement from the grass roots up, looking for -- almost demanding -- education and a more human life style, more consultation and that kind of thing. There were also the Vatican documents which we had studied and the call was there. From the seventies with a new Major Superior, there was a major change in style. The humanising had started.

In some Mercy communities, the Sisters remarked that renewal did not seem to lead them anywhere. One Sister remarked that, "in the early years after the Council, Sisters did begin to go to programs and courses, but could not spread their wings very far or extend them when they came home". At the same time, coming into the convents, were the documents from the Second Vatican Council. One Sister said: When the walls came tumbling down, the strong outside breezes were too much for some people". According to another Sister,

. . . the suddenness of some external changes, for example, in dress, and in use of leisure time, was too great for some Sisters to sustain. The resulting tension led, in some cases, to movement out of religious community.



### Changes in Community Living

Several Sisters commented, that in the period since the Council, "individualism" has been growing and they believed that Sisters would have to alter their expression of religious living to accommodate this change, otherwise the pressures on each other would increase. Many Sisters hoped to see a continued growth in the kind of community living by which each member is more and more aware of the ministry of others even though it may differ from the usual type of ministry engaged in by the group.

The following comments by one of the Sisters exemplify what many Sisters thought about community life at that period.

As yet, it seems to me, we have not come to grips with a concept of "different apostolates" operating within the same group. The survival of the individual within the group requires some skilful technique at times, technique to cope with pressures from those who impose their own idea of "community living" on the rest of the group without considering what might be required in the particular apostolate in which each one works.

Many Sisters expressed a deep desire for smaller, more convenient dwellings as a kind of support for this renewed type of community. They indicated that these types of dwellings would help to provide a new context for living as well as a new perspective into group relationships. The statistics in Table 4 demonstrate the extent to which smaller numbers were being accommodated in the one community, but do not reveal any information about the dwellings themselves.

The following remarks from one young Sister sum up the wishes expressed by Sisters in many groups:

I believe that we must move out of the sheltered, safe refuges we have made for ourselves in our convents to a more demanding life-style, and in particular, make our convents open to all.

Table 4

Size of Religious Communities in Mercy Order:  
1966, 1971, 1976

| Year            | 2-5<br>Religious | 6-10<br>Religious | 11-15<br>Religious | 16-20<br>Religious | 21-40<br>Religious | 40+<br>Religious | Total |
|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------|
| 1966            | 113              | 104               | 50                 | 19                 | 33                 | 12               | 331   |
| 1971            | 128              | 103               | 44                 | 20                 | 33                 | 12               | 340   |
| 1976            | 152              | 96                | 39                 | 20                 | 24                 | 8                | 339   |
| Change<br>66-76 | +39              | -8                | -11                | +1                 | -8                 | -4               | +8    |

(Statistics Selected from the  
National Survey of Religious  
Personnel. 1976)

Many Sisters experienced a special sense of bonding with other Sisters in their own group when they were working together on a Mercy project. The data from the interviews and questionnaires revealed that the Sisters in traditional, institutional Mercy ministries, such as teaching in a school or nursing in a hospital, referred to this feeling of bonding more frequently than did the Sisters working in an individual apostolate. Sisters accounted for this feeling by saying they experienced a sense of Mercy history when they were working in a ministry which had been staffed for some time by Mercy Sisters. Even if only two or three Mercy Sisters were now working there, those Sisters still saw it as a Mercy work and, therefore, their work. Sisters working in individual apostolates commented that they were often on closer terms with lay members of their work group with whom they shared work experiences than with members of the Mercy community who, perhaps, did not fully understand individual Sister's work.

Sisters expressed a concern that networks of support for their work and for themselves personally were only in the early stages of development. To this point, individual Sisters looked to various Mercy groups, such as the Mercy Hospitals Association, for support in their ministries, and to their communities for personal support. Apart from these sources, the Sisters saw the need to initiate and develop new ways of supporting each other through something like resource exchange networks which would also be one means of assisting their continuing commitment to the Mercy Order.

In recent years, Major Superiors have found it increasingly difficult to get Sisters to accept the position of leader of community, and administrator in either hospital or school. They believe that pressure has something to do with it, pressure of life and the complexity of the role of principal or administrator, and wonder if a new theology is needed to see administration as a service, as a ministry, and as an apostolate. In spite of this reluctance to undertake positions of responsibility, Sisters commented upon the commitment which they saw as characteristic of the total membership.

Sisters said they were impressed, when they came to National Meetings, at the quality of Sisters' commitment to the total Mercy group. One Sister said that she had been struck by the tremendous wealth of intellect, of dedication, of knowledge, and commitment of the Sisters. The community had a history of exceptional women, and each group spoke of special women in their group. These women all shared one thing, according to the Sisters; they were women who were so exceptional in a personal approach that they built enormously strong and viable links with people. According to one Sister, these women will probably not be replaced. She remarked:

I still think of some of the people who have died within the last few years, in their late seventies or so, as being amongst some of the most talented women I've ever known. I'm not so sure that their places are being fully taken.

While the respondents in general perceived that Sisters of Mercy assented willingly to a vowed life in community, some few Sisters expressed misgivings about the way that other Sisters lived as members of the Mercy Order.

One misgiving was related to the vow of poverty as it was understood by different members of the community. One Sister said that:

Often times, these young Sisters come up with an idea of what we should be doing about poverty, and when we look back, it's what we did. We had some communities in very isolated areas that were pretty poor and with no possibility of an assured income. They just lived from hand to mouth. While now we hear these young ones saying that's what we should be doing, and they don't realise that that's what we did.

Comments, such as those just quoted, highlight a problem experienced in some communities, that is, a lack of understanding between age groups. One Sister identified lack of communication as a contributing factor in this problem, when she said that:

There is still some polarisation in certain communities because some Sisters simply will not make the effort to speak to other Sisters.

Not all Sisters have been prepared to accept change. Among some groups, the Sisters perceive this reluctance as one reason for the development of polarisation among the Sisters. In its extreme form, the lack of ability for some Sisters to accept change has caused bitterness and withdrawal into isolation.

Other Sisters said that they saw a change in Sisters' relationships with some people. They thought that lay people were

eventually seeing the possibility of religious being there as supports rather than leaders. They believed that religious women had an important task, too, to help laity assume their rightful and active role in the Church.

In every group, Sisters commented upon the loss of members through voluntary departure. Most Sisters remarked that departure from the religious Order was related to a complexity of personal and community factors. One Sister draws attention to a different way of looking at this phenomenon. In speaking of her own group, she says that:

We have lost a lot and some whom we have lost I am very sorry that we have lost. I think perhaps we have been responsible for helping them to go rather than helping them to stay. I think we have made the mistake of falling over backwards to be fair, to allow them their right to choose, and so on. For some, of course, who have gone, one can only be glad that they found the truth for themselves and hope that they are now living a fulfilling life.

In Table 5 below, the statistics show the total decrease in the number of Sisters which includes loss through death as well as voluntary departure. In the column headed "On leave or exclaustation", there is a clear indication of the increase in the number of Sisters who, between 1966 and 1976, were taking official steps to leave the Mercy Order, that is, to sever their official commitment with the Order. The reasons which caused these Sisters to do this were not the subject of this research.

Table 5

Complete Membership of Australian  
Mercy Order on September 1:  
1966, 1971, 1976

| Year         | Postulants |      | Novices |      | Temp. Professed |      | Finally Professed |       | Total |     | On Leave or Ex-claustration |            |
|--------------|------------|------|---------|------|-----------------|------|-------------------|-------|-------|-----|-----------------------------|------------|
|              | N          | %    | N       | %    | N               | %    | N                 | %     | N     | %   | N                           | % of Total |
| 1966         | 81         | 1.94 | 161     | 3.86 | 363             | 8.71 | 3563              | 85.49 | 4170  | 100 | 1                           | .002       |
| 1971         | 23         | .59  | 67      | 1.74 | 256             | 6.63 | 3514              | 91.04 | 3850  | 100 | 46                          | 1.19       |
| 1976         | 14         | .41  | 35      | 1.02 | 106             | 3.08 | 3291              | 95.50 | 3446  | 100 | 59                          | 1.71       |
| Change 66-76 | -61        |      | -126    |      | -257            |      | -274              |       | -724  |     | +58                         |            |

(Statistics Selected from the  
National Survey of Religious  
Personnel. 1976)

However, the decrease in total numbers of Sisters and the age structure of the total group (see Table 6) bear a direct relationship to the number of Sisters available for active, that is, full-time work in Mercy ministries (see Table 7).

In Figures 7 and 8, there is evidence from two Mercy groups of the continuing decrease of numbers in full-time apostolic work and an increase in the numbers of retired Sisters. These two groups show numerical trends that are typical of all Australian Mercy groups to this point.

From the findings about the commitment of members in the Mercy Order, the following conclusions about commitment were formulated.

Table 6  
Age Structure of Mercy Order:  
1966, 1971, 1976

| Age   | 1966 |      | 1971 |       | 1976 |       |
|-------|------|------|------|-------|------|-------|
|       | N    | %    | N    | %     | N    | %     |
| -20   | 151  | 3.62 | 26   | 0.67  | 3    | 0.09  |
| 20-24 | 375  | 8.99 | 222  | 5.75  | 63   | 1.83  |
| 25-29 | 373  | 8.94 | 334  | 8.66  | 177  | 5.14  |
| 30-34 | 408  | 9.78 | 332  | 8.60  | 283  | 8.21  |
| 35-39 | 338  | 8.11 | 390  | 10.11 | 295  | 8.65  |
| 40-44 | 300  | 7.19 | 326  | 8.45  | 348  | 10.10 |
| 45-49 | 290  | 6.95 | 282  | 7.31  | 309  | 8.97  |
| 50-54 | 394  | 9.45 | 275  | 7.13  | 277  | 8.04  |
| 55-59 | 366  | 8.78 | 381  | 9.87  | 278  | 8.07  |
| 60-64 | 318  | 7.63 | 354  | 9.17  | 367  | 10.65 |
| 65-69 | 265  | 6.35 | 304  | 7.88  | 341  | 9.90  |
| 70-74 | 243  | 5.83 | 235  | 6.09  | 277  | 8.04  |
| 75-79 | 181  | 4.34 | 201  | 5.21  | 203  | 5.89  |
| 80+   | 168  | 4.03 | 197  | 5.10  | 222  | 6.44  |
| TOTAL | 4170 | 100  | 3860 | 100   | 3446 | 100   |

(Statistics Selected from the  
National Survey of Religious  
Personnel. 1976)

Table 7

Complete Membership of the Mercy Order  
by Apostolic Status:  
1966, 1971, 1976

| Year            | Preparatory<br>i.e. Postulants<br>Novices<br>Students |      | Active<br>i.e. Full-<br>time<br>Apostolate |       | Retired<br>and<br>Semi-<br>Retired |       | Total |      |
|-----------------|---|------|--|-------|------------------------------------|-------|-------|------|
|                 | N   | %    | N  | %     | N                                  | %     | N     | %    |
|                 | 1966  | 346  | 8.30                                       | 3374  | 80.91                              | 450   | 10.79 | 4170 |
| 1971            | 249   | 6.45 | 3077                                       | 79.72 | 535                                | 13.86 | 3860  | 100  |
| 1976            | 101   | 2.93 | 2475                                       | 71.82 | 870                                | 25.25 | 3446  | 100  |
| Change<br>66-76 | -245  |      | -899                                       |       | +420                               |       | -724  |      |

(Statistics Selected from the  
National Survey of Religious  
Personnel. 1976)

#### CONCLUSIONS: COMMITMENT OF MEMBERS

To mark her initial commitment to the Mercy Order, each Sister takes public vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and service of the poor, the sick, and the ignorant. The manner of living the vows, which determines her continuing commitment, is the result of redefinition and reinterpretation by each Sister. For example, after the Second Vatican Council, the reinterpretation of vows, in the light of the charism of the Foundress and to meet the need of the times, led to changed but strengthened commitment to these vows.

*Initial commitment is marked by voluntary taking of the vows, and continuing commitment is demonstrated by the living of the vows as redefined and reinterpreted by each Sister.*

The taking of vows which marks the initial commitment of the Sisters of Mercy has a parallel in the literature in the claim by



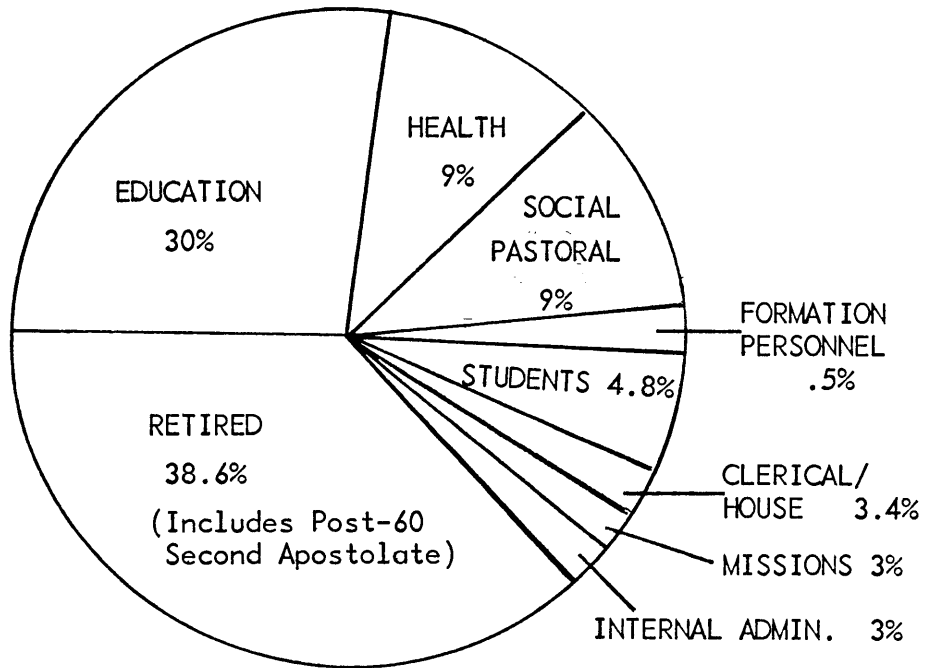


Figure 7

Distribution of Ministries in Mercy Group X 1980-1981

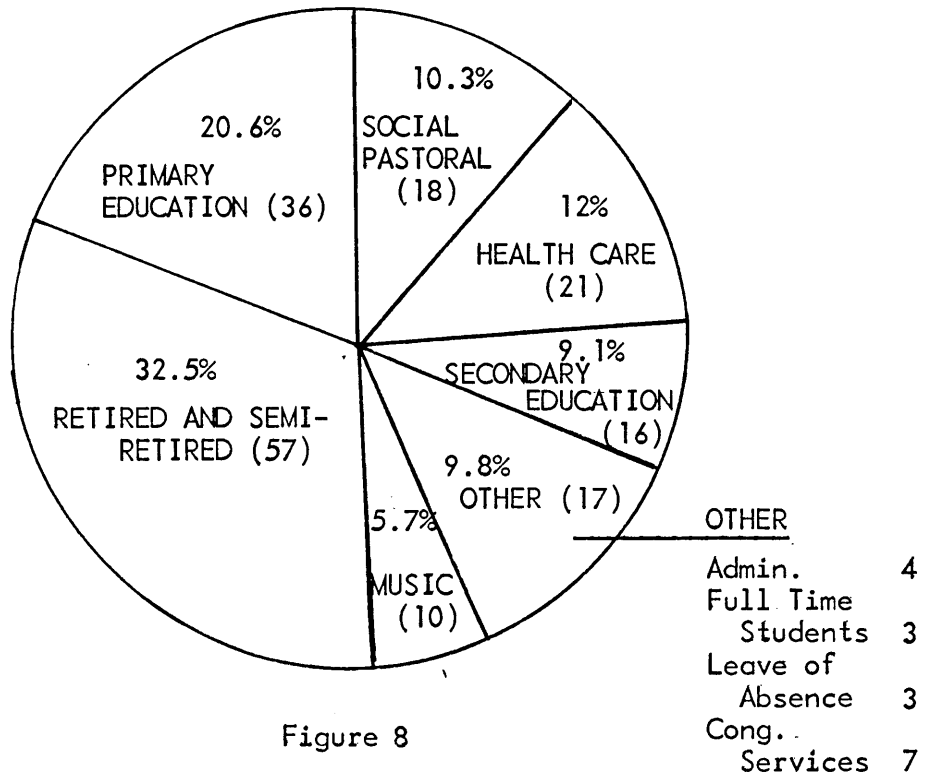


Figure 8

Distribution of Ministries in Mercy Group Y 1980-1981

Salancik (1977:4-7) that certain public acts are binding and determine the extent of commitment.

In the Mercy community, Sisters express their commitment by living the vows in various ways. For example, some Sisters live the vow of poverty in a radical fashion by identifying as closely as possible with the very poor, while others have a more "middle class" standard of living. Some Sisters see obedience as following very closely the expressed wishes of a formally appointed superior, while an increasing number of Sisters expect to help make decisions they are to implement.

*Organisational commitment of the Sisters is not homogeneous and unidimensional, but a multidimensional phenomenon which accommodates individual differences.*

In the literature, research findings on the nature of commitment in voluntary organisations (Gouldner, 1960:470-473) are consistent with the conclusion that commitment in the Mercy Order is a multidimensional phenomenon.

Since the Second Vatican Council, and largely influenced by spiritual and professional renewal programmes, Sisters have become more open to new ideas and better prepared to carry out their mission. Personal exchange with other Mercy Sisters during their programmes helps to broaden Sisters' understanding of Mercy life and work. Affirmation of individual ministries by local groups provides personal support for individual Sisters and strengthens their commitment to living the vows.

*Commitment of Sisters to the Mercy Order is strengthened as a result of the enlightenment they receive from spiritual and professional renewal, from meeting other Sisters, and from personal support in their local communities.*

The conclusions about the ways in which commitment is strengthened in the Mercy Order are compatible with those discussed

by Chittister (1980) and Neal (1977).

Among its members, the Mercy Order can identify many exceptional women who have strongly influenced the religious community. These women are remarkable particularly in their dedication and commitment to the Order and to its mission. For individual Sisters, they act as models of "Mercy in action", and demonstrate to the group as a whole that, through a personal approach, strong links are made with the people they serve.

*Group and individual commitment is enhanced by the dedication and commitment of exceptional and influential women in the Mercy Order.*

Since the Second Vatican Council, the loss of members through death and voluntary departure has not been balanced by the number of entrants to the Mercy Order. The age structure of the remaining Sisters shows an increase in the proportion of older Sisters. As a result of the general decrease in the numbers of active Sisters and a consequent threat to survival of the Order, Sisters have re-evaluated their commitment to religious life and have come to a shared understanding. The threat to survival does not divert attention from mission to internal concerns of the Order.

*The threat to survival of the Order, represented by the decreasing number of active members, leads to an increasing commitment to living the vows.*

Evidence from this study was not consistent with findings in the literature (Ebaugh, 1977; SanGiovanni, 1978) that departures of members from a religious community point to a need for that community to become concerned with the maintenance of the group rather than the service of their clients.

## SERVANT LEADERSHIP

In reflecting on leadership in different Mercy groups, the Sisters expressed such a diversity of opinion, that, in this section of the chapter, overall patterns and trends in the data will be interspersed with Sisters' perceptions which differed from the overall responses. In questions on leadership, Sisters had been asked for their personal experience of leadership. As a result, the responses were more clearly subjective than responses to other questions.

### Personal Experience of Leadership

In general, Sisters equated religious leadership with Sisters who exercised authority in formal leadership positions. The Sisters spoke most frequently of the Major Superior within their own group, although some mention was also made of the local superior, that is, the Sister in charge of a local community.

At one point in their history in Australia, the Sisters perceived a blurring in the distinction between the two positions. One Sister, in referring to her experience in this regard, said that, when she became a Sister of Mercy, just after the establishment of the Union and Federation, the position of the local superior in relation to the Sisters in a local house had just changed. Until that time, in charge of each convent, there was a Reverend Mother with complete authority in that house. With the new forms of governance, the positions of Provincial in the Union and Mother General in the Federation introduced another level of authority to which the Sisters had to refer. This Sister said that:

.. It had taken years for a local superior to be recognised as having local authority. At present, the local superiors are still experiencing the agony of trying to assert their authority. Some Sisters cannot accept the authority of the local superior, and still want to go to the Provincial or Mother General for decisions.

At the same time, in all groups in the pre-Council period, and in keeping with other ways of relating in the community, the Sisters found that there was little discussion or dialogue with them and a lack of the personal touch. They contrasted this with the tradition of leadership which had been familiar from the foundation days, and believed it could be accounted for in terms of the restrictions still in force from the 1917 Code of Canon Law. One respondent said that:

The leadership certainly tightened up very much. Some of us presumed that, with the establishment of Union and Federation, those in authority paid more heed to the minutiae of Canon Law than they had in earlier days. As a result, we were getting more directives, more recommendations or whatever. The local groups felt a great imposition upon them.

Many Sisters experienced real personal hardship under such leadership.

One Sister claimed that:

. . . . It wasn't easy and it certainly wasn't geared to developing the individual qualities of a person. In fact, if you were good at anything or you had a gift in any way, that was the very thing you didn't do. There was very little opportunity for personal decision making.

The adjectives most commonly used by the Sisters to describe this kind of leadership were "authoritarian" and "autocratic".

Several Sisters believed that even the earlier, more autocratic superiors tried to be, and were, "servants" in a certain sense. One Sister remarked that:

They spent themselves in trying to be responsible for everyone else and in trying to maintain all the religious customs of that Mercy group. But under that model there was no liberation of the adult woman's capacity to be responsible for herself and her decision.

After the Second Vatican Council, with its directives about increased personal and local decision making in religious communities, movement away from an autocratic type of leadership was very slow. One Sister described the earlier type of leadership as "strong and usually benevolent, and in most cases, despotic, with consultation only

of councillors or people in power positions in the group". Post Vatican II, according to many Sisters, was a period of very gradual and somewhat uneven change. Many Sisters found themselves very insecure, as one Sister explained, without the crutch of "Mother said". Taking full responsibility for one's actions was, for them, a truly threatening experience.

Post-Vatican Chapters were perceived by the Sisters to have developed the spirit of servant leadership by which Superiors exercised authority in a way that could liberate and strengthen each Sister. One Sister pointed out that:

Whether it does or not depends on the Sister's response, because such leadership only provides a context for liberation . . . . Such a change in leadership, by putting responsibility back on individuals also creates conditions for some confusion for those who are not especially gifted in analysis of situations.

#### Implications of Succession Pattern

Most Sisters perceived major changes in leadership in the early 1970's. One Sister spoke of her experience of an earlier period in these terms:

Right up to 1972 when I was elected Provincial, we had an extraordinarily small number of people who were in and out of office. They either sat on the throne or stood behind the throne as the power. And it was sort of accepted that way. These people were very powerful in their autocratic and fairly distant type of leadership. I feel it was a kind of boiling pot situation at our '72 Chapter. It was a case of we've got to have change from this kind of thing.

In every group, similar experiences were recalled by the respondents who provided examples of the restraining effect this succession pattern had on the Sisters' opportunities for leadership experience.

The data in Table 8, which was gathered from each Mercy group for the present research, confirmed the Sisters' perceptions of the succession pattern. The first column, "Number of Administrations", shows the number of governments for each of the Mercy groups. The

| ELECTED SUPERIOR GENERAL/PROVINCIAL ON ADMINISTRATION AS COUNCILLORS |                         |      |       |         |            |         |                                       |         |  |         |  |  |
|--|-------------------------|------|-------|---------|------------|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--|---------|--|--|
| Mercy Group  | No. of Admin-istrations | Once | Twice | 3 Times | For 1 Term | 2 Terms | 2 Terms Incl. Sup. General Provincial | 3 Terms | 3 Terms Incl. Sup. General Provincial (No. of times) | 4 Terms | 4 Terms Incl. Sup. General Provincial (No. of times) | 5 Terms Incl. Sup. General Provincial (No. of times) |
| 1  | 8                       | 2    | 3     |         | 8          | 6       | 1                                     | 6       | 3  |         |  |  |
| 2  | 7                       | 2    | 2     | 1       | 9          | 4       | 1                                     | 2       | 1  |         |  |  |
| 3  | 8                       |      |       |         | 15         | 2       |                                       |         | 4  |         | 1(1)   |  |
| 4  | 7                       | 4    |       | 1       | 10         | 2       |                                       |         |  | 2       |  | 1(1)   |
| 5  | 8                       | 2    | 3     |         | 14         | 1       | 1                                     | 3       | 1  |         |  |  |
| 6  | 6                       | 4    | 1     |         | 19         | 2       | 2                                     | 3       |  |         |  |  |
| 7  | 8                       | 2    | 3     |         | 13         | 2       | 1                                     | 2       | 4<br>(2)(1)<br>(1)(1)                                |         |  |  |
| 8  | 8                       | 3    | 1     | 1       | 9          | 2       |                                       | 2       | 1  | 1       | 2(3)<br>(1)  |  |
| 9  | 7                       | 3    | 2     |         | 16         | 1       | 2                                     | 1       |  |         |  |  |
| 10   | 8                       | 1    |       | 2       | 17         | 2       | 1                                     | 2       | 1  |         |  | 2(3)<br>(2)  |
| 11   | 7                       | 2    | 1     | 1       | 12         | 3       | 1                                     | 2       |  |         |  |  |
| 12   | 7                       | 2    | 1     | 1       | 13         | 2       | 1                                     | 1       | 1  |         | 1(3)   |  |
| 13   | 8                       | 4    | 2     |         | 12         | 5       | 1                                     |         | 2  |         | 1(2)   |  |
| 14   | 10                      | 1    | 3     | 1       | 13         | 7       | 1                                     | 2       |  |         |  |  |
| 15   | 6                       | 4    | 1     |         | 9          | 4       | 2                                     |         | 1  |         | 1  |  |
| 16   | 8                       | 4    | 2     |         | 9          | 5       |                                       |         |  |         |  | 3  |
| 17   | 6                       | 4    | 1     |         | 13         | 3       |                                       |         | 2  |         |  |  |

Table 8

Succession Pattern in Governance  
in Australian Mercy Groups:  
1950-1980

number of administrations varied from group to group as the terms of office were three, four, five or six years. Terms of office as Superior General of the Union and as President of the Federation are not included. Data are drawn only from the individual Mercy groups.

From this Table, the following observations may be made: a significant number of Sisters held the position of Superior General (Federation) or Provincial (Union) more than once; in five groups, fewer than ten Sisters were on the Council of the group during the period from 1950 to 1980 with a very large number of Sisters on the Council more than once; several Sisters spent almost the entire period as a member of the Council. These figures caused the Sisters to comment that "there had to be a better way to govern".

The Sisters in several groups said that members of their groups who had been Major Superior or Councillors, had, on relinquishing their position of authority, been appointed to another position of some responsibility, such as local superior of a community, matron of a hospital, principal of a school, or Sister in charge of novices. Some Sisters perceived such appointments as a way in which leadership experience could be put to good use. Other Sisters made a judgment that effective power was being retained by a very small group of Sisters.

Since the Second Vatican Council, according to the Sisters, the replacement of a member of the Mercy community in a key office was potentially a significant event in the development of the religious organisation. They emphasised the fact that this "administrative succession" was sometimes stressful for the members of the organisation when they were divided about the suitability of the person for the position. In some groups, the issue of how a



replacement was negotiated was a matter of some dispute among the Sisters themselves, particularly in the period leading to a General Chapter where elections were to occur.

According to some Sisters, in spite of a very staid type of government and very conventional convent life-style ideas, leaders had enlightenment in particular areas. One Major Superior was reported as being "very keen" on updating Sisters in educational qualifications, and on allowing Irish Sisters to visit their homeland, a permission not granted until then. She allowed for a kind of personal development in the Sisters, yet had a very authoritarian approach to leadership.

In other Mercy groups, servant leadership had been the experience of Sisters for quite a long time. Sisters from one group stressed that:

The quality of servant leadership has always been present in our Mercy community and our Major Superiors have been deeply and unselfishly committed to their task of governing. Perhaps, as a result of the changes experienced in religious living and in the exercise of authority over the past decade, we are more conscious that what we have experienced has been a very strong "servant" element in our leadership.

Sisters perceived the Post-Vatican Chapters as having endeavoured to develop the spirit of servant leadership. Members of different Mercy groups remarked that they were much more involved in Chapter preparation and hence felt an increased degree of acceptance of recommendations. They also recognised that a new understanding of Canon Law had helped to purge Mercy Constitutions of many of their archaic prescriptions.

All Mercy communities have spent a great deal of time and effort in the study of the concept of leadership in religious communities. The Sisters spoke of the relationship between leadership

and responsibility. They differentiated between the leadership which every Sister had to exercise in the ordinary everyday activities in which she was engaged, for example, in the local community, in her personal life-style, in her professional activities, and the leadership exercised by those Sisters who were appointed or elected to formal leadership positions, such as the principal of a school or the Major Superior.

Although it had and still has "growing pains" for both leaders and community members, leadership as service has generally encouraged the "emergence of the real person" for many of the Sisters. One Sister pointed out that:

The Sisters all acknowledge that authority is vested in a unique way in the Major Superior and local superiors. But every person is able and must (for the good of the Congregation and its mission) exercise personal leadership.

Some Major Superiors referred to their own move away from being, as one Sister said, "pretty legalistic and trying to get people to keep to the rules and do the right thing", to allowing members of the community to "become themselves". Another Sister saw her role as Major Superior as being in touch with and listening to the inspirations that came from individual Sisters while challenging them by a quality of leadership that gave direction. Several Sisters spoke of their experience of leadership that could "liberate and strengthen each Sister". They pointed out that whether it did or did not depend on the Sister's response, as servant leadership only provided a context for liberation and could not determine it.

In many instances, Sisters as formal leaders in local communities found the exercise of servant leadership a very painful experience when they were relating to Sisters who were still heavily reliant on structures and power figures for their personal direction

for acting. When they used gentleness and understanding, some local superiors were seen to be weak and indecisive.

On the other hand, respondents in every Mercy group raised the issue of unsatisfactory leadership in local communities. The following comment comes from a Sister in a small Mercy group with most of its communities in country areas.

It is my fear that further appointments of people unsuited to the leadership role in the '80's will have a damaging effect on the morale of Sisters placed under such leadership. I see this as made more serious by reason of our isolation where two or three are caught in this dilemma and are sometimes over two hundred kilometres from their nearest Mercy neighbour community.

One Sister added that: "Some Sisters at the level of Superiors still seem to be very conscious of being 'in charge'. They serve the needs of the Sisters, but are also served".

In general, Sisters stated that there were genuine attempts to exercise and to respond to servant leadership, but that there was still a lack of real understanding of the meaning of the term. They realised, too, that they must all allow for human weakness. While they hoped that more care and discernment would be shown by those who were responsible for appointing leaders to the community groups, they realised that, when there is a limited number of people available, some superiors may be less than competent to hold a position as servant leader. In every group, Sisters expressed a wish for an increase in leadership training and opportunities for Sisters to gain experience in leadership in small ways before they were given a senior leadership position.

#### The Major Superior as Servant Leader

In 1972 and 1973, every Mercy group in Australia held a General Chapter at which new Major Superiors and their Councils were elected. Most Sisters claim that, since that period, servant leader-

ship has been very much the way of exercising authority in Mercy groups.

The Major Superiors who were interviewed spoke very frankly about their experience in trying to be "servant leaders". In particular, they discussed the need for personal support from other Mercy Major Superiors, and the value they found in attending National Mercy Meetings. One of the matters introduced into many of their discussions was the difficulty Mercy leaders experienced in using leadership to empower the individuals in their group. In fact, all respondents saw that as the touchstone of authentic servant leadership.

The Major Superior of one group reflected on the part which she hoped to play as a servant leader. She said that:

I suppose my dream is to be able to empower the individuals in my group. I would like to be able to free Sisters from some of their bonds. Many of our Sisters are only 50% effective, in lots of ways, because of their poor self-image, or because of such personal restraints as fear. I have really deliberately tried to give people opportunities. We have had a number of people overseas and many in individual professional and renewal courses. It is to give them confidence in themselves and to encourage leadership.

Most Sisters saw that servant leadership was more a characteristic of the Major Superior than it was of other leaders in the group. One Sister asserted that:

There are those who, in lesser positions of leadership, have not yet managed to lessen the strings to the extent that our congregational leader has done and pull a series of strings tied to the Sisters of their community. Conversely, there are those Sisters who still feel uncomfortable when the strings are released.

Few Sisters mentioned the relationship between the Major Superior and her Council, and the Major Superior and the local superiors. Most Sisters saw the Major Superior acting alone; they did not make any comments about the role of the Council in the

decisions which were taken by the Major Superior, nor did they remark upon the part that individual Councillors might play in supporting the Major Superior as servant leader. Only one Major Superior spoke of her Council and the local superiors in her Mercy group, and said that she would have had a most difficult task in exercising servant leadership in her group without the support of both Councillors and local superiors. She said that their weakness as a Mercy group seemed to lie in a lack of policy formed from "grass roots" level. With the help of the Council and the information from the local communities through their superiors, the group was able to develop policies which would eliminate what sometimes appeared to be "ad hoc" decisions.

Several Major Superiors said that they were pleased that all "trimmings" of authority, such as titles, precedence, and unlimited permissions, had been abolished. On the other hand, they stressed that effective servant leadership depended on the followers. As one Sister said quite forcefully: "Religious life still contains many middle-aged and elderly children and adolescents who resist strength and liberation".

#### Expectations of Leadership in the Institute of Sisters of Mercy

Many Sisters said that they experienced real difficulty in expressing what their expectations of the leadership would be. The concept of a completely new structure of governance, at the time of data collection, was still very much something written on paper but not at that time translated into a tangible form. As one Sister explained it:

It's such a new thing, isn't it? It's almost a free-floating thing. To me, it's a completely different approach to an authority. It's not an authority that's given to people that they exercise over other people. It's an authority which cannot even exist unless it's given by seventeen different people. It's going to stand on the commitment of seventeen groups to it.

Several Sisters said that they would hope the National Executive Council would model servant leadership for the seventeen Mercy groups. They hoped, too, that it would:

. . . both reflect and challenge the leadership in the various groups. We do not expect it to influence the everyday issues, but rather to confront us continually with the issues we, as Sisters of Mercy, should be grappling with through our own leadership. It should, in turn, reflect nationally the leadership and talents present in the whole structure.

Several Sisters said that the influence of the National Executive Council on particular groups would be the exercise of a prophetic role, that is, the role of challenging the Sisters to a deeper commitment to the Mercy way of life and of alerting them to needs which might be met by the total group of Sisters of Mercy. They hoped for the development of research and resource facilities for the use of the mission, as well as the initiation of ventures at national level, with appropriate evaluation and communication back to the members of the Institute.

Most Major Superiors spoke of the role of the Plenary Council, defined as the group of National Executive Council members and Major Superiors of the 17 groups who, in a process of mutual consultation, joint discernment and decision-making, provide leadership at both national and regional levels in the interpretation, development and implementation of the policies of the National Chapter. They recognised that this group had considerable leadership potential; they looked for special leadership in the area of mission.

Expectations of leadership of the National President of the

new Institute were that she would be someone who would unify, challenge, and inspire. She would be someone who was visible, either because she was present, had written something, or stood behind particular types of projects. She would serve the Mercy group by helping to shape the Executive and having an influence on how the Executive Council works as a group. The Sisters had a great hope in terms of what she would embody for them, that is, Mercy in today's context. They said they were looking for all those qualities of understanding and tolerance, thrust towards the needy, and so on. They believed that the person of the President and her call to special commitment were their most demanding expectations.

Leadership as service was seen as making great personal demands on the person of the leader, but the only kind of leadership which would challenge the members of the Mercy community to self-development and to commitment to the mission. Sisters recognised that Superiors still have to walk a tightrope in many areas. One Sister explained it in the following way:

There is constant tension in deciding between what is part of our traditional charism and these things which, in the changing times, call for a new expression of Mercy. Within that kind of uncertainty, decisions must be made.

From these findings, the following conclusions about the servant nature of leadership were drawn.

#### CONCLUSIONS: SERVANT LEADERSHIP

The concept of servant leadership means that the servant leader ensures that other people's highest priority needs are being met. In the Mercy community, the traditional leadership style is servant leadership as understood and exercised by Catherine McAuley. The Foundress served the Sisters who in turn served the needy. This

leadership style became more authoritarian after the promulgation of the 1917 Code of Canon Law, but reverted to the traditional leadership style after the Second Vatican Council.

*Sisters perceive servant leadership as the appropriate form of leadership for the Mercy Order. Servant leadership means that the servant leader ensures that other people's highest priority needs are being met.*

This type of leadership is consistent with that described in the literature by Grant (1979:521-7), Greeley (1971:266) and Greenleaf (1977:10).

Before the Second Vatican Council, formal leadership positions in most Mercy groups were generally filled from a small pool of nominees, and marked by an autocratic style of leadership. At the General Chapters after the Council, more open types of election for leadership positions were developed. However, many Mercy Sisters elected to formal leadership positions found the exercise of servant leadership a very painful experience for them and for Sisters who were still heavily reliant on structures and power figures for direction of their actions. A lack of understanding of the term and the limited number of Sisters competent to hold a position as servant leader were offset by a wish for an increase in leadership training and opportunities for Sisters to gain experience in leadership.

*The change, from an autocratic leadership style and a closed succession pattern to servant leadership and a more open succession pattern, was painful for both leaders and followers.*

The issues of leadership succession in the Mercy Order have counterparts in other types of organisations, as Levenson (1964) and Champion (1975) pointed out, although the lack of career structure is a distinctive feature of the Mercy Order.

The struggle for a servant style of leadership to emerge and its consequences for leaders and followers is a concern expressed by



several writers, including Grant (1979), Greeley, (1971) and Greenleaf (1977).

After the Second Vatican Council, directives about increased personal and local decision-making in religious communities encouraged Sisters to take greater responsibility for living their religious life. Servant leadership provided the context for this responsibility to develop within the Mercy Order.

*The exercise of servant leadership is appropriate to implementing the directives of the Second Vatican Council that Sisters participate more fully in group decision-making and take more responsibility for their own decision-making.*

There is a considerable body of literature which supports the view that leadership style influences the development of participative decision-making. Bradburn (1971) and Maier (1970) are examples of writers who support this view.

In the new structure of governance, national leadership, exercised through the Plenary Council, the National Executive, and the National President, is based on servant leadership. The Plenary Council, comprised of the Major Superiors of each group and the members of the National Executive, exercises servant leadership as the national policy-making body. The National Executive implements policy by providing services, such as information about new overseas missions, to the Mercy groups through their Major Superiors. As the Major Superior of each group is responsible to the Sacred Congregation for Religious, the National President is not in the line of authority, and does not have a direct relationship to each Sister in the Order. In the context of the Plenary Council and the National Executive, she exercises servant leadership by challenging and inspiring Sisters to live the Mercy charism.

*Leadership at the national level, whether exercised by the National President, the National Executive, or the Plenary Council takes the form of servant leadership.*

## ETHOS OF THE MERCY COMMUNITY

In the course of collecting data, the researcher found that the organisational characteristics, mission, membership, and leadership, could be studied as discrete elements in the Mercy community. She also identified a further characteristic, ethos, or culture, which, although also a discrete element, subsumed aspects of mission, membership and leadership. Findings from responses to the interview questions and the questionnaires revealed elements of organisational ethos or culture perceived by the Sisters as unique to the Mercy community. Evidence from archival records and observations by the researcher supported these findings.

Almost every Sister spoke of the special character of the Mercy group to which she belonged, a character described by one Sister as "our Mercyness". She put it this way:

For quite a number of years, I have been very conscious of our "Mercyness", unique to our Congregation and expressed in what we believe, and in the way we live and work, as well as in the kind of work we do.

Another Sister said, that, for her, the Mercy spirit was "indefinable, but unmistakable" for anyone who was a member of the group. For her,

. . . there is a certain "at-home-ness" with other Mercy Sisters, even when they are members of groups on the other side of the Australian continent.

In their travels around Australia, many Sisters found that meeting Sisters in other Mercy groups was almost an awareness of "déjà-vu".

In her youth, the researcher had attended schools owned, administered, and staffed by Sisters of Mercy. That experience and twenty years as a member of the Mercy Order also attested to the identification of a Mercy ethos and helped confirm "ethos" as an organisational characteristic.

The Sisters identified the following dimensions as significant in the definition of the Mercy ethos:

1. Appeal of and fidelity to the charism of the Foundress, in particular, her devotedness to the service of the needy in society.
2. Respect for the religious traditions of the Mercy Order.
3. Evolution of an organisational saga characterised by a unique configuration of norms, values, beliefs, and myths.
4. Development of a sense of the importance of local identity and local self-determination.
5. Openness to change from within the congregation, from the Roman Catholic Church, and from society.

Fidelity to the Charism of  
the Foundress

First, as an important element of their understanding of the Mercy ethos, Sisters acknowledged the strong influence of the inspiration of the Foundress on their decision to join the Order and on the way in which they remained faithful to it as members of the Mercy community.

The attraction of Catherine McAuley's charism to work for and with the needy was the reason which many Sisters gave for their joining the Mercy Order in preference to any other religious group. The strength of this influence was well expressed by one Sister when she stated:

I wanted to be publicly committed to serving the poor, the deprived, and the powerless. To join the religious congregation begun by Catherine McAuley seemed to offer the best way for me to do this.

Many women who wished to enter religious life wanted to work with the needy. However, they did not wish to be confined to the restrictions

of an enclosed, monastic-type order. The Mercy way of life offered the opportunity they were seeking. One respondent commented:

When I wanted to enter a religious congregation more than fifty years ago, I was quite excited at meeting the Sisters of Mercy. As Catherine McAuley had done, they brought mercy from within the religious enclosure to wherever there were people in need. I wanted to do that, too.

Throughout Australia, other religious communities also worked with the needy, but in general their activity was restricted to a particular group in need, for example, the sick. The work of the first Sisters of Mercy encompassed a variety of Mercy services, including education, nursing, and social welfare. Fidelity to a diversity of works has continued to be a distinguishing feature of the Mercy community, and, in each group, Sisters spoke of the different works of Mercy in which they were engaged.

Information in Mercy archival records supported the Sisters' perceptions, and provided further evidence that the Australian Mercy community had remained faithful to Catherine's charism to engage in a wide variety of works for and with the needy. The data in Table 9 were collected from the "National Survey of Australian Religious", conducted in 1976. The figures indicate both the diversity of apostolic works and the adaptation in types of ministry made by the Sisters as new demands for the exercise of Mercy came from the needy. (Detailed analysis of these data are reported in the section "Focus on Mission", pp.185-207.)

In trying to remain faithful to Catherine McAuley's charism of responding to people's need, the Sisters remarked upon an increase in the number of Sisters working as the only Sister of Mercy in a particular work; an increase in the diversity of works undertaken; a decrease in the number of Sisters in institutional works; and a

Table 9

## Part V: Apostolate

1. Apostolic Works of Members of Province (Including Missions):  
1966, 1971, 1976

|  | 1966 |       | 1971 |       | 1976 |       |
|--|------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|
|  | N    | %     | N    | %     | N    | %     |
| <u>EDUCATION</u>                                   |      |       |      |       |      |       |
| Administration: Primary                            | 98   | 2.56  | 117  | 3.24  | 160  | 4.78  |
| Administration: Secondary                          | 45   | 1.18  | 47   | 1.30  | 62   | 1.85  |
| Primary Teaching                                   | 1403 | 36.69 | 1189 | 32.92 | 725  | 21.67 |
| Secondary Teaching                                 | 662  | 17.31 | 589  | 16.31 | 388  | 11.60 |
| C.C.D/Adult Education/RE Co-ordination             | 15   | 0.39  | 20   | 0.55  | 59   | 1.76  |
| Tertiary/Research                                  | 9    | 0.24  | 12   | 0.33  | 27   | .81   |
| Special (eg Schools for Handicapped)               | 1    | 0.03  | 9    | 0.25  | 10   | .30   |
| Para-Professional (eg Librarians, Teachers' Aides) | 2    | 0.05  | 6    | 0.17  | 39   | 1.17  |
| Other (please specify)                             | 233  | 6.09  | 191  | 5.29  | 128  | 3.83  |
| <u>TOTAL</u>                                       | 2467 | 64.51 | 2180 | 60.35 | 1598 | 47.77 |
| <u>HEALTH CARE AND RELATED MINISTRIES</u>          |      |       |      |       |      |       |
| Administration (eg Matron)                         | 29   | .76   | 35   | 0.97  | 47   | 1.41  |
| Medicine (eg Doctor, Chemist, Radiologist)         | 6    | .16   | 3    | 0.08  | 2    | .06   |
| Nursing in Hospitals (except for Geriatric)        | 227  | 5.94  | 175  | 5.40  | 149  | 4.45  |
| Home Nursing                                       | 8    | 0.21  | 4    | 0.11  | 10   | .30   |
| Geriatric Nursing                                  | 15   | 0.39  | 16   | 0.44  | 18   | .54   |
| Para-Medical (eg Nurses' Aide, Lab. Asst.)         | 12   | 0.31  | 18   | 0.50  | 21   | .63   |
| Clinics for Alcoholics, Drug Dependents            | 1    | 0.03  | -    | -     | 1    | .03   |
| Nursing Education                                  | 8    | 0.21  | 14   | 0.39  | 14   | .42   |
| Other (please specify)                             | 31   | 0.81  | 40   | 1.11  | 25   | .75   |
| <u>TOTAL</u>                                       | 337  | 8.81  | 325  | 9.00  | 297  | 8.58  |
| <u>SOCIAL/PASTORAL CARE</u>                        |      |       |      |       |      |       |
| Administration                                     | 18   | 0.47  | 15   | 0.42  | 21   | 0.63  |
| Pastoral Care (eg Retreats, Renewal, Parish Team)  | -    | -     | -    | -     | 29   | 0.24  |
| Counselling  | -    | -     | -    | -     | 5    | 0.15  |
| Home for Unmarried Mothers                         | 6    | 0.16  | -    | 0.19  | 2    | 0.06  |
| Caring for Handicapped Children                    | -    | -     | 2    | 0.06  | -    | -     |
| Caring for Aged/Ill (includes Hospital Visits)     | 10   | 0.26  | 19   | 0.53  | 52   | 1.55  |
| Child Care   | 61   | 1.60  | 64   | 1.77  | 51   | 1.52  |
| Work with Migrants                                 | -    | -     | -    | -     | 1    | 0.03  |
| Work with Aborigines                               | -    | -     | 2    | 0.06  | 6    | 0.18  |
| Other (please specify)                             | 9    | 0.24  | 11   | 0.30  | 19   | 0.57  |
| <u>TOTAL</u>                                       | 104  | 2.72  | 120  | 3.32  | 185  | 5.53  |
| <u>OTHER MINISTRIES</u>                            |      |       |      |       |      |       |
| Administration (eg Provincialate or Formation)     | 78   | 2.04  | 96   | 2.38  | 100  | 2.99  |
| Communications, Mass Media                         | -    | -     | -    | -     | 1    | -     |
| Domestic/Home Management                           | 322  | 8.42  | 273  | 7.56  | 212  | 6.34  |
| Farming/Animal Husbandry                           | -    | -     | -    | -     | -    | -     |
| Full Time Study                                    | 24   | 0.63  | 63   | 1.74  | 107  | 3.20  |
| Retired/Ill  | 432  | 11.30 | 506  | 14.01 | 798  | 23.86 |
| Miscellaneous (please specify below)               | 60   | 1.57  | 59   | 1.63  | 57   | 1.70  |
| Contemplative Order                                | -    | -     | -    | -     | -    | -     |
| <u>TOTAL</u>                                       | 916  | 23.96 | 987  | 27.33 | 1275 | 38.12 |
| <u>GRAND TOTAL</u>                                 | 3824 | 100   | 3612 | 100   | 3345 | 100   |

(Statistics Selected from the  
National Survey of Religious  
Personnel. 1976)

readiness in each Mercy group to provide both moral and financial support for Sisters working in apostolates different from those in which the group was accustomed to work.

In each of the following extracts from interviews and questionnaires, respondents recalled some of these consequences as they personally experienced them.

One of the Sisters who is the only Sister of Mercy in a particular work, reflecting on her life-style, said:

In my ministry, I have been challenged to live the more radical style of life which my work necessitated. It made me realise that we can never say "We have arrived", but will always be pilgrims, always discerning new ways to serve, enthused with the Mercy Spirit to face new challenges, especially individual ministries, with courage and conviction.

The Sisters frequently remarked upon the increase in the diversity of works undertaken. One Sister spoke at some length about this in these words:

In the past in Australia, there was a great need for religious as teachers in Catholic schools and nurses in Catholic hospitals. At the present time, there are fewer Sisters engaged in these two works. Many Sisters see great needs in other areas, such as work with Aborigines, Youth, Alcoholics, the Unemployed, Solo Parents, Prisoners, the Elderly, and the Lonely. Many of these groups were helped to some extent over the years, but the increase in numbers in these needy groups in our society has led more Sisters to devote themselves to full-time work with them.

Another summed it up by saying:

Today the terms "poor, sick, and ignorant" have a very different meaning for Australians, but we, as Sisters of Mercy, still exist to alleviate ills or to encourage those who need us under that present meaning.

While Sisters acknowledged that there was a decrease in the number of Sisters in institutional works, they believed that the Mercy spirit and mission were still very much in evidence. For example, one Sister, speaking on behalf of her group, claimed:

In our group, we see the Mercy charism as a living spirit calling forth an authentic response to the needs of our times in individuals, families, and groups in the Church and in society. We see our activities as "corporate" rather than "individual" ministries.

The support given to Sisters who are moving into new works was emphasised by one Sister when she said:

Our community spends a good deal of time working towards the establishment of group needs and priorities. In this, we give practical recognition to the existence of pluralism among our Sisters, and, together, look for ways of supporting those who are working outside our traditional ministries.

The Sisters in this study perceived strong support from all members of the community for the charism of the Foundress, especially for the centrality of service of the needy in society.

#### Respect for the Religious Traditions of the Mercy Order

Among the religious traditions of the Mercy Order, Sisters noted the following, namely, relationship to the hierarchy of the Church, influence of the Constitutions, commitment to living under vow in community, and the nature of spiritual practices.

During the foundation period of the new Mercy Order, Catherine's respect for the opinion of Church authorities caused her to decide that, if her work of mercy was to continue and prosper, she would have to establish a religious order. In the early days of the Mercy community, she expressed her respect for Church authority by consultation with the bishops and priests when she was making decisions about new foundations and the works of mercy which they were to undertake.

In the parishes and dioceses in which Australian Sisters of Mercy work, Sisters said that, in general, they find little difficulty in relating on a personal level to the priests and bishops, who are more often than not, a source of great support. One Sister said

quite firmly:

I feel I am speaking for many Sisters of Mercy when I say that our Australian priests and bishops do seem to have an appreciation of our religious life and work. They encourage rather than hinder us, particularly in regard to our mission.

In some parishes, and in certain dioceses, other Sisters are experiencing tensions in their relationship with representatives of the hierarchical church. Most tensions and, in a few cases, almost open conflict arise from different understandings of what is meant by "church". One Sister has expressed it this way for the diocese in which her group is working:

Our whole group have used a well tried questionnaire to work out models of "church". And we saw that "church" for us was a community, sacramental, servant church . . . . The trouble is that, in our diocese, we're operating within a hierarchical institutional model, and that's where, I think, even though you may P.R. and dialogue, if there's not a basic understanding of how you see "the church" or how you operate as "church", there has to be a certain amount of conflict.

Another Sister describes the effect that different understandings of church may also have on the rest of the Church in a certain parish.

In our parish, the laity are moving out of a hierarchical understanding towards a community, servant model, and so we have this certain sympathy and understanding of directions that we should take together. Our parish priest is not too happy about the situation!

The different understanding of church sometimes has serious repercussions for the mission of the Sisters, as this comment shows:

Our main work is still education because our bishop really can't see anything else but education. We have a certain group of Sisters who are involved in pastoral work, unofficially. But I think the real spirit of the Sisters is still just with people. As our Foundress did, they're anxious to get out and visit.

The second element noted by the Sisters among the religious traditions of the Mercy Order was the influence of the Mercy Constitutions. In the archives of each Mercy group, a considerable amount of printed material is collected under the heading "Constitutions".



For certain periods in the history of the Australian Sisters of Mercy, that material is quite voluminous. Those periods, such as that after the Second Vatican Council, coincided with the issuing of directives from Roman authorities to revise and renew constitutions.

In 1980, the author of the new draft of the revised Constitutions prepared a background tape and a set of slides (copies held by the researcher) to explain it to Mercy communities throughout Australia. She presented the Constitutions as a kind of "corporate word" expressing in written form what the community is and does, what the Sisters would like it to be, and how they think they may arrive at that ideal. The Sisters recalled the enthusiasm of the members of their group as they read the draft and used it as a touchstone when examining the expression of their community self-image in the light of Catherine McAuley's ideals.

An earlier effort after the Council to revise the Mercy Constitutions had resulted in a draft document which was not accepted by all 17 groups. Even so, working on the Constitutions was, for the Sisters, a productive exercise in terms of clarifying their ideas about the special spirit of the Mercy Order. Reflecting on that work, one Sister said that:

After the 1968 Renewal Chapter, the next important step for us was the interest in the writing of a Draft Constitution. Although our particular contribution may not have been significant on the national level, the effort of the Sisters locally to examine the material presented and to reflect on its meaning for us, helped us to grow from an unthinking acceptance to a critical appraisal of what was best for us.

The later draft, Constitutions and Directory (1982 Draft), now in the hands of every Australian Sister of Mercy, was more readily accepted. This acceptance was seen by the Sisters to be related to the stage they had reached in identifying and articulating the Mercy ethos in contemporary terms.

In discussing their lives as members of the Mercy community, many Sisters referred to the way in which a study of the Constitutions had deepened their sense of Mercy identity as well as their understanding of the spirit of the community. The revised Constitutions were divided into two sections entitled General Constitutions and the Constitution on Governance. The first section had a particular appeal for the Sisters who saw it as a source of inspiration and reflection and as a form of affirmation of the way in which they were "living Mercy".

They spoke of the belief that the call to Mercy (Constitutions: 13-14) is a mystery; each Sister and the total group must constantly search for its meaning in contemporary terms. As one Sister said:

I am once more reminded by our Constitutions that we are an apostolic and not a monastic group. For me, the challenge to be Mercy has been renewed.

Another Sister commented:

When I sometimes feel confused about my work, the Constitutions remind me that, as a group, we are trying to be faithful to the principles of religious life and to the ideals of our Foundress in terms of their relevance in today's world. My own worries, then, seem very minor.

Of great significance for many Sisters was Catherine McAuley's special legacy of charity (Constitutions:15). From experience in their own and other Mercy groups, Sisters noted charity in practice. They remarked on the way in which Sisters assisted and helped one another, affirming each Sister in her gifts and personality, and bearing with their own and each other's weaknesses. Many Sisters expressed their personal difficulties in living "in charity"; sometimes, they experienced serious tensions in interpersonal relations in their communities, in other cases, in their particular ministry. According to one Sister:

As more and more aspects of our community life are opened to others, we have found a lessening of privacy, both personal and communal. In some instances, when our working hours are very much longer than they used to be and other demands are placed on us, we find ourselves living under considerable stress.

Yet, they all agreed that, unless they gave high priority to Catherine's exhortation to love one another as Christ had loved them, the community would lack the true spirit of mercy. One Sister summed up the opinions of many Sisters by saying:

We really must live out of a rooted belief in the love of God and a willingness to love for Him. How can we repudiate the mediocre, and make a passionate response (an "all or nothing" business) to his call?

Above all, the Sisters perceived the Constitutions as standing for the corporate dimension of Mercy life, and working on the Constitutions helped them to appreciate that. As one Sister said:

I think the shared enterprise of working on constitutions and governance has been very significant. We have people involved in the workings on the constitutions and the shared study of documents. I think that has involved a fair bit of interaction and interchange. It's significant because it's directed also to what is really important -- to our common life and shared values.

Among the Sisters' many references to the influence of the Constitutions as a dimension of Mercy ethos, commitment to their vowed life in community received a special mention.

An essential element of all religious life and, therefore, of Mercy life, is commitment to living under vow in community. In the Mercy Order, Sisters take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, as well as the service of the poor, sick, and ignorant. In speaking of their vow of poverty, Sisters said that, as they tried to live more radically, they became very aware of its communal, as well as its personal aspects. Movements out of traditional works and into different forms of apostolate gave them new insights into the vow of poverty. Just as Catherine McAuley's call to become a religious

came through the poor of Dublin, Sisters of Mercy today move wherever they hear a strong call from the poor. As they work more closely with the materially poor, Sisters are challenged to live more simply in their own community. One aspect of that has been the personal handling of money. As one Sister experienced this, her realisation of the living of the vow became important. She said:

Many of us now live on a weekly or a monthly allowance. This makes one aware of the value of money and helps us realise how hard it is for people to "make ends meet". I think it is a great help in being realistic about the purchasing value of money. As the allowance is quite restricted, it makes the living of poverty more of a reality.

Other Sisters would see being on an allowance of rather less importance for the Sisters personally than for their involvement in a work of mercy. Some Sisters felt that:

Personal use of money has led to a better understanding of material poverty -- of the difference between "want", "need", "desire". It has also enabled Sisters to understand the pecuniary differences of parents, for example, in regard to school fees. Ownership of cars has allowed for a wider field of service. Not only meals on wheels, but prayers on wheels!

If a Sister is to receive no remuneration for her service of Mercy, members of her community will discern with her how she and her work will be supported. In general, the Sisters expect that, in the future, all Sisters will choose to live more simply and more poorly to identify more personally with the poor with whom they are working.

This type of life-style would not be easy for some Sisters because as one Sister reflected:

Sometimes I am tempted to think that we have too much of this world's goods and have become part of the affluent society in which we live.

This attitude towards poverty in life-style is related very closely to an increasing involvement in issues of justice to the extent that Sisters showed a greater participation in projects relating to social

justice. At the same time, some Sisters questioned their own comfortable, middle-class standard of living. A few Sisters were quite outspoken about the way they were living. One Sister wrote:

There is just so much less reverence for the "sacred" and "religious", and a real tendency to want the best of both worlds evident in worldliness in dress, social pleasures, furnishings, consumerism mentality, unreal attitude to money, and cost of living.

In referring to their living of the vow of chastity, Sisters made comments such as: "Gone are the lowered eyes and cloistered safeguards. Friendships are encouraged and contacts with men and women made on a normal and adult level". In local communities, too, changes in the living of the vow of chastity were noted and appreciated by the Sisters. One respondent pointed out that:

An openness and frankness with one another is now experienced in community in contrast to the strict control over topics of conversation when I first entered. I appreciate the freedom to develop friendships within the group -- in my first eight years, this was decidedly taboo.

For other Sisters, there was a freeing in the area of personal relationships. They saw as important:

1. encouragement to "re-enter" one's own family and in some cases to get to know one's parents, sisters and brothers by means of home visits, by bringing the family into previously "enclosed" areas of the convent, and by attendance at celebrations, for example, weddings, funerals of friends and relations;

2. end of restriction, and censorship of, Sisters' correspondence, and

3. liberal attitude toward cultivation of friendships within and outside the convent.

In summary, as one Sister aptly expressed it:

There was real movement from imposed structures which were the same for everyone and undue emphasis on minutiae, to what I term "structures of the heart" where each Sister is allowed to become aware of affective influences upon her whole life.

A new understanding of the vow of obedience, too, changed the face of community life. A "freeing" was noted here, too, during the period following the Second Vatican Council. One Sister remarked that:

Gone also is the seeking of permissions for every need or on so many occasions. Gone also is the dedication to "blind" obedience. We are expected to act responsibly, to be open with our Superiors about our inclinations, gifts, and disabilities, to be ready to discuss with them the apostolic commitments.

Sisters remarked that there was less deference to Superiors and, in theory and in practice, an increase in shared decision-making. The spirit of the law was more important than the letter, and increased scope was given to individual differences. One Sister went to the heart of the spirit of obedience when she said: "I don't have to be obedient. I choose to be so by working hard to find what God expects me to do". The respondents perceived general agreement among Mercy Sisters that

. . . many religious lived deeply the vowed life in the period before the Council, but they are glad to feel the growth possibilities in the present way of living.

Some Sisters noted that a few Mercy groups experienced difficulties in trying to establish creative and challenging structures. Changed structures, more relaxed modes of interaction with those in authority, and greater personal responsibility, were causes of tension for some Sisters. In many cases, Sisters claimed that changes were made too rapidly and without sufficient consultation with them. The changing role of Superiors was reflected in the fact that, during General Chapters in 1972/1973, most groups replaced the title "Mother" with "Sister".

From the time of the establishment of the Union (1954) and the Federation (1957), increased communication between Mercy groups had given Sisters an appreciation of similarities in their way of living as Mercy Sisters. Furthermore, Sisters from various communities met during courses in professional development at tertiary institutions, and at programmes on religious life. During the late 1960's and early 70's, as a result of study of documents from the Second Vatican Council, religious renewal programmes became very much part of life for Australian Sisters of Mercy, and gave impetus to change in conceptualisation and, more gradually, in the living of vows. Change in understanding of the vows continues, because, as one Sister pointed out:

The vows are, after all, an integral part of our religious life, and change cannot occur in one area without some effect in other areas.

The research findings showed that the Sisters expressed the charism of the Foundress in other ways, too. For example, many instances of the Sisters' efforts to translate the purpose of the Foundress into contemporary organisational practices were evident. As one Sister explained it:

Change of religious dress, relaxed domestic arrangements, more appropriate structures of governance, have been significant signs of our trying to think how Catherine would want us to live and work these days.

The researcher found that the plural form in the expression, "significant signs", was used as a general term to include many different ways of expressing "Mercyness".

In many instances, the Sisters spoke of the way community life had changed to meet the demands of change in the works of Mercy. For example, as one Sister commented:

There is certainly more emphasis on quality of time spent together as a community group rather than on quantity, hence we find ourselves sharing at a deeper level . . .

and, then, another:

Flexibility in prayer life has led to Sisters being free to become more involved in parish life.

But they also acknowledge some of the problems associated with moving into a way of religious living that was quite foreign to Sisters who had been in the Mercy Order for a long time. In one community, concern for the Mercy ethos was expressed in this way:

Because there is often not so much conversation between Sisters of different age groups, I feel there is a danger that work of our pioneer and older sisters could be overlooked and our tradition will lose some of its richness.

One Sister said:

There is greater openness, but not sufficient yet, not the kind that leads to full acceptance and affirmation . . . . Quite noticeable is a gap not yet bridged, between old and young, conservative/progressive, and so on.

Other personal strains were noted by several Sisters who commented that the opening of their community life and their house to others led to a lessening of privacy. They also experienced greater stress because of longer working hours and increasing demands made on them by their "clients".

Whatever the joys and difficulties in living under vow in community, all Sisters were convinced of one facet of that life. In keeping with her insistence on the importance of charity, Catherine McAuley encouraged among her Sisters a spirit of warm hospitality linked with simplicity in personal and community life-style. The Sisters interviewed and questioned for this study took it for granted that hospitality was a distinguishing feature of every Mercy community, and that people who were not Sisters of Mercy also received a warm welcome. After visiting many Mercy convents, one Sister



declared that:

As soon as I come into a Mercy convent, I always feel that I'm at home. We have so many little practices in common, and certainly share a unique sense of humour.

A further comment on community life from a Sister of the Union who said:

It was quite amazing to me having lived with Federation Sisters for two years in Sydney that we all had the same spirit, even to the same prayers being said in common.

The saying of prayers in common was part of the spiritual practices which Sisters of Mercy perceived as an important dimension of the Mercy ethos, and which has a special relationship to life in community.

Among the changes in religious traditions which members of the Mercy community experienced within their group, the Sisters, without exception, spoke of the gradual, but obvious, transition from a monastic structure of spiritual practices to a situation in which Sisters are free to seek all kinds of ways of expressing themselves spiritually. One Sister spoke of her appreciation of the transition in the following terms:

For me, less emphasis on a rigid horarium and more responsibility for my personal spiritual life has led to a deeper commitment to my being a Sister of Mercy. The interior life of other Sisters cannot be judged, but externally we have shifted from "head-count and punctuality" to a more personal decision to be responsible for praying. We have let go the accretions of many years such as an accumulation of vocal prayers in common. There is room, I feel, for the roots to go down ever more deeply now.

Slowly, within each community, attempts were made to integrate spiritual practices and the rest of life for individual Sisters and for the community as a whole.

It seems as if this dimension of Mercy community life is related to the future as well as the present. The hopes of several Sisters were summed up in this comment by one of the respondents:

In the future, I would like to see a greater development of the "faith community" aspect of religious living.

Many Sisters expressed a similar wish for this development, and one Sister looked for:

. . . a growth in prayer life, deeper understanding of and faith in Jesus Christ and His mission. In my early years of religious life, it seemed that the ritual and routine of when one prayed and with whom was more important (the discipline of early rising and meditating together made one a "good nun") than how one's spiritual life was developing.

Sisters remarked on the change from a very stylised and inflexible community prayer with no opportunity for shared prayer, to a prayer response which is in touch with "the rhythm" of the day and allows for personal expressions in time, place, and form. Religious retreats were conducted for a whole community together and were very tightly organised. Now, groups are smaller; discussions have become part of the retreat; the unbroken silence has eased. Many Sisters now have a personal directed Retreat. Even for those making "traditional" retreats, there is more emphasis on Scripture and contemplation.

Study of Scripture and of liturgy, adoption of the use of the "Prayer of the Church" (a traditional form of communal prayer now used widely both by religious communities and other members of the Church), and opportunities for Sisters to receive spiritual direction, have all had a part to play in diversifying spiritual practices in Mercy communities. Flexibility in prayer life has also enabled Sisters to become more involved in apostolic activities. At the same time, many religious communities have opened their homes to lay people who wish to join them in prayer.

#### Evolution of an Organisational Saga

A third dimension of the Mercy ethos has been the development of an organisational saga seen by the Sisters as uniquely "Mercy". During the life of the Mercy community, a clear, but unique con-

figuration of norms, values, beliefs, and myths had evolved, and a "Mercy way" of thinking and acting had developed.

As soon as a woman is admitted to the membership of the Mercy community, she becomes aware of the norms or guiding standards which prescribe what is acceptable or unacceptable for a member of the religious community. Sisters spoke of the "rules of the Mercy game" which played a major part in establishing expectancy patterns for action when they first joined the Mercy Order. Norms applied to the way in which Sisters dressed first thing in the morning. As each article of clothing was put on, a prescribed prayer was said to remind the wearer of the religious significance ascribed to various parts of the habit (or religious dress). Norms applied also to the order of precedence among the Sisters as they entered and left the chapel and the dining-room. Even at recreation time, the norm of precedence still applied when the Sisters sat around a table for sewing and discussion.

Some norms, such as the order of precedence, applied to everyone; others applied only to particular persons and their status. For example, Sisters who had been incorporated into the Mercy Order through Final Profession were allowed privileges of speech and movement not given to those such as novices who were not incorporated into the religious organisation. The Sisters described norms of the Mercy organisation as exercising a pervasive influence throughout the community by functioning as guides in the ways roles were enacted and in determining the way in which the mission might be undertaken, sanctions applied, and so on.

Sisters acknowledged that values in the Mercy ethos were related, in the first instance, to the position of the religious community within the context of the Roman Catholic Church. The

"Mercy" aspect of the proclamation of the Good News, strengthened by the vow of service to the poor, sick, and ignorant, was identified as the basic value on which other values rested. From speaking with Sisters in each Mercy group, and from reading the questionnaires, the researcher found that members of the Mercy community believed strongly in the worth of their organisation, valued loyalty to each other and to the total group, and endeavoured to translate the purpose of the Foundress into contemporary organisational practices.

In speaking of the worth of their organisation, Sisters remarked on the time they were prepared to spend on evaluation of the organisation, on the high priority which they placed on being prepared to move from one ministry to another where there was greater need, on the feeling of "belongingness" which they individually experienced, and the sense of personal satisfaction they derived from their membership of the Mercy Order.

There was a good deal of evidence to support the contention that the Sisters valued loyalty to each other and to the total group. Both Union and Federation Sisters spoke of this in relation to their own group and to the total group of Australian Sisters of Mercy. The following comment summed up the feelings of many Sisters:

We've always had a wonderful bond among us, especially when we did renewal programmes together. We made life-time friends.

Loyalty has been shown to two groups of Sisters in particular. In every group, Major Superiors spoke of the concern they had for Sisters who were going through a period of personal crisis, and of the support which they and their Sisters tried to give to members of their community who had decided to leave religious life. Several Sisters discussed the care of their sick and elderly Sisters. In some groups, it is still possible to care for them themselves, but the

tendency is to have them cared for in a nursing home (sometimes as part of the convent) which is staffed by secular nurses. Many Sisters found their own apostolic activities so demanding that they did not see the sick and elderly members of the group as often as they would wish.

A few isolated comments showed that some elderly Sisters were afraid that change could result in a weakening of the bonds between Sisters. For example, one Sister remarked that:

Some Sisters who see their role as critical revolutionaries (without giving, in time and concern, to the group) seem to lack something of the solidifying strength we once enjoyed. The younger Sisters, while less organised, are also disoriented and insecure, and obvious products of the "me" generation.

However, among the Sisters questioned or interviewed, such a comment was rarely heard.

The Sisters also referred to beliefs as another element of the Mercy "saga". As they described them, the Sisters defined beliefs as propositions about the world which they accepted as true. In this regard, they stressed their acceptance of basic beliefs held by the Roman Catholic Church. They spoke of their belief in the dignity of the human person and his or her rights and responsibilities, no matter what the colour, creed, or sex. They recounted stories about the impact of this belief on the way they ran their schools and hospitals, and related to their clients in social welfare and pastoral care. They said that the exercise of Mercy was undertaken in consultation with those in need so that individual rights and responsibilities would be safeguarded.

One of the strongest beliefs was that Mercy must be exercised where and when the need arises. When Government funding is needed for a work of mercy, the Sisters said that its delivery was often so

enmeshed in "red tape" that the recipients passed the point where funding might assist them.

Sisters pointed out that the acceptance of a belief was not only cognitive; it was often strongly coloured by sentiment and emotion. They instanced the Sisters' belief in the importance of striving for a more peaceful world. The expression of this belief by the Sisters has taken several forms, from silent prayer vigils to active participation in peace rallies. While all Sisters agree that members of the Mercy community have a right to hold such a belief, the expression of the belief has sometimes caused dissension in the Mercy Order.

Myths played a crucial role in the continuous processes of establishing and maintaining what was acceptable and that which was labelled unacceptable in the Mercy Order. Many Sisters told stories which explored issues and events in the past and which were often given a magical, even sacred quality. Stories about the hardships endured by the pioneer Sisters offered legitimacy for asking Sisters to refrain from criticising difficult physical conditions in the present.

Several Sisters said that some Mercy myths were used as weapons to justify a particular stance by a group within the Order. In her personal experience, the researcher had sometimes asked why a certain course of action could not be taken, and was told: "That can't be done because it's against the Code of Canon Law". Only when she was a Major Superior and made a study of the Code did she find that prescriptions ascribed to Canon Law were often myths, used to affirm a wavering power situation.

Many Mercy myths, according to the Sisters, had qualities that helped to reinforce the solidarity and stability of the Mercy community. These myths generally took the form of stories of heroic exploits by Sisters long since dead, but the stories did serve to encourage Sisters to aspire beyond their normal vision and abilities. The Sisters also recounted several humorous stories which they believed helped to bond the Sisters together through having been part of the event described.

A number of Mercy myths are about the Mercy mission, and have remained in the minds of the people in different areas where the Sisters have worked, as well as in the minds and hearts of the Sisters. This is to be expected, for the Sisters of Mercy have a long history of dedication to meeting the needs of people in a particular area. To do this, the Sisters perceived the importance of a sense of local identity and local self-determination which is a dimension of some significance in the Mercy ethos.

#### The Importance of Local Identity and Local Self-Determination

When the Sisters used the term "local" to describe identity, they were referring to the way in which they perceived their own group as distinct from other Mercy groups in Australia. The feelings of pride which they expressed for their group were related, in part, to the way in which their group had been founded and to its development since that time.

The reflections of one Sister are pertinent:

I suppose there is an insight into how a group begins and grows, that is valued by us on the inside . . . . There was something to be treasured. Maybe it isn't anything great in Mercy affairs, in the Mercy mission in Australia, but it is something that grew quite rapidly, and grew out of a particular ability.

Sisters recognised the distinctive nature of other Mercy groups. One Sister commented:

The uniqueness of the groups has always fascinated me . . . we could have so many local groups and yet remain faithful to the spirit of the Foundress.

Sisters gave evidence of the uniqueness of their Mercy group. They spoke of the circumstances under which their members had come to the area where their first convent was built. They described the needs of the people, and the ministries undertaken, as a result of demands from the people and of their own insights into needs of the Church and of the wider community. Many Sisters placed "local identity" very high on their list of matters of significance. In one group, it was expressed as follows:

Nothing is as important to our group as our identity in our local place.

Several Sisters spoke of the early practice of recruitment from a local area and service of the needy in that area. While recruitment patterns have changed, each local group still has a major part in deciding the service which will be carried out in their area. Evidence of the strength of this dimension of the ethos is found in the following comments:

We feel that people in other areas cannot understand our situation, but our own Mercy group is convinced that we must move out of certain ministries and into new ones. The strong support we received from the Bishop helped us to gain a wider diocesan perspective, too.

The Sisters, then, saw a close relationship between local identity and their freedom to make decisions within and for their own group which they termed "local self-determination". In practice, the decision-making related to a wide variety of matters, including choice of ministries by the local group, allocation of Sisters to particular ministries and to their place of residence, and finance.



During the Gunnedah Mercy Meeting (1979), the researcher had heard several Sisters use the term "local autonomy" in comments such as the following: "Whatever structure of governance we devise, it must not interfere with our local autonomy". At the time, the researcher noted that the Sisters used the term to include both "local identity" and "local self-determination".

The researcher saw the need to clarify the meaning of "local autonomy", and to establish its significance in relation to the new structure of governance. During the interviews, then, she asked the following question: "During the Gunnedah Meeting, many Sisters expressed their concern about retaining their local autonomy. What does the term 'local autonomy' mean for your group?" Responses to this question clustered into the following themes:

1. Significance of the concept of autonomy to Union and Federation groups.
2. Relationship between feelings of group isolation and concern for autonomy.
3. A sense of the importance of local identity and local self-determination.
4. Ambivalence between desire for national unity and retention of group autonomy.

Sisters from groups in both the Union and the Federation perceived their particular groups as having autonomy. In the Union, one Major Superior described the autonomy in each of the Provinces as "working" autonomy. Although the Union had a central form of government, each province, in practice, had not experienced any real restraints to its internal government. The Federation had a decentralised form of government. Each Federation group had its own Superior General and Council so that the group had the legal authority to act in its own right.

particularly about mission.

A sense of local identity was very real to the Sisters. Several Sisters spoke of the early practice of recruitment from a local area and service of the needy in that area. While recruitment patterns have changed, each local group still has a major part in deciding the service which will be carried out in their areas. Evidence of the strength of this dimension of the ethos is found in the comment that:

We need the ability to make decisions at our own level and the freedom to direct our own future.

Sisters remarked that public articulation of fears held by members of both Union and Federation about joining the new structure of governance was particularly noticeable at the National Meeting at Gunnedah in 1979. One of the Union Sisters recalled several of the salient points of the discussion in these words:

One thing that sticks most in my mind was the fear and lack of trust among us, and the questioning of how much power would be given to the National President. Every time we moved away from that, people were most supportive of the new structure of governance. The final crunch was this thing of authority.

Sisters in both groups admitted that they doubted if they had ever come to grips with the question of autonomy. Union Sisters said that their central government was never heavily centralised; in fact, some Sisters said that they hardly knew that it existed. In the Federation, Sisters expressed the fear that their group would have to give away some of their administrative and legal power, particularly as it referred to movement of personnel and choice of mission. In both groups, Sisters said their greatest fear was of the unknown, particularly with regard to the exercise of authority. This dimension of the ethos is explored in greater depth in the findings on the

process of change in the next chapter.

### Flexibility in Response to Changing Expressed Needs

A further dimension which the Sisters perceived as significant was openness to change from within the Mercy Order, from the Roman Catholic Church, and from society. The two broad questions from which data were generated related to religious living as it had been experienced in the past and as it was envisaged for the future.

Changes within the community included decrease in number of entrants, and increase of number of Sisters leaving. Sisters remarked on the implications for mission and community life. Other changes related to community living with movement from a fairly rigid and ordered communal existence with the emphasis on adherence to external expressions of uniformity, for example, in dress, prayer times, and recreation, to a more flexible sense of community living where the emphasis was on personal relationships.

While the Sisters found obvious advantages in these changes, they did point to some shortcomings. In summary, one Sister commented:

Among problems which resulted from the changes was the sense of corporate identity which was sometimes felt to be lost with the absence of a more formalised communal structure. Other problems related to individual responsibility, for example, excessive social activity, which, if unresolved, can cause problems in community living.

Changes of attitude in the Church have placed a new focus on shared responsibility, mutuality, shared leadership, and authority. For Mercy communities, this focus has produced internal changes. As one Sister said:

This area has brought with it the greatest challenges and called forth a more solid faith level. It certainly has been a risk-filled development, which no doubt has resulted in some eroding of our life.

From society, too, new demands have been placed on the Sisters. Human service organisations are staffed with personnel whose level of professional training is rising, so that Sisters have to ensure that their qualifications and expertise are appropriate for their particular ministries. Human service organisations have an increasingly diverse clientele with a wide variety of personal needs. At this time in their history, Sisters of Mercy are looking at the world outside the convent, and are asking themselves questions of their place in the world. One Sister describes what is happening in the following words:

We are making a reassessment of our role in the world, seeing ourselves as part of that world. In particular, we consider we have to act as responsible/informed citizens on issues of justice. I believe we are still at the theory stage in this. Small, inconspicuous "don't rock the boat" type actions are taking place, but always within a socially acceptable, non-threatening boundary. We are careful to retain our image and not be ridiculed or labelled for being strongly opposed to any aspect of the status quo.

These comments are quoted in full, as they serve to sum up an important facet of the Mercy ethos, as seen by the Sisters, who realise that there are changes of various kinds, coming from a variety of sources. They realise, too, that they can be active in responding to some changes, and, in other cases, they themselves may be the source of change. The research focus in this study is on the process of change, with a question as to the relationship of selected organisational characteristics, such as the Mercy ethos, to that process.

The following conclusions were drawn from the findings on ethos in the Mercy Order.

#### CONCLUSIONS: ETHOS OF THE MERCY COMMUNITY

Members of the Mercy group perceived that their religious community had a special organisational character or ethos, "Mercyness"

or "the Mercy way", expressed in what they believe, and evidenced in the way they live and work, as well as in the kinds of ministries they undertake.

*The concept of "ethos" is interpreted by Sisters of Mercy as "Mercyness" or "the Mercy way", and is crucial to understanding the Mercy Order as an organisation.*

In the literature, the special character of different organisations is discussed by several writers, for example, Jelinek et al. (1983:331) and Barley (1983:393-394).

Since the establishment of the Mercy Order in 1831, the influence of the Foundress, Catherine McAuley, has been evident in the way in which the religious community has given pre-eminence to its mission, in the way in which members have been committed to the Order, and in the way in which leaders have demonstrated a servant quality of leadership.

*The spirit of Catherine McAuley still pervades the Mercy Order through the importance of mission, through the nature of the commitment of members, and through the servant quality of its leaders.*

The importance of the influence of the founder in the development of an organisation is also discussed in the literature, most recently by Pettigrew (1979).

The Mercy Constitutions are an effective means of enshrining basic values of the religious community, and identifying and articulating Mercy ethos in contemporary terms. Distinct from the Constitutions, sagas record different kinds of information about the Mercy Order, namely, stories of people and events, remembered as important in the life of the Mercy organisation. Both Constitutions and saga are important in determining something about the way the Mercy Order operates.

*The Constitutions and the organisation saga are the means by which the Mercy ethos is preserved, articulated, and transmitted.*

In the literature, this concept of an organisation remembering its past and preserving its ethos received some attention from writers such as Clark (1972:178), Handy (1976:176), and Jönsson and Lundin (1977:157). The significance of Constitutions to the ethos of a religious community has not, to this point, been addressed.

One element of "Mercyness" is freedom to decide at the local level. Dominance of the value of local autonomy and local identity has placed a unique stamp on the ethos of the Mercy Order.

*Autonomy of individuals and Mercy groups, in choice of ministry and living of religious life, is an important value in the Mercy ethos.*

In the literature, the question of autonomy as an element in ethos has received little attention. Eldridge and Crombie (1974:89-91), however, assert that the character of organisational choice is one of the major manifestations of organisational culture.

The Mercy Order is open to change in the sense that there is a willingness to accept changes in the Order in response to a variety of influences, whether from the Mercy group, the Church, or society.

*Flexibility in response to a variety of expressed needs, whether from within the Mercy Order, from the Roman Catholic Church, or from society, continues to be an important element in Mercy ethos.*

#### SUMMARY

At this stage in the study, the researcher looked at the pattern of the responses, and asked herself one basic question: If the Sisters I am studying were to read the report to this point, would they recognise their world in it? As a member of the group, and from her unique position in various roles in the organisation, the researcher was convinced that the report presented an accurate (though necessarily not full) picture of life in the Mercy community

at that time. She was confident that the findings to this point substantiated the selection of the four organisational characteristics as a most productive source of information about the way in which the religious organisation operated as a human service organisation.

Some relationships among the conclusions were noted. For example, the Sisters' commitment to the Mercy Order was clearly evidenced in their vow of service and its expression by dedication to Mercy mission. The servant quality of the leadership supported the Sisters in their commitment to mission, by facilitating their responses to a diversity of needs. The ethos, or special "Mercy" character of the religious community, served to strengthen the commitment of Sisters, helped support the servant quality of the leaders, and pointed to the focus on mission. An identification of interrelated factors in the four characteristics show the nature of the Mercy community and the fact that the four characteristics are sufficient to give an understanding of the Mercy community.

In the next chapter, findings on the second subproblem are reported.

## CHAPTER 6

### PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS ABOUT THE PROCESS OF CHANGE LEADING TO THE ADOPTION OF THE NEW STRUCTURE OF GOVERNANCE

In the preceding chapter, the findings presented confirmed the researcher's assumption that, although other characteristics might have been selected for study, analysis of the four characteristics, namely, mission, membership, leadership, and ethos, would provide a rich source of data about the way in which the Mercy community functioned as an organisation. These data also indicated ways in which the Sisters perceived change to have occurred in the religious organisation.

In this chapter, findings are presented in answer to the second subproblem which was phrased as follows: What was the change process that led to the adoption of the new structure of governance for the Sisters of Mercy (Australia) in 1981? At this stage of the research, the Delbecq model (Figure 3, p.106) provided a framework that offered process guidelines for the introduction of an innovation into a human service organisation. Each of the phases proposed by Delbecq corresponded to what the researcher, from her experience and insight, defined as a "critical event" in the process of change (Fig.9) leading to the adoption of the new structure of governance. For each phase, findings were obtained through the use of the research techniques discussed in Chapter 4. As a result, for each phase, the data provided insights into the process of change, and helped build a composite picture of the way in which adoption of the new structure of governance took place.



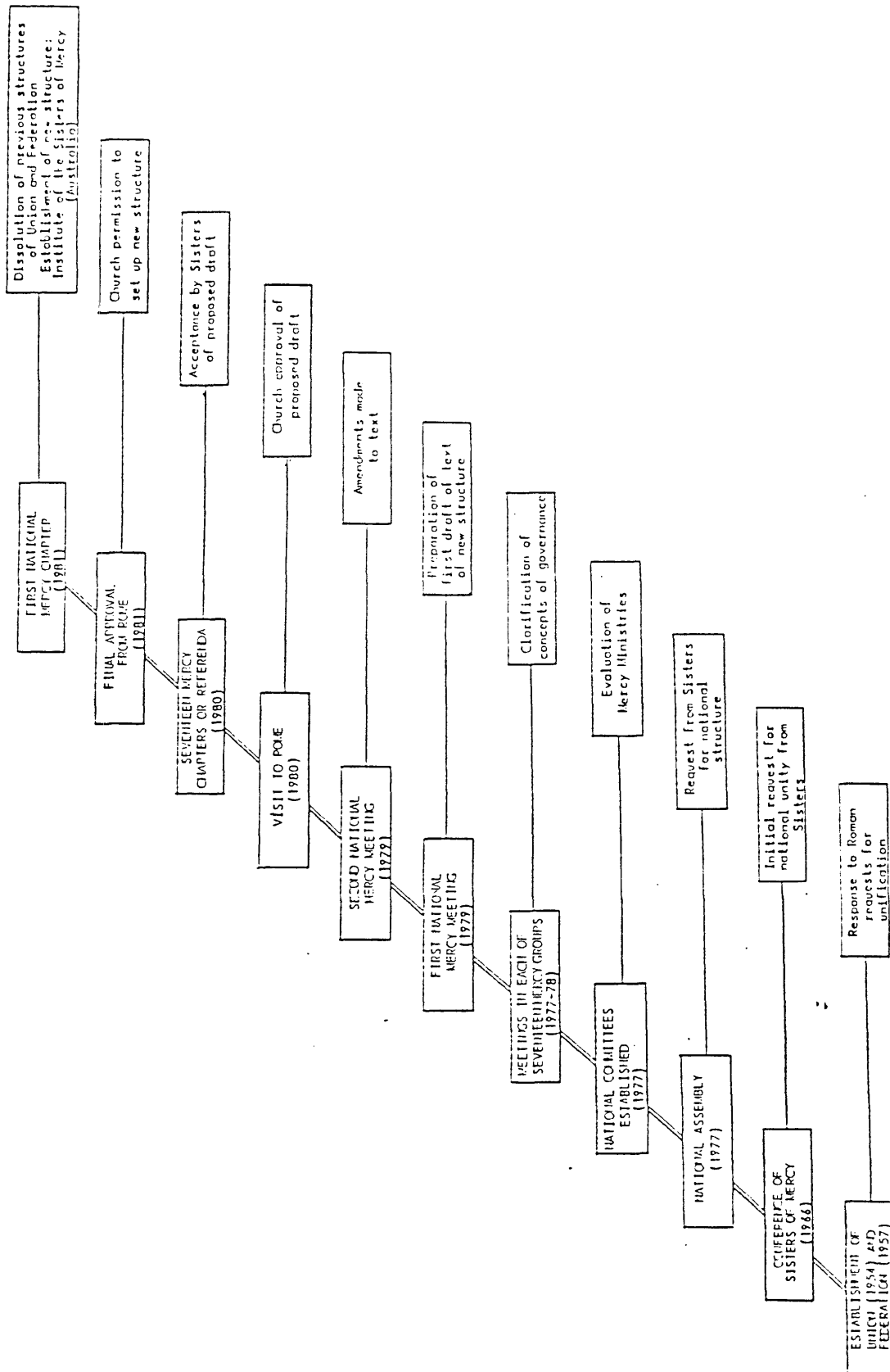


Figure 9  
 Critical Events and Their Significance in the  
 Development of the New Structure of  
 Governance for the Sisters of  
 Mercy of Australia, 1981

Data about each of the phases in the process of introducing a change in structure of governance for the Sisters of Mercy (Australia) are now presented.

PHASES IN THE PROCESS OF CHANGE LEADING  
TO ADOPTION OF THE NEW STRUCTURE  
OF GOVERNANCE

Phase 1. Initial Mandate Resulting in the  
Establishment of Union (1954) and Federation (1957)

The initial mandate for change in governance for the Sisters of Mercy was found in a number of requests from Church authorities in Rome that all groups of religious Sisters with the same Foundress should unite under one form of governance. In Australia, at that time, Sisters of Mercy did not accept such a structure. They chose two clearly distinct forms of governance. The establishment of a Union for eight Mercy groups in 1954 and a Federation for the remaining nine groups in 1957 marked the beginning of a new era of governance for Australian Sisters of Mercy. At this historical point, the present research began.

As the historical antecedents in Chapter 2 indicated, the establishment of the two forms of governance was a step of some significance in the evolution of governance of Australian Sisters of Mercy. In the research design, however, the researcher had not planned to collect data about the Sisters' perceptions of reasons for the establishment of the Union and the Federation, as the research study was directed to an understanding of the process of change after the formation of the Federation and leading to the adoption of the new structure.

In the course of the interviews with the Major Superiors and the delegates, many Sisters did speak of various kinds of change

which had occurred in their group after they had joined the Federation or the Union. To collect, from the respondents to the questionnaire, information similar in content to that which had been volunteered by the interviewees, the researcher decided to include the following item in the questionnaire:

In the 1950's, some Australian Mercy groups decided to form a Union and others a Federation. How do you explain the fact that all groups did not choose the same structure of governance at that time?

This item was related to the central problem through the researcher's assumption that Sisters in different positions of responsibility in the Order would perceive differently the reasons for their group's choice of structure. In order to gain insights into these perceptions, data generated from this question and information from the interviewees were investigated through the use of suggestions proposed by Delbecq (1978:115) in Phase 1 of his model.

Delbecq (1978:317) claimed that early dialogue with elites prior to any requests for support can be an important precondition for innovation. Out of the dialogue, between the elites (Mercy Major Superiors) and the advocates of innovation (hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church), should have come a shared understanding with respect to:

1. Value and timeliness of the innovation being considered.
2. Groups who should be involved in designing the innovation.
3. Planning steps and subprocesses.
4. Form, frequency, and timing of feedback about planning for innovation.
5. Level of resources to be devoted to planning and innovation.

As details of this period discussed in Chapter 2 indicate, such

a shared understanding between all Major Superiors and Roman authorities about one structure of governance for the Sisters of Mercy was not achieved, nor was there any agreement between Major Superiors and the hierarchy of the Church about subsequent phases of a planning process leading to the adoption of one structure of governance for all Australian Sisters of Mercy. From the historical antecedents and from perceptions of the Sisters, it would seem that each of the factors in a shared understanding of the introduction of an innovation was not seriously considered by those wishing to promote the specific change. Among the Major Superiors and delegates at the National Chapter and among those who answered the questionnaires were Sisters who remembered quite clearly the establishment of the two earlier forms of governance. The Sisters' perceptions of the introduction of the innovation, as they are related to each of the above factors, are now reported.

1. Value and timeliness of the innovation. In regard to the value of the innovation, several responses to the question were similar for both Union and Federation Sisters. They spoke of the influence of the Major Superior and, in some cases, the local Bishop, on the decision to adopt a particular type of governance. Where the Mercy group was small and working in one diocese, both Major Superior and Bishop believed that, in a centralised system, personnel might be transferred outside the diocese. Other fears, mentioned by the Sisters, included the loss of autonomy in local Mercy government, the loss of identity of their group, and the loss of material resources. These three fears were mentioned by almost half of all respondents. Such fears were related to preservation of the value of autonomy of the local Mercy group.

The following quotations, the first from a Sister in the Union, the second from a Sister in the Federation, illustrate the similarity in Sisters' perceptions about these fears. A Sister in the Union stated that:

I believe that a group chose one structure rather than another because of the position taken by the current Mother General. Her position would probably be influenced in turn by the resources of her community and the need she felt to obtain support from other communities. External forces such as the persuasive opinion of the local Bishop could also have contributed to the stance taken.

A Sister in the Federation said that her whole group perceived the possibility of a central form of governance in only one way. She described this perception in the following words:

In my memory it was principally a "preservation of territory" and "boundary maintenance" mentality -- a fear of being engulfed in a huge bureaucratic organisation with consequent loss of identity. At this stage it was to be expected, I feel. Our concerns did not go much further than our own back yards and the idea of putting ourselves at the service of a national Church was quite foreign.

Other Sisters also spoke of the value that their members placed on working for their own Mercy group. One Sister expressed the feelings in her group in the following way:

There was no way the major social changes of the '60's -- not even the renewal occasioned by Vatican II -- could have been foreseen, hence a rather "selfish" mentality would have prevailed. It was: "What is best for us?" rather than "What does the Church need?" or "What do God's people need?"

In reflecting on the establishment of the Union, one Sister in a small Mercy group commented:

In our group, we had a saying that the "Union people" were the risk takers, but I often wondered if we joined the Union because the Cardinal said so, or because there was safety in numbers!

Many Sisters said that their Major Superiors believed that the strongest form of unity was Union. In this belief, they received encouragement to join the Union from two sources. First, they

pointed out that two Australian Sisters of Mercy went to Rome where they had first-hand experience of the advantages enjoyed by congregations with centralised forms of governance. Also, many groups, with satisfying experiences of amalgamation at an earlier period, did not fear what seemed to them to be yet another form of amalgamation. Second, the Sisters in the Union stressed that their Major Superiors of the time were heedful of the advice given by those Sisters and clerics who pointed out the advantages of Union. Eight Major Superiors were convinced of the soundness of the advice, and voted for their group to become part of the Union.

Not all groups remembered amalgamation as a happy experience. Amalgamation and other previous experiences combined to complicate the process of decision-making. The following rather lengthy quotation described the situation as one Sister perceived it:

In my opinion, all groups did not choose the same structure of governance in the 1950's because in those days our lifestyle was much less threatened and, indeed, there seemed to be a competitive streak between the two groups in our area. I think that one group feared to lose its autonomy because it would have been a minor partner. Previously, amalgamations had been more or less ordered by the Archbishop, and some smaller groups appeared to have lost their identity in the larger "receiving" group.

She went on to say that the difference between Union and Federation would have been difficult to distinguish at that time. In her area, there were two large Mercy groups. One group chose Union and the other Federation. She wondered if the two groups "just opted to be different".

Sisters, who were members of Mercy groups that joined the Federation, perceived the matter of unification from another perspective, and identified a core value for their groups. Several Sisters spoke of a centralised Union as being against the spirit or charism of the Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy. One Sister

summed it up this way:

Most Sisters were conscious of the reality that Catherine McAuley was one of the pioneers in the movement within the Church away from strict centralisation in government for religious communities, because she saw this as inhibiting freedom to respond flexibly to need. Some saw Union, as initially presented, as moving away from this flexibility.

In relation to discussion about the timeliness of the innovation, Sisters in the Union had little to say. From Sisters in the Federation, the most common comment was that their Major Superiors had told them that there had not been enough time for consideration of the issue of one form of governance, and that the movement to acceptance of the Union was too fast.

## 2. Groups who should be involved in designing the innovation.

According to the Sisters, the two groups, the Major Superiors and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, were involved in planning the new structure of governance. Several respondents in this study emphasised the fact that, had all the members of each Mercy group been consulted about the form of a new structure of governance, the final result could have been very different. They also pointed out that, in the early 1950's, consultation of all Sisters was not a common practice in all Mercy groups.

Some Major Superiors, however, were not prepared to commit their groups to a new form of governance without consulting the members of their groups. Two Sisters spoke of this at some length. One Sister stated that:

As far as I can remember, there was no mention in the convocation letter (for the Melbourne meeting) that amalgamation would have any special significance on the agenda. If there had been, we would certainly have ascertained the opinion of our Sisters on this vital and emotive issue before leaving for Melbourne . . . . From later events, I think that the decision for a close union was made too hastily.

This opinion was supported by another Sister who said that:

Having lived through this interesting period, I feel that there was insufficient dialogue between the various groups before the crucial meeting in Melbourne where the Major Superiors were expected to cast their votes in favour of one body. As I remember it, some groups . . . were unprepared to commit their Sisters without further consultation.

At this point in the decision to establish one form of governance, no consultation was made with organisational members or with clients of the organisation. It would seem that the opinions of these two groups were of little consequence to the decision-makers.

3. Planning steps and subprocesses. Delbecq (1978) suggested that those promoting change and the organisational elites should decide upon planning steps and subprocesses. The Sisters recalled that the decision to accept one particular form of governance, that is, the Union, was taken without consideration of other preliminary stages towards unification.

Although some groups accepted the Union form of governance as the form approved by the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, the remaining Mercy groups tried to find an alternative type of governance which would better suit their needs. The Sisters acknowledged that, for some strong personalities among the Major Superiors, the Union was seen as having too much central authority. For these Major Superiors, the Federation was viewed as an appropriate intermediate step to some kind of complete union which would be acceptable to all Australian Sisters of Mercy. For at least one Sister, joining the Federation had particular significance:

For me, joining the Federation meant that there was something bigger than our own small group to trust in; it gave our small group special status. At times, you could perhaps lose heart in how things were in your group. You could be numbed a little bit by things that happened, but you felt deep within you that things could not go so very badly if you belonged to something as public as the Federation.



4. Form, frequency and timing of feedback about planning for innovation. Several Sisters remarked that, because of the

pressure from the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church to come to a decision about one form of governance for all their groups, Major Superiors did not have the opportunity to consult with them, to collect feedback, to discuss that feedback, and then to begin again the cycle of consultation and feedback about planning for innovation.

5. Level of resources to be devoted to planning and innovation.

According to the Sisters, little time was spent in investigating the level of resources to be devoted to planning the innovation. They could not recollect discussions about finance and physical resources. They did, however, remember discussions about personnel. Several Sisters recalled the concern expressed by their group when it was feared that, if they joined the Union, their young Sisters would have to go away to a central place for training, and their teachers and nurses might be moved from their home base.

In many cases, the Sisters stated that they believed that their local Bishop would feel that he had a certain degree of control over their activities and their personnel if the local Mercy group was part of a centrally organised body in the Church. They believed that many Bishops were basing their thinking on their experience of international Orders with their headquarters in Rome. Several Sisters from one group said that their Major Superior refused to join the Union because the local Bishop was in favour of their joining. They perceived the situation as a case of opposition to what the Bishop wanted rather than opposition to the Union as such.

Some groups looked to the future, but just for their own group. For example, many Sisters said that they believed that the basic reason for their groups joining the Federation was the appeal

of the decentralised government structure which appeared best to meet their need for local autonomy in government and in mission. One Sister expressed it this way:

It seems to me that our Congregation was reluctant to be part of the Union in the 1950's because we were a small group working in a particular diocese and we wished to preserve autonomy in order to continue that work . . . . Several other groups thinking along the same lines, then joined in a Federation which provided a unified structure while at the same time preserving the autonomy of each member group.

From the perceptions of Sisters who were members of a Mercy group at the time of establishment of Union and Federation, several issues relevant to the present research study were identified. In general, the Sisters believed that little consultation with members of the various groups took place; that decisions were made by Major Superiors; that information about Union and Federation was not widely disseminated among the Sisters before decisions were made; that lack of contact and also communication between groups were closely related to geographical distance and lack of mobility; that the particular background of a group, its ideas about authority, and what was seen by the Major Superiors as best for the group at the time, were key factors in the decision to join either the Union or Federation; and that the influence of local Bishops for or against a particular form of governance was keenly felt by the Sisters.

Of the respondents who had become Sisters of Mercy since the formation of Union and Federation, many admitted that they did not know any historical details of that period for their group, but that "folk tales" abounded. For example, one story was that: "It [Union or Federation, as the case might be] was what Catherine McAuley would have wanted in this day and age". In both groups, some Sisters reported that they heard that: "The others [Union or Federation] were

not really concerned about unity, but about the protection of their own particular interests".

In general, these Sisters took it for granted that Union and Federation, as two different forms of governance, both allowed for the development of Mercy life. The following quotations from Sisters who joined the Mercy community in the 1960's illustrate the way in which many Sisters viewed that period. One Sister said that:

Different Congregations had different understandings of authority and different ways of exercising it. Their histories were different as were the localities in which they worked and from which their customs sprang.

Another Sister stated that:

Basically, decisions regarding Union and Federation seem to have flowed from many considerations. It seems unrealistic to assume that the needs of seventeen separate foundations spread across a vast continent could be so similar that the same answer could immediately emerge. While the vision of service was strong in each, the manner of serving seemed to call for consideration.

All Sisters who were interviewed had something to say about the choice in the 1950's, but 16 of the respondents said they did not know why all groups did not choose the same structure. Another 19 Sisters did not reply at all to the question. No reasons were given on the scripts, but as those respondents answered all other questions, the researcher believed it was reasonable to assume that they, too, did not know why a particular choice had been made.

By 1957, all Australian Sisters of Mercy were members of either the Union or the Federation. Whatever the Sisters' choice of governance, that choice was seen by the Sisters to be the most appropriate at that time to support the "Mercy way of life" in their group, although the group had no clear perception of the future direction of the structure of governance.

In terms of Phase 1 of Delbecq's (1978) model, an analysis of forces operating in the initial mandate from which developed the Union (1954) and the Federation (1957) showed that agreement between all Mercy groups and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church on one form of governance was unlikely at that time. This conclusion was based on the fact that important preconditions for successful innovation, that is, early dialogue between elites and the advocates of the innovation, resulting in a shared understanding of the factors involved in planning the change, were not present. At this point in the Delbecq model, the first stage towards adoption of the innovation was completed. For the Sisters of Mercy, their innovation, one structure of governance, had not been adopted.

Delbecq (1978:318) suggested that one of the strongest motives for obtaining the mandate to proceed with planning for an innovation was a potential threat to the organisation's legitimacy. While Sisters did not view as threats directives from Rome that groups of religious with the same Founder or Foundress should unite, Sisters said that, because of their legal relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, they felt a strong sense of obligation to continue to work towards the establishment of one structure of governance for all Sisters of Mercy in Australia.

#### Phase 2. Problem Exploration Resulting in Formation of National Mercy Conference (1967)

In this second phase of Delbecq's Program Planning Model, the focus of attention moved from the organisation to its clients. The nature of the clients' needs were assessed as a basis for improving the way in which clients were served.

In the present study, this phase corresponded to the search for some kind of Mercy unity which was closer than that existing in the two structures of the Union and the Federation. In terms of time, this phase corresponded to the period between the establishment of the Federation (1957) and the next "critical event", the formation of the National Mercy Conference in 1967.

The Sisters noted that, during this time, significant changes occurred in the organisational characteristics, namely, focus on mission, commitment of members, servant quality of leadership, and ethos of the Mercy community. They related the changes to various factors, including the following:

1. Growing demands for members of the Mercy Order to provide staff for services, such as health care, education, and social welfare, and to undertake new ministries and overseas missions.
2. Larger intakes of women into the Order with new opportunities for spiritual and professional development.
3. Support for change by Major Superiors, and increasing interaction and collaboration between Sisters in formal leadership positions in the Union and the Federation.
4. Impact of the Second Vatican Council (1963-65) on the life-style and work of the Sisters of Mercy through directives to religious institutes to undertake radical personal and community renewal and adaptation. As was mentioned earlier (p.3), two broad principles were prescribed to guide the process: first, a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration of a given community of religious; and second, an adjustment to the changed conditions of the times.

The following findings about this phase in the process of change leading to the adoption of the new structure of governance by the Sisters of Mercy in Australia in 1981 were synthesised from the perceptions of the Sisters in interviews and from questionnaires, from the experience and insights of the researcher as participant and observer, and from archival records held by various Mercy groups.

In recalling their experiences of the education ministry in the late '50's and early '60's, Mercy Sisters reported numerous requests from parish priests, in both country and urban areas, to help establish and staff schools, particularly primary schools. When a school was set up, the parish usually built nearby a convent for the Sisters. Living in close proximity to their place of work, the Sisters found that they were expected to be "on duty" long past the normal hours of working. While several Sisters spoke of their excitement in being part of a new Mercy foundation, they also recalled the physical and mental strain resulting from teaching without adequate professional training, from trying to cope with very large numbers of students in their classes, and from the demands on their time outside the school in the parish.

Similar requests for Sisters were also made in other areas of education, in health care, and in social welfare. During this period, as the Sisters repeatedly pointed out, very few requests for personnel for any type of ministry were refused by a Mercy Major Superior. While increasing numbers of young women applied to join the Mercy Order, the future of Mercy institutions appeared to be secure. One Sister who joined the Order at this time recalled her experience in these words:

When I entered, a rising rate of entry meant that our continuing life expectancy as a Mercy group and our capacity to maintain our Mercy institutions were unquestioned.

During this period, many Mercy Sisters continued in their work although they were without appropriate training for the task. At the same time, leaders of the Union and the Federation supported Major Superiors in their efforts to give the Sisters opportunities for both spiritual and professional development.

Sisters in the Union spoke appreciatively of their First Mother General who encouraged communication among the Sisters by making the Generalate, that is, the main house in Canberra, a centre of hospitality and a place which offered all kinds of spiritual and professional renewal programmes. One Sister stated that:

One important thing that the Sisters in the Union Generalate set out to do was to put on programs that would not only unify people by the very fact of bringing them together, but would also educate them.

Sisters in the Federation also spoke of programmes of mutual assistance, especially in the area of formation, which were organised through the Federation Council.

In reflecting on this period, one Sister spoke at some length in the following words:

We were under great pressure in the apostolate. We had a desire, prior to the Vatican Council, for more opportunity for greater professional development and further study so as to equip ourselves better, but the pressure of our works prevented anything from taking place . . . . Trying to work under those pressures prevented, and I think stunted, a good deal of other personal growth.

In some of the urban areas, where access to tertiary courses was easier, Sisters had more opportunity to update professional qualifications.

Sisters of both Union and Federation identified their meetings with each other as an invaluable means of broadening their outlook about living the Mercy charism. One Sister described her experience in these words:

When we went to Canberra, we mixed with other Sisters from the Union. Then several groups came to Sydney where they stayed with communities of the Monte Sant'Angelo group, so they were getting a wider input still from Federation as well as from other Union students who were with them.

Other Sisters noted that, as a general rule, the Sisters who had the opportunity to mix were the younger members of Mercy groups. One Sister pointed out that:

The whole experience of those young people became considerably broadened. They experienced not only the day-to-day kinds of regulations, freedoms, restrictions, and so on; they lived a whole different congregational way of doing things.

Several Sisters claimed that:

We were all suddenly, in all sorts of ways, exposed to the fact that there were other ways of being good Sisters of Mercy and that some of those ways were very different from the things that we had been holding sacrosanct.

During this period, the structures of governance in both the Union and the Federation were used by the Major Superiors to protect autonomy in each of the 17 groups and to preserve unity of the Mercy spirit among them. One Union Sister had this to say:

The Union Council members didn't interfere in our day-to-day affairs. They did, I feel, deal more with legal matters. I also think that the Union did a good deal for us as a small group because they held Superiors' retreats and Principals' meetings. Then, there were the religious renewals every twelve months for three Sisters from each Province. As a small Province, we could never provide such an opportunity ourselves.

In the archives of the Union Generalate, letters from the Mother General to Provincials, that is, the formal leaders of each Province, support the Sisters' view that a great deal of autonomy was permitted, within the limits set by the Constitutions, for each Province. Provinces were responsible for election of their own Provincial, for formation and appointment of personnel, and for management of financial and physical resources.



Collaborative ventures among the Federation groups and biennial meetings of the Federation Council were the formal means used by the Federation to develop unity among its member communities. As decisions by the Federal Council were made by Major Superiors with authority within their own group, members of those groups were, in the words of one Sister, "most loyal to them". The Federation Statutes emphasised uniformity among the groups in Constitutions, customs, religious dress, and ceremonial. Some Sisters believed that this emphasis on uniformity could lead to undue constraints on members, but, in practice, this did not seem to be the case. For example, in Papua New Guinea and the tropical north of Australia, the need of Sisters for modification of the Mercy religious dress to suit climatic conditions was readily acknowledged by the Council.

According to many Sisters, the first major changes which they experienced in Mercy life followed the advent of the Second Vatican Council (1963-65). Before the Council, the various Australian Mercy groups showed the same general pattern in life-style and work. As was demonstrated earlier in this chapter, several respondents pointed out that, when Sisters of Mercy in Union and Federation met, they often remarked upon the many ways in which they were alike. After the Council, variations developed in this pattern as each group responded at its own pace and in its own fashion to the conciliar directives to adaptation and renewal in religious communities.

Speaking of this period, one Sister said that:

When we saw that "unchangeable" Rome did change, every aspect of the formerly almost sacred legacy of our Foundress was suddenly subjected to questioning as to its appropriateness in the modern world.

As they examined the Church documents, Sisters in each Mercy group began a serious study of their place as women religious in the

Roman Catholic Church. Sisters recalled the impact which this study had upon them individually and upon their religious group in the years following the Council. The following changes were among those noted by the Sisters.

1. Community living. From a fairly rigid and ordered communal living with the emphasis on adherence to external expressions of uniformity, for example, in dress, prayer times, form of prayer, type of recreation, use of leisure, to a more flexible sense of community living where emphasis was on personal relationships, sensitivity to others, and respect for individual differences. Several Sisters said they felt that, in their group, the sense of corporate identity was lost through the absence of a more formalised communal structure.

2. Prayer. From a very stylised and inflexible community prayer form with few opportunities for shared prayer to, what one Sister termed, "a prayer response in touch with the rhythm of the day and allowing for individual differences among those who made up the group". For many Sisters, tensions developed in their communities between members with needs which reflected "older" and "newer" prayer forms.

3. Mercy ministry. From being engaged almost solely in teaching, nursing, and social work, with very little thought of retirement and scant consultation about ministry between formal Mercy leaders and members of a group, to a wider range of ministries which reflected the changing needs of clients and the individual abilities and talents of the Sisters. Until this period, it was often the case that Sisters engaged in one apostolate lived together in one convent. Gradually, ministries no longer governed the type of

community living, and in individual communities were Sisters from a variety of ministries. While professional development was seen as important and movement into a "second apostolate" became quite common, preparation was also made for retirement of Sisters.

4. Membership. From a steady intake of young women and few departures from any Mercy group before the Vatican Council to an exit of members, which began in a very small way in the mid-sixties, and which became increasingly one of the most noticeable features of membership in the latter part of that decade. Sisters found it quite difficult to explain the phenomenon of Sisters leaving religious life. They did, however, believe that two sources of discontent with religious life could be identified. Some Sisters were dissatisfied with the slow rate of change as they perceived it in their religious community; others experienced a lack of personal fulfilment in religious life. The respondents were unanimous in their opinion that the decision to leave was a most complex matter and was not completely understood even by those Sisters who left.

According to some Sisters, decreased numbers seemed to result in greater stability and commitment, with more emphasis on what they termed "real community". For the majority of Sisters, very positive results in personal growth and development, in personal responsibility and accountability, in deeper commitment, in more intensive discernment of corporate mission and identity, led to greater cohesiveness in many Mercy groups. One respondent expressed her attitude to the matter of personal development in the following words:

I believe there has been a somewhat unbalanced swing towards the "fulfilment" of individual needs to the detriment of commitment to the designs of God as discerned by the Congregation and the local community.

On the other hand, another Sister said that "the freedom 'to be' and the growth and development within the Sisters has been one of our greatest blessings".

5. "World View". From a rather narrow and limiting world view to a more realistic world view. Usually, the convent was a large and imposing building. The parish boundary tended to be the world boundary for the Sisters. The emphasis in service tended to be on "welfare" rather than on searching for the cause of a problem. In many Mercy groups, the Sisters had little interest in or information about national and world issues. Questions of justice were rarely discussed except as they had been encountered through a personal experience with the apostolate. Gradually, clearly observable changes occurred. New convents were often ordinary houses, so that Sisters began to develop what one Sister termed a "street" perspective rather than a "tower" perspective. In ministry, questions were asked about the cause of a person's need, and Sisters were prepared to work with the people involved to help remove injustices. More awareness of global issues relating to the poor and greater readiness to extend the boundaries of ministry beyond the traditional were also noted by the Sisters.

6. Government. From a rather inflexible and structured form of government where authority resided in one person and was "passed down" to other Sisters in the community, to a more flexible and apparently less structured form of government where shared decision-making was encouraged. The new system of government as proposed by the Vatican Council was based upon two broad principles: collegiality, that is, participation in decision-making by those who would carry out the decisions, and subsidiarity, the right of lesser and sub-

ordinate bodies to perform functions and make decisions at their level of competence.

Accompanying this change was a new understanding of religious authority and religious leadership. Every Sister had the right and, in most communities was encouraged, to express her opinion on a variety of community matters. Furthermore, most communities set up a structure so that Sisters' opinions could be considered. According to many Mercy respondents, this period marked for them the beginning of a noticeable shift to what has been termed "servant" leadership, discussed in Chapter 3 (pp.89-97). These Sisters remarked that the leaders of their communities were making renewed efforts to encourage each member to place her abilities and her gifts at the service of the poor. These Sisters also pointed out that members of the community and Sisters in positions of authority were to be accountable for their decisions to the community. Moreover, new voting procedures for elections were introduced to include a wider representation of Sisters on community Councils.

At a national level, the Major Superiors were working towards even more significant developments in governance for the Mercy communities. In May, 1966, the Australian Federation called a special meeting in Sydney to discuss two matters, a link with the Australian Union, and a proposal from the newly formed American Mercy Federation to work towards a World Federation. Informal meetings between the Executive of the Australian Federation and representatives of the Union Generalate resulted in three Sisters from each group attending the American meeting.

In August, 1966, a further step was taken towards a formal structure of unification for the Australian Sisters of Mercy. While the Union Sisters were meeting at their General Chapter, Sisters of

the Federation made a request that a formal link be made between the two Australian Mercy groups. An invitation from the Union to the Federation Executive to attend final sessions of the Chapter was accepted. This meeting of Sisters from every Mercy group in Australia was a means of encouraging the exploration of new ideas. One Sister explained her reactions to the meeting in these words:

I came to the 1966 Chapter and I felt like Alice in Wonderland coming up from the rabbit hole. I thought: my goodness, are there really people who think as I do, and it's not stupid?

In terms of Phase 2 of Delbecq's model, dialogue between members of the organisation, particularly elites, was well established. Further dialogue led to a meeting in Sydney in September, 1966, at which the formation of a National Conference of Sisters of Mercy was proposed. The Union and the Federation remained as two distinct legal Mercy entities. The Conference, a third legal Mercy entity, was not intended to replace Union and Federation, but to take final unity a step further. The Preamble to the Constitutions of the National Conference of Sisters of Mercy, Australia, (see Mercy Archives, Sydney) described the situation in the following way:

#### Preamble

In 1952 a movement towards unity was initiated in the Congregations of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia. This resulted eventually in the formation of the Australian Union of the Sisters of Mercy and the Australian Federation of the Sisters of Mercy. Now, 1967, these two groups, obedient to the wishes of the Church, as expressed in Vatican II, have decided to establish a continuing link in order that they may co-operate for the better fulfilment of their vocation to the exclusive loving service of God through their Apostolate of Mercy in the Church, the new people of God.

The Constitutions of this Conference received formal approval from Rome on December 19, 1967.

The formation of the Conference was viewed by the Sisters as another "critical event" in the movement towards one structure of

governance for the Mercy Order. One Sister commented that:

The establishment of the Conference in 1967 brought big changes in the way we thought about ourselves. We began to experience the reality of our "oneness" with so many other Sisters of Mercy as we were encouraged by our leaders to attend Conference meetings on various matters and to take an interest in society beyond our local area.

At this point in the process of change leading to the new structure of governance, the normative-re-educative strategies of change in Chapter 3 (pp.114-123) were in operation. The influence of the Second Vatican Council on the life and work of the Sisters could not be underestimated. One Sister stated that:

Change in structures, religious dress, domestic rules, and horizons in ministry have been ongoing since the Council directives were received. At first, we experienced a good measure of confusion, doubt, tension, and pain in the process. I think it was well worth it.

Personal difficulties in adjusting to change were not unusual. One Sister accounted for these difficulties by saying: "I feel that we were given too many liberties too soon. The process should have been more gradual". Another Sister spoke even more strongly:

It was a vast change. From being apparently sure to being unsure, experimenting, searching, being catapulted along with the rest of the world from the bank of a river into a cauldron, and trying all sorts of strokes to bring order and meaning to the situation.

While the directives of Vatican Council II were a significant influence on the form and direction of change for Sisters of Mercy, other influences could not be discounted. One Sister stated that:

It became almost a cliché to say that all sorts of changes were justified by Vatican II. I am not sure that Vatican II intended itself to be used that way, but I think that is irrelevant. The social movement was there, and it gave validation to things that someone somewhere calls the yearnings in the hearts of people. It cast a broad religious validation over a social movement that was in progress, and I believe that without that social movement it would have been strangled.

She went on to point out that, on a theological level, the Vatican

Council, by setting up religiously-based mechanisms, "freed people from guilts and restrictions, and very old institutional ways of looking at things".

At this stage in the research study, considerable exploration of the problem had led to the "critical event", the National Mercy Conference.

Phase 3. Knowledge Exploration Leading to  
the National Mercy Assembly (1977)

According to Delbecq (1978:320-321), after the problem had been thoroughly explored by the organisation and an understanding about its nature accepted by all members, a solution to the problem should not be made until experts outside the group have been consulted. In the case of the movement towards a new structure of governance for the Sisters of Mercy, three sources of "expertise" contributed, at this stage, to the exploration of knowledge which would assist decision-making. These sources were the Special General Chapters, the Constitutions, and the National Mercy Assembly.

Several respondents described the role taken by the body known as the Special General Chapter through which Vatican II directed that adaptation and renewal were to be facilitated. One Sister remarked that:

Election procedures changed and Chapter preparation and the living out of the Acts of Chapter became an important part of on-going formation and have had a profound effect on the Congregation, particularly on its effectiveness in ministry.

In 1968 and 1969, Special General Chapters in each Australian Mercy group continued, in a formal way, the process of change which was progressing so rapidly among the members of the religious organisation. To these Special General Chapters, the Sisters invited other religious, clerics, and lay people who could give them advice from a variety of disciplines. Specialists in the areas of theology,



scripture, psychology, and sociology provided a broad base of "external information", as Delbecq (1978:320-321) named it. The Chapter delegates, who evaluated such information on behalf of each Mercy group, were the "cosmopolitans" and served as "boundary spanners to the broader world of professional and scientific insight". Furthermore, these Special General Chapters in both Union and Federation groups encouraged local autonomy by emphasising the value of subsidiarity. At the same time, the Chapters sought to clarify the role of leaders in each Mercy group so that increased understanding about leadership in Union and Federation groups would help to prepare Sisters for a stronger leadership bond in the future among all Australian Sisters of Mercy. One Sister stated that "the legislation from the Special General Chapters had an unbelievably broadening effect on the Mercy horizons".

In the immediate post-conciliar period, the work on the Constitutions by a Union and Federation Commission showed that the Sisters of Mercy were making serious efforts towards a formal expression of Mercy unity. A first draft of a common Constitution (1968-69) was followed by a revised Draft Constitutions in 1972. In 1974, the Union carried out a detailed study of this Draft, and invited the Federation Sisters to take part. The close working partnership which developed between the Sisters during the stages of the study was one further expression of the unity between Union and Federation at that time.

From this period in 1972, the Major Superior of the Union and the President of the Federation redoubled their efforts to involve an increasing number of Sisters in the work of the National Conference. Meetings between Sisters engaged in different ministries took place with increasing regularity. A number of initiatives by the Major

Superiors strengthened the role of the Conference in the movement towards one structure of governance. In May 1975, the Federation Council conducted a survey among Federation Sisters to test their readiness to look for a greater degree of unity among Australian Sisters of Mercy. A similar survey was then conducted among the Union groups. A virtually unanimous acceptance of the idea that greater unity should be sought came from both Federation and Union Sisters.

In 1974, four events helped to accelerate the movement towards unity. First, during the Conference meeting at Sydney in April, the Conference Statutes, revised by the Sisters to make them a more powerful means of supporting unity, were accepted. Second, at the same meeting, an Executive Council for the Conference was elected from among all the Mercy Major Superiors of the Mercy group. From this election came the first group of Sisters to be seen as Australian Conference Sisters of Mercy, rather than Union or Federation. Third, in June, 1976, a full-time Executive Director was appointed to work for the Conference and plan for a National Mercy Assembly. Fourth, the Conference Executive chose one Sister to prepare a final draft of the Constitutions. Each of these events placed before all Sisters the potential of the Conference as a mechanism for a future formal structure of governance.

In the next 12 months, all Australian Sisters of Mercy had the opportunity to take part in a planned programme in preparation for the National Mercy Assembly held in Melbourne from August 28 to September 3, 1977. At this point in the research, change was being effected by altering and re-educating the attitudes, values, norms, and external and internal relationships of the members of the organisation.

According to Bennis et al. (1976:23), this approach may be more effective than giving more information. In the Mercy Order, both approaches were being used at this point.

At the meeting, each of the 17 Mercy groups was officially represented by ten Sisters. In attendance, also, were several hundred other Sisters of Mercy, women and men from a variety of other religious communities, members of the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, clerics, and a large number of lay people. The theme of the Conference, "Mercy and Justice", provided the impetus for Sisters to engage in evaluation of all aspects of Mercy life, in particular, the four organisational characteristics which have been studied in this research, namely, the focus on mission, commitment of members, the servant quality of the leadership, and the ethos of the community. Most importantly, the Sisters listened most carefully to the opinions of those people who were not Sisters of Mercy, and who had been invited to the Assembly to give the Sisters their perceptions of the place of the Mercy Order in the modern world.

One Sister spoke of her reaction to being at the Assembly in the following way:

To me, the Assembly was one of the biggest gatherings and greatest opportunities we ever had as a group to go out of ourselves. For the first time, we were given a national outlook; our thoughts were turned outwards from our little group back home. The Major Superiors, through the Conference, had been looking at the whole Australian scene, but we hadn't. It was also the first time we had our eyes tuned out to an international scene, and the things that as a group we could do. I think this showed us a purpose in all we were doing that we didn't seem to feel before.

Another Sister pointed to far-reaching effects of the Assembly in these words:

The Assembly had its influence, too, when I just look at people's attitude to hospitality, their attitude to education. As far as I can judge, that has changed quite dramatically. And administration . . . there's been a whole new insight into administration. We have congregations that have actually given their title deeds to disadvantaged groups; we've people making decisions at the highest level of authority -- that's Chapter level -- to apportion percentages of their income to the service of people in need. That's over and above the services that the Sisters give. There are examples of that everywhere. It's a kind of consciousness about the world we live in.

Many Sisters said that the Assembly reaffirmed the Mercy emphasis on their mission to the disadvantaged. One Sister related this to the need to keep working for a new structure of governance. She explained that:

The Assembly in 1977 brought rank and file members of both Union and Federation in close contact. There was an amazing spirit of unity in the group and this motivated many to follow the later developments in governance with greater interest. It was felt that we could do much more for the poor and oppressed of Australia if we worked together with some unifying structure to enable the work to flourish.

In speaking of the development of the structure, one Sister said that:

The structures of recent years, particularly it seems since the National Assembly, have facilitated a great deal more sharing than was there before. I don't just mean more types of committee arrangements, although that's certainly helped. I think the formation area has been quite significant, the interaction of the younger people has helped because they're the ones who will be around in the future. Again, part of it is due to greater mobility and ease of communications. All in all, there's a far higher degree of interaction and inter-relationship between the groups than there would have been twenty-five years ago.

As a result of this meeting, the importance of network intervention and resource exchange, as described by Sarason et al. (1977; 1979), was stressed by Sisters in every ministry. From their discussions, Sisters planned new ways of cooperating between different Mercy groups, of coordinating Mercy services, and of enlarging the horizons, experience, and skills of the Sisters. Even Sisters who were not present at the Assembly experienced something of

the spirit of the event and could understand why the Sisters who had been participants were so enthusiastic about new ways of doing things. One Sister, who had been studying overseas at the time of the Assembly, said that:

I found when I came home that the Assembly had obviously been a very powerful experience for a great many people. In some ways, I felt a little left behind in it; that there was a whole significant Mercy event there that had somehow by-passed me.

Another Sister summed up the event for a number of people when she said:

I would see the National Assembly rather as consolidating what was going on and giving it almost a celebration expression. It caught the imaginations of the Sisters and encouraged them to keep on with the head work which had already begun.

In terms of "critical events" in the process of change leading to the new structure of governance, the researcher identified the National Mercy Assembly in 1977 as the single most significant event. The Assembly served as a reference point, a watershed in time, around which could be described the many changes which have taken place since then in the Mercy Order. The changing attitudes of the Sisters, towards their own group and each other and the relationship between individual groups and the national body, could all be discussed in terms of the Sisters' experience, insights, and decisions at the Assembly.

At this point, a strong ground swell of opinion from the Sisters revealed the need to hasten the formulation of a proposal for a new structure of governance for the Mercy Order in Australia.

#### Phase 4. Proposal Development Through Group and Regional Meetings (1977-1979)

The phase of proposal development, according to Delbecq (1978:321), should pass through two stages: a preliminary informal review of the concepts and approach to change as a basis for learning and dialogue; and only later, the development of a formal proposal

about change as the basis for the "decision to adopt".

The Federation Council proposed that it

. . . seek to set up a Working Party representing both Union and Federation, to explore ways of making and governing the administrative structure of the Conference of Sisters of Mercy such that it would possess adequate authority, representation and executive power in the event of the Conference becoming the sole body of Sisters of Mercy in Australia.

A similar proposal came from the Union. As a result, the two formal Mercy groups, Union and Federation, set up a Working Party with the specific mandate to "examine the Statutes with a view to making them a means of promoting the efficiency of the Conference".

In April, 1978, the Working Party presented their report to the National Council. From their findings, as Gaudry (1979:9) had pointed out, it was clear that:

the Conference lacked the authority and administrative structures to carry out adequately the responsibility for leadership at a national level and for common projects involving Sisters from different groups. Any authority it had depended on the authority of the Union Generalate and of the independent Superiors General in the Federation.

Members of the Working Party, with the Executive Director and Church lawyers, were asked to prepare a model for a new structure of governance to be considered at a later Special National Meeting of the Sisters of Mercy.

In preparation for this meeting, extensive consultation was carried out with the Sisters in every Mercy group. Sisters studied the draft model and sent replies through their Major Superior to the Working Party. The responses were collated and circulated to the Sisters.

In the interviews and through the questionnaire, the researcher asked the Sisters to describe the steps taken by their group to study the draft. Most respondents remembered the reactions of their Mercy group to being asked to study the draft proposal. Many groups had

a planned programme of study, although there was a great deal of variety in the way in which the programme was carried out. For example, one Sister said:

Our program was not very comprehensive because we had our Chapter and our own centenary about the same time. In a way, it was overlapping into a number of other areas. But of the study we did do, we found that there was a group of Sisters who took that and really looked at it in more detail than others. They really tried to look at it very hard, while others simply read it through and said: "Oh, yes. It looks all right. It'll suit us." That sort of reaction seemed to come from those people who had been to the National Assembly, where they really got the feel of the whole thing.

One Major Superior added that:

Oh, we certainly had a plan. I actually took the document and the diagrammatical presentation of the document which we had on overheads to each individual community. As well, we had a couple of sessions on it for our whole group. Though the reception to it was good, most of our people would be unfamiliar with structure of government. They'd ask the usual questions such as, "Will that new President be able to transfer you from Perth to Cairns or something?" Most people were happy with the movement towards unity and not too involved or aware of their ability to change what had been done. That was the attitude, I think.

Some groups felt that there was not a great deal of interest in the actual draft; some thought that their Sisters would let other people get on with the business of decision-making. One Sister said that:

Yes, there was a plan, but like so many of the things that come from the central office, in our case the Provincial office, and are laid out for study at local level and response from a local and individual level, I think that it would be rather patchy as to what happened to it.

For every group, too, there was the offer of a visit from members of the National Secretariate. Without exception, these visitors were received in a most welcoming fashion, as the following comment from one of the Sisters indicated:

The two Sisters who came from the national centre received a very positive response in our community. Generally, our people couldn't be bothered too much about the details. All they wanted was for the Sisters of Mercy to get together and, except for a few people who had questioned the legal side, most of them couldn't see why we couldn't get on with it faster than we did.

From all the meetings, the Sisters' suggestions were incorporated into the draft to be presented at a Special National Meeting to be held in March, 1979.

Delbecq (1978:322) pointed out that a "draft" was a most important vehicle for dialogue, so that shared excitement should come from discussions of flexible, emerging concepts. In this phase of the process of change leading to the new structure of governance, a great deal of excitement was engendered among the Sisters, and enthusiasm expressed among them for the ideas in the draft. According to Delbecq (1978:323), this phase could be summarised in the following way:

Preliminary review of proposals allow for the accommodation of valid objections, incorporation of features that strengthen the proposal, increase organizational accommodations and readiness, and create a coalition of support in preparation for formal adoption decisions.

Phase 5. Design and Structure of Governance  
Formulated at National Meetings and in Rome (1979-80)

Delbecq (1978:323) claimed that, at this stage, the advocates for change should proceed to write the formal proposal. In the process of change leading to adoption of a new structure of governance for the Mercy Order, the writing of the formal proposal was completed only after work at the following meetings: Special National Meeting, Gunnedah, March, 1979; National Meeting, Ryde, October, 1979; and the Meeting with the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, Rome, January, 1980.

At the meeting at Gunnedah, the amended draft was unanimously accepted by the participants, namely, the Major Superior and elected delegates from each of the 17 Mercy groups. This meeting corresponded to Beckhardt's activity (1976:270), the "confrontation meeting",



designed to include the entire management of a large system in a joint action-planning programme. According to Beckhardt, one of the continuing problems facing top management in times of major change is the accurate assessment of the state of the organisation. For example, how are people reacting to the proposed change? Where are the most pressing organisational problems?

During this meeting, a major question to be faced by the participants was the state of readiness of all Sisters to accept the draft of the new structure of governance. The participants related the state of readiness to issues of values and value judgments. According to Warwick and Kelman (1976:471), major issues in deciding the direction of change arose from questions about the values to be maximised at the expense of other values. In this Mercy Meeting, two values were clearly articulated by the Sisters: unity among all Australian Sisters of Mercy, and freedom for each group to make decisions relating to that group.

When Sisters were quite satisfied that both of these values were safeguarded in the new structure, they voted unanimously in support of the first draft of the proposed model of the structure of governance.

The Working Party prepared and circulated By-Laws for the model. Once again, Sisters in every Mercy group were consulted, and their responses to the By-Laws collated. Respondents were asked if any Sisters opposed adoption of the structure. They all replied that, in their group, a number of Sisters asked questions about the way in which they saw the model functioning. A small degree of opposition to the new structure was also voiced in some groups. In one group, a respondent said:

A couple of our Sisters might be opposed if they see the Institute appearing to reinforce some of the changes, such as changes in religious dress. But, that's not really opposition to the Institute as such.

Another Sister said that some members of her group might have been a bit apprehensive, but that she had not heard any real opposition to it. Several Sisters pointed out that the explanations so freely given at each stage in preparing the draft set any fears at rest.

One Sister said that she found a great growth in trust develop in the Sisters between the Gunnedah and the Ryde Meetings. She was of the opinion that the time lapse of three to four months gave enough space for a growth in perceptions and in moving towards a common understanding of the new structure of governance. At the meeting at Ryde, Sisters looked back on the Gunnedah Meeting and, with hindsight, saw quite clearly what had happened. They recognised that the key issue had been the retention of autonomy by the individual Mercy groups. One Sister clarified everyone's thinking by saying that the Plenary Council and not the National President made decisions; the National Executive Council implemented them nationally; and the Major Superiors implemented them at the local level, in their own Mercy group. As a result of this clarification, and understanding that their own Major Superior and not the National President was responsible for decisions in their group, there was an immediate change of feeling, as Sisters said, "Yes, if we say yes to this, we are not losing our autonomy".

Sisters remarked to the researcher that, at both the Gunnedah and the Ryde Meetings, key individuals were influential in facilitating the passage and the acceptance of the new structure of governance. These key individuals, without exception, were Sisters experienced as Major Superiors or Provincials; they had been on the Working Party or

had made a detailed study of the drafts of the new structure of governance; they were skilled in interaction; and in most cases, had an informed background in religious governance. The Sisters gave conflicting perceptions of the role played by these key individuals. Most Sisters were of the opinion that the key informants were of invaluable assistance in alerting the delegates at the Meetings to the strengths and weaknesses of the structure of governance. Some few Sisters said that the key influentials exerted undue influence on the Sisters and on the decision to adopt the new structure.

The draft document accepted by the Sisters at the Ryde Meeting (1979) was taken to Rome (1980) by the researcher (at that time, President of the Federation and of the Conference of Sisters of Mercy) and by the Sister who was Superior General of the Union. Accompanied by two Church lawyers who had been advisers to the Sisters of Mercy, the two Sisters worked with members of the Sacred Congregation to prepare a further draft.

During the interviews, the researcher asked the Sisters for their opinion of the importance of the presence of the Church lawyers in the presentation of the request for acceptance of the draft. The Sisters claimed that these men offered invaluable legal expertise not available from members of the Mercy Order, and that they had enormous influence because of their knowledge of the Mercy Order and their personal contacts with decision-makers in the Sacred Congregation. Most Sisters were not surprised at the speed with which the draft was accepted in Rome. The following comment is typical of the Sisters' opinions:

It was politically helpful to have the Church lawyers working with us. Their counsel was sound because they could pick up technical difficulties as well as advise on timing and channels of communication.

The Sisters also described the role played by the researcher and the Superior General of the Union in presentation of the draft. They explained that:

. . . the people who presented it were very clear about what the Sisters in Australia wanted. They had been with the movement towards the new structure, knew the way it would function, and had a good feel of what was happening with people. They had done their homework well!

Several Major Superiors in the Mercy Order had visited the Sacred Congregation in the years preceding the presentation of the draft in 1980, and the Sisters of Mercy and their cause was well known to members of the Sacred Congregation. Several Sisters said that the structure of governance was so different from any structure currently in use that the Sacred Congregation recognised it as modelling something quite new for religious women.

Formal letters of support for the draft were sent by all the Australian Bishops in whose dioceses Mercy Sisters were working. The Sisters were of the opinion that the Bishops were not just doing something formal; they were really supportive of the move to unification. The Sisters recognised that the Bishops were then playing a different role from that which they had played in the early '50's when they had tried to impose their personal views about unification on the Sisters in their dioceses.

Two further factors that facilitated acceptance of the draft were the agreement of all Mercy groups and the assistance in Rome of an influential priest in the Sacred Congregation who understood a model of governance that was neither Union nor Federation, but some kind of combination of both of these models (see Appendices I and J).

As a result of further work on the draft in Rome, official approval was given to present an amended draft for formal adoption by the members of the Mercy Order.

Phase 6. Adoption of the New Structure of  
Governance at the First National Mercy Chapter (1981)

At this stage in his model, Delbecq (1978:324) discussed strategies related to the implementation of a particular change. He did not, however, describe how such a change would be formally adopted by members of an organisation. At this stage in the process of change leading to the new structure of governance for the Mercy Order, the decision to adopt the change was formally taken by the Sisters. This decision was reached by the following steps.

1. In a letter to the Conference of the Sisters of Mercy (Appendix J), the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes authorised the Superiors of the Federation and the Union to use the Constitution and By-Laws on Governance to ascertain the opinions of the Sisters in every Mercy community in Australia.

2. The results of the Sisters' expressions of opinion were sent to the Sacred Congregation, and were accompanied by the request for the new structure to replace Union and Federation (see Appendices K and L).

3. The First National Chapter, held in two sessions, August and December (1981), was the occasion on which the Institute was formally established (Appendix M).

In the light of the relationship between any religious community and the Roman Catholic Church, the processes leading to the formal adoption of the new structure of governance, just described, gave clear evidence that the Mercy Order was conscious of its legal position in the Church. At the same time, the Sacred Congregation of Religious was conscious of the rights of the individual Sisters, and in giving them the opportunity to cast a personal vote for or against the new structure was acknowledging the internal autonomy of the religious community. Every group easily attained the level of agreement required by the Sacred Congregation.

### Phase 7. Successful Replication of the Establishment of the Structure of Governance

In the Delbecq model (1978), the final phase in the process of change is the transfer and diffusion of a particular change. In this research, the question of using a similar process of change to lead to the adoption of a new structure of governance in another group is raised. While the stages in the process could well be applicable to other organisations, the unique setting and mission of the religious organisation introduce elements which could not be replicated.

#### Summary

In this chapter, it was argued that the Delbecq (1978) model for introducing innovation in a human service organisation was a useful framework for analysing the process of change leading to a new structure of governance in the Mercy Order in 1981.

Phase 1, securing a mandate with organisational elites, the Major Superiors showed the importance of obtaining a basis of sponsorship wider than the original advocate group of Church authorities in Rome. Phase 2, in which the nature of the clients' needs was assessed, corresponded to the exploration by formal leaders of the Mercy community of the way in which clients were being served. The formal leaders, the Major Superiors, perceived that change in structure of governance was an important issue in this regard, and established a link between the two existing structure, Union and Federation, by formation of the National Conference of Sisters of Mercy (1966). At the same time, the members of the Mercy Order were being educated to cope with new demands from their clients. Corresponding to Delbecq's third phase of knowledge exploration was the National Mercy Assembly (1977), at which expertise and knowledge from inside and outside the Mercy Order were shared to help solve

problems of service.

Delbecq's Phases 4 and 5 deal with two stages of proposal development with a preliminary informal view of the concepts and approach to change followed by writing a formal proposal. The insights gained from the study of these two stages were used to help analyse the Sisters' role in studying a draft document of the new structure and in writing the formal proposal for the introduction of change into the religious community.

Some phases of the Delbecq model, namely 6 and 7, did not have direct application to this study of the process of change in the Mercy community as implementation and replication of the innovation, that is, the new structure of Mercy governance, were not included in this research. The model, however, did provide a helpful framework for analysing a major part of the process of change.

In this chapter, it was also argued that analysis of the research problem should include a study of the people involved in the process of change. To assist this analysis, writings selected by the researcher referred to:

1. strategies for effecting changes in the ways the members of an organisation think and act;
2. ways of facilitating the process of change when several groups were involved;
3. management of the process of change through the timing of events and meetings; and
4. clarification of the value component of decisions and judgments.

As a result of this analysis of the process of change leading to the new structure of governance for the Sisters of Mercy (Australia) in 1981, the following broad conclusions on the process of change were developed.

## CONCLUSIONS: THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

While the initial impetus for change to a unified structure of governance came from the Church, the role of Church authorities was limited. They helped maintain the momentum, but were not directly involved in the change process.

*The role of the Church in the process of change leading to the adoption of the new structure of governance was to initiate the process of change, to maintain the movement towards a new unification of the Mercy community in Australia, and to legitimate the structures of unification (the Mercy Conference, Mercy Constitutions, and the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy), developed by the Sisters.*

In this study of the Mercy community, Church authorities played various roles in the process of change. In the literature, writers, such as Bennis et al. (1976), Havelock (1979), and Lippitt et al. (1958), cited organisations in which the influence of a person or persons might change during a process of change.

The Sisters did not draw up a formal plan to assist them in coming to a decision about a new structure of governance, nor was there any documentary evidence to suggest that Church authorities in Rome had such a plan. It was evident, however, that the Sisters collaborated in several ventures. For example, Sisters from various Mercy groups were represented at the National Assembly in 1977 and at other large national meetings, and all Sisters had the opportunity to study and make a personal response to the Draft of the Mercy Constitutions and the drafts of the new structure of governance.

*In the absence of a formal plan towards unification, there was a consistent approach in that collaborative ventures among the Sisters were used throughout the process of change.*

In this study, the Sisters from various Mercy groups engaged in a number of collaborative ventures during the process of change. In the literature, Weick (1976:1-19) demonstrated that loosely related events could be responsive to each other and so facilitate a



process of change.

Sisters' experiences of earlier unifying structures, that is, Union, Federation, and National Conference, prepared them for the acceptance of a further step in unification. Moreover, at each stage towards the adoption of the new structure of governance, Sisters' concerns were taken into consideration, and, where possible, were resolved.

*Adoption of the new structure of governance was facilitated by positive experiences associated with previous unifying structures and accommodation in the new structure of governance for negative experiences.*

As the Sisters made choices about each unifying structure, they had to consider its implications of such choices for the life and work of the religious community. In the literature, Warwick and Kelman (1976:470) also focused attention on issues which involved conflicting values.

All Sisters agreed that sufficient time was allowed for them to become accustomed to the idea of a new structure of governance and avoid generation of resistance to change. No Sisters reported that the development of the new structure proceeded too quickly. Some, notably those who had spent a considerable amount of time studying drafts of the structure, said it was too slow.

*Adoption of the new structure of governance was enhanced by allowing Sisters sufficient time to become ready to make decisions about acceptance.*

The Sisters were not rushed into making decisions during the process of change. In the literature, Delbecq (1978) demonstrated the importance of giving members of an organisation sufficient time in which to come to important decisions.

During the process of change, Sisters spent time discussing and clarifying implications of the proposed structure of governance

for mission, commitment, the nature of leadership, and their "Mercyness". As a result, statements about their Mercy life and work were included in the common Constitutions.

*During the process of change, a re-examination of mission, commitment, nature of leadership, and "Mercyness" led to an awareness of the commonality of certain aspects of Mercy life and work, formalised in the common Constitutions.*

Although the Mercy Order has been characterised by the presence of exceptional women over the years, the Sisters did not identify any one Sister, or indeed any other person, as having undue influence on the process of change. They did, however, identify individuals or groups as influential during the process of change.

*Different people were influential at different stages in the process of change leading to the adoption of the new structure of governance:*

- (i) in the early stages, Church authorities in Rome, certain clerics, and Major Superiors, were influential in the choice of Union (1954) and Federation (1957) structures;*
- (ii) in the intermediate stage, continuing dialogue between Mercy Major Superiors led to the formation of the Conference of Sisters of Mercy (1966), and to the organisation of the National Assembly (1977), while the activities of the Executive Director of the Mercy Conference and Working Party on Governance produced drafts leading to the final document;*
- (iii) in the final stages, in Rome, the two Mercy Sisters and the two Church lawyers presented the case for the Australian Sisters of Mercy. Later, in Australia, the vote of all Sisters was required before authorisation by Church authorities in Rome of the establishment of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia.*

In this study, different people, at different times, influenced the process of change. In the literature, Delbecq (1978) drew attention to this fact in his model for the introduction of change into a human service organisation.

In the next chapter, a report is given of the total research task, conclusions are drawn from the findings, and implications for practice and research are proposed.