

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELECTED ORGANISATIONAL  
CHARACTERISTICS AND THE PROCESS OF CHANGE  
LEADING TO A NEW STRUCTURE OF GOVERNANCE  
FOR THE SISTERS OF MERCY (AUSTRALIA)  
IN 1981: A CASE STUDY

VALDA MARY WARD

B.A., B.Ed. (Melb.), M.Ed.Admin.(Hons.) (U.N.E.)

A thesis submitted for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy of the  
University of New England, Armidale,  
New South Wales

April, 1986

## ABSTRACT

This case study investigated the relationship between selected organisational characteristics and the process of change which led to the adoption of a new structure of governance for the Sisters of Mercy (Australia) in 1981.

To gain an understanding of the complex nature of the religious organisation, data were collected from several sources, 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. The research techniques were used as complementary to each other, in the research strategy known as "triangulation". To order the collection of data, the researcher investigated the research problem through three subproblems, and organised the findings in the sequence in which those subproblems were treated. A conceptual framework was formulated to assist in analysing the process of change.

Conclusions about each of the four organisational characteristics (reported in Chapter 5) and the change process (reported in Chapter 6) were synthesised to draw conclusions about the relationship between the characteristics and the change process:

1. The limited role of the Church in directing the process of change and determining the form of the new structure of governance is consistent with the importance of autonomy to the Sisters and with the interpretation of commitment which developed during the process of change.

2. The commitment to the ideals of servant leadership and mission helped maintain continued efforts of formal leaders to achieve a new form of governance acceptable to the Sisters and supportive of mission.

3. The importance of a few influential Sisters in the development of the new structure of governance is consistent with the Mercy tradition of exceptional women making an important contribution to the development of the Mercy Order.

4. The adoption of the new structure of governance was facilitated by the concurrent development of the shared understanding of a corporate mission.

5. Concern for the readiness of Sisters to make decisions about the adoption of the new structure of governance is consistent with exercise of servant leadership and the reinterpretation of the vow of obedience.

6. The increasing collaboration between formal leaders and Sisters, and between members of different Mercy communities, resulting from the reinterpretation of the vows, made Sisters more aware of commonalities in mission, commitment, the nature of leadership, and their "Mercyness".

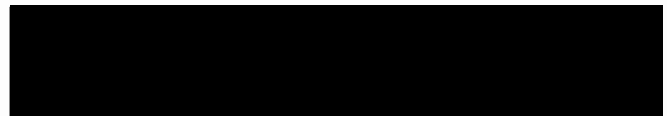
7. Diversity in ministry, within a corporate mission, was valued so highly by the Sisters that any diminution in autonomy would generate resistance to acceptance of a new structure of governance.

The findings and conclusions from this study and the methodology used have a number of implications for the analysis of change in a religious community. The case study approach and the conceptual framework for analysis provided a new perspective into the process of change in a religious community.

DECLARATION

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degree.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer wishes to acknowledge the encouragement and help given by various people during the progress of this study.

The dedicated service of the poor by Sisters of Mercy throughout Australia inspired the writer to undertake the study, while Sisters in her Ballarat East community provided generous leave to allow her time to complete the thesis. Special appreciation is extended to the many Sisters of Mercy who so willingly and graciously cooperated in the difficult task of data gathering. The tolerance and understanding of the writer's community of St. Martin's in the Pines made completion of the work possible.

Members of staff from the Centre for Administrative Studies at the University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, were a constant challenge and source of support to the writer. Three supervisors patiently guided and advised her throughout the course of the thesis. Doctor Bill Simpkins set the writer on the path of investigation, and often redirected her steps from unproductive byways. With rare insight into the complex nature of religious communities, Doctor Pat Duignan constantly challenged the writer to fresh efforts in analysis. Doctor Tony Marshall, with his extensive knowledge of data analysis, gave valuable counsel for the research plan, and guided the progress of this report to its conclusions. Special appreciation is also extended to Mrs. Robyn Brady and Miss Juanita Bongiorno who cheerfully and carefully typed the many drafts and the final manuscript.

All Sisters of Mercy will understand that interpretation of the data and presentation of the findings are the sole responsibility of the writer.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1 INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY . . . . .	2
PURPOSES OF THE STUDY . . . . .	4
THE PROBLEM AND SUBPROBLEMS . . . . .	4
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY . . . . .	5
LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS . . . . .	8
DEFINITIONS . . . . .	9
OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS . . . . .	9
2 CONTEXT OF THE STUDY . . . . .	10
RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH . . . . .	10
Introduction . . . . .	10
Roles of Religious Communities . . . . .	13
Features Held in Common by Religious Communities . . . . .	14
Common Terms . . . . .	15
GOVERNANCE IN ROMAN CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES . . . . .	18
Development of Particular Law . . . . .	19
Development of the Code of Canon Law . . . . .	22
The Role of General Chapters . . . . .	26
CHANGE IN GOVERNANCE IN ROMAN CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES . . . . .	28
National Surveys . . . . .	28
Research Projects . . . . .	31

Chapter	Page
EVOLUTION OF THE STRUCTURE OF GOVERNANCE OF THE SISTERS OF MERCY (AUSTRALIA) . . . . .	34
Introduction . . . . .	34
Phase 1. The Foundation Period: The Foundress and her Vision . . . . .	36
Phase 2. Period of Overseas Growth: Rapid Growth in Number of Foundations . . . . .	44
Phase 3. Period of Amalgamation: System of Growth Characteristic of the Mercy Order . . . . .	47
Phase 4. Period of Coordination: Union (1954) and Federation (1957) . . . . .	50
Conclusion . . . . .	59
3 REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND FORMULATION OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK . . . . .	61
Introduction . . . . .	61
THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY AS AN ORGANISATION . . . . .	62
Introduction . . . . .	62
Religious Communities in Organisation Theory . . . . .	63
Analysis by Francis . . . . .	64
Analysis by Hill . . . . .	66
Analysis of the Church as an Organisation . . . . .	67
THE MERCY COMMUNITY: A SPECIAL TYPE OF HUMAN SERVICE ORGANISATION . . . . .	71
Key Characteristics of Human Service Organisations . . . . .	71
Identification of the Mercy Community as a Special Type of Human Service Organisation . . . . .	74
Summary . . . . .	76

Chapter	Page
SELECTED ORGANISATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY . . . . .	77
The Focus on Mission . . . . .	77
Commitment of Members . . . . .	83
Servant Leadership . . . . .	89
Ethos of the Mercy Community . . . . .	97
FORMULATION OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK . . . . .	104
Phases in the Process of Change . . . . .	109
Strategies for Introducing Change . . . . .	114
4 RESEARCH PLAN AND METHODOLOGY . . . . .	124
Introduction . . . . .	124
RESEARCH PLAN . . . . .	125
SELECTION OF RESEARCH METHODOLOGY . . . . .	127
The Case Study: Strategies and Techniques . . . . .	128
DATA COLLECTION . . . . .	134
Triangulation as a Research Strategy . . . . .	135
Sources of Data . . . . .	137
ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER AS PARTICIPANT AND AS PARTICIPANT-AS-OBSERVER . . . . .	140
THE INTERVIEW . . . . .	143
Definition . . . . .	143
Strengths of the Interview as a Data-Collection Technique . . . . .	144
Limitations of the Interview as a Data-Collection Technique . . . . .	145
CONDUCT OF INTERVIEWS IN THE PRESENT RESEARCH . . . . .	146
THE MAILED QUESTIONNAIRE . . . . .	154
ARCHIVAL RECORDS . . . . .	160



Chapter	Page
VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY . . . . .	163
Validity . . . . .	164
Reliability . . . . .	168
TREATMENT OF DATA . . . . .	171
5 PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS ON THE FOUR SELECTED ORGANISATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS . . . . .	183
FOCUS ON MISSION . . . . .	185
Understanding of Mercy Mission . . . . .	186
Significance of the Vow of Service . . . . .	189
Diversification of Ministries . . . . .	191
Determinants of Need in Mission . . . . .	200
Future Directions in Mission . . . . .	205
Conclusions: Focus on Mission . . . . .	207
COMMITMENT OF MEMBERS . . . . .	210
Significance of the Vows . . . . .	210
Spiritual and Professional Development . . . . .	212
Changes in Community Living . . . . .	215
Conclusions: Commitment of Members . . . . .	222
SERVANT LEADERSHIP . . . . .	226
Personal Experience of Leadership . . . . .	226
Implications of Succession Pattern . . . . .	228
The Major Superior as Servant Leader . . . . .	233
Expectations of Leadership in the Institute of Sisters of Mercy . . . . .	235
Conclusions: Servant Leadership . . . . .	237

Chapter	Page
ETHOS OF THE MERCY COMMUNITY . . . . .	240
Fidelity to the Charism of the Foundress . . . . .	241
Respect for the Religious Traditions of the Mercy Order . . . . .	245
Evolution of an Organisational Saga . . . . .	256
The Importance of Local Identity and Local Self-Determination . . . . .	261
Flexibility in Response to Changing Expressed Needs . . . . .	266
Conclusions: Ethos of the Mercy Community . . . . .	267
SUMMARY . . . . .	269
6 PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS ABOUT THE PROCESS OF CHANGE LEADING TO THE ADOPTION OF THE NEW STRUCTURE OF GOVERNANCE . . . . .	271
PHASES IN THE PROCESS OF CHANGE LEADING TO ADOPTION OF THE NEW STRUCTURE OF GOVERNANCE . . . . .	273
Phase 1. Initial Mandate Resulting in the Establishment of Union (1954) and Federation (1957) . . . . .	273
Phase 2. Problem Exploration Resulting in Formation of National Mercy Conference (1967) . . . . .	283
Phase 3. Knowledge Exploration Leading to the National Mercy Assembly (1977) . . . . .	295
Phase 4. Proposal Development Through Group and Regional Meetings (1977-1979) . . . . .	300
Phase 5. Design of Structure of Governance Formulated at National Meetings and in Rome (1979-80) . . . . .	303
Phase 6. Adoption of the New Structure of Governance at the First National Mercy Chapter (1981) . . . . .	308

Chapter	Page
Phase 7. Successful Replication of the Establishment of the Structure of Governance . . . . .	309
Summary . . . . .	309
CONCLUSIONS: THE PROCESS OF CHANGE . . . . .	311
7 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS . . . . .	314
SUMMARY OF THE STUDY . . . . .	314
Purposes of the Study . . . . .	314
Statement of the Problem and Subproblems . . . . .	314
Significance of the Study . . . . .	315
Research Plan for the Study . . . . .	316
Research Methodology . . . . .	317
Collection and Treatment of Data . . . . .	317
CONCLUSIONS . . . . .	318
Organisational Characteristics . . . . .	318
The Process of Change . . . . .	320
The Relationship Between the Organisational Characteristics and the Process of Change . . . . .	321
IMPLICATIONS . . . . .	323
Implications for Practice . . . . .	323
Implications for Further Research . . . . .	324
<hr/>	
REFERENCES CITED . . . . .	325
APPENDICES	
A Personal Letter to the Researcher from Fr. Mark Said . . . . .	343
B Sample Act of Profession (Sisters of Mercy) . . . . .	345

APPENDICES	Page
C Interview Guide . . . . .	347
D Questionnaire . . . . .	350
E Letter to Delegates Attending National Mercy Chapter, November 1981 . . . . .	359
F Letter to Major Superiors of the 17 Mercy Groups, February 1982 . . . . .	361
G Letter Accompanying Questionnaire to Representative Sample of Sisters of Mercy, February 1982 . . . . .	364
H Letter to Major Superiors, April 1982 . . . . .	366
I Letter to the Sacred Congregation Requesting Permission for the Establishment of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia . . . . .	368
J Letter from the Sacred Congregation Outlining Steps to be Taken for Establishment of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia . . . . .	371
K Pro Forma of Authentication of Chapter . . . . .	374
L Pro Forma of Authentication of Chapter . . . . .	376
M Document of Dissolution of the Union and Federation . . . . .	378

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1 Australian Sisters of Mercy in Education: 1966, 1971, 1976 . . . . .	194
2 Australian Sisters of Mercy in Health Care and Related Ministries: 1966, 1971, 1976 . . . . .	197
3 Australian Sisters of Mercy in Social Welfare and Pastoral Care Ministries: 1966, 1971, 1976 . . . . .	198
4 Size of Religious Communities in Mercy Order: 1966, 1971, 1976 . . . . .	216
5 Complete Membership of Australian Mercy Order on September 1: 1966, 1971, 1976 . . . . .	220
6 Age Structure of Mercy Order: 1966, 1971, 1976 . . . . .	221
7 Complete Membership of the Mercy Order by Apostolic Status: 1966, 1971, 1976 . . . . .	222
8 Succession Pattern in Governance in Australian Mercy Groups, 1950-1980 . . . . .	229
9 Part V: Apostolate I. Apostolic Works of Members of Province (Including Missions): 1966, 1971, 1976 . . . . .	243

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1 The Five Phases in the Development of the Structure of Governance: Sisters of Mercy (Australia) . . . . .	37
2 Typical Organisational Wave Pattern of the Development of Myths . . . . .	102
3 Phases in the Process of Introducing a Change in Structure in Governance in the Sisters of Mercy in Australia . . . . .	106
4 Conceptual Framework for Study of Organisational Characteristics and their Relationship to the Process of Change Leading to a New Structure of Governance in the Sisters of Mercy (Australia), 1981 . . . . .	121
5 Sequence of Activities in Research Plan . . . . .	126
6 Timeline of Research Project . . . . .	182
7 Distribution of Ministries in Mercy Group X 1980-1981 . . . . .	223
8 Distribution of Ministries in Mercy Group Y 1980-1981 . . . . .	223
9 Critical Events and Their Significance in the Development of the New Structure of Governance for the Sisters of Mercy of Australia, 1981 . . . . .	272