Well of Mercy: The Beginning

By Dr. Mary John Dye

Before the land… before the road… before the buildings…before anything we enjoy today, the foundation of Well of Mercy was already laid. The Well of Mercy story begins with Scripture — Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well.

For two Sisters of Mercy, this text was more than inspiration. The story recounted in the Gospel of John 4 became a call that situated their ministry in the place we now know as Well of Mercy in Northern Iredell County, North Carolina.

With Sister Donna Marie Vaillancourt's background in psychology and theology, and Sister Brigid McCarthy's in education and counseling, they both had exercised their gifts as Sisters of Mercy in Belmont, North Carolina. Sister Donna led retreats and workshops, and Sister Brigid counseled individuals, families, and groups. They kept encountering a recurring question. Where can I take a spiritual and emotional break from the daily demands and expectations of my life? "Do you know a place I can go for temporary respite, for personal retreat and rest?"

Over and over again, they heard the need for people wishing to move apart in order to pray, to be restored, to seek God's guidance, and receive God's healing grace. And just as often, the same question faced them: "Do you know of a safe, supportive, spiritual, unstructured place where I can go?"

This question became a theme: a recurring, persistent mantra that developed into a calling. By 1989, this theme drew Sister Donna and Sister Brigid into a time of discernment. Knowing that Jesus and their foundress, Catherine McAuley, provided the model of hospitality, love and healing, they grew into a deeper awareness of the need for such a place for people they served. Was the question, "Do you know a place I can go?" a call from God? Did God want the Sisters of Mercy to offer a place of hospitality, healing, and renewal?

Sister Brigid and Sister Donna called for a meeting one evening with eighteen sisters to open their hearts to communal discernment. From the youngest to the oldest, they received blessing and affirmation to explore this new direction.

And so, with faith and courage, they began.

Location was the first decision. The property search began. For a year and a half, they looked for land in the Charlotte and Gastonia areas of North Carolina because of their proximity to the Belmont home of the Sisters of Mercy. But there was something not quite right about every potential piece of property, including adjacent property to the Sisters of Mercy campus.

Early in June 1991, Sister Donna and Sister Brigid were driving from Charlotte to Boone, North Carolina, on I-77. When they got to the green rolling hills north of Statesville, they were struck with the beauty of the area.

"It is gorgeous up here," Sister Donna said. "But is this too far away?" At just that point in the conversation, they passed Exit 65 on I-77. The exit sign read: "Harmony/Union Grove."

And Sister Brigid remarked, "Wouldn't it be wonderful to have Well of Mercy in Harmony?"

In fact, they were so seized by the beauty of the area that, on their return trip, they drove through Harmony, Houstonville, and Union Grove, and Sister Brigid wrote down the names and phone numbers of realtors selling land in the area.

Sister Donna fully intended to call the realtors as soon as they got back, but when the week began, there were many other things to be done. She was just too busy to call on Monday, and then Tuesday, and also on Wednesday. Most of the week passed and she had not called a single realtor. Then, on Thursday, her brother-in-law called. "Hey," he said, "I think I've found the land you've been wanting."

Sister Donna's brother-in-law, a stockbroker in Charlotte, had a client who needed to sell a piece of property. This client was going to put it on the market the following week. Sister Donna asked her brother-in-law how much land was included. When he told her 110 acres, she thought immediately this was much more property than they needed. But before ending the conversation, she couldn't resist asking, "Do you know the location of the property?"

He replied, "The only thing I know is that it's up I-77 North somewhere near the Harmony/Union Grove exit."

She felt cold chills run through her. That was just too much of a coincidence to be chance. Two days later, June 6, 1991, Sisters Brigid and Donna visited the land. Though it wasn't IN Harmony it was close enough!

It was raw land, no roads, no development, no buildings —– just beautiful, undeveloped land. But they felt the power of its beauty. They felt the holiness of the quiet. It was everything for which they had prayed. These Sisters believe that when a vision comes from God, God will provide. And that is how the next part of the story unfolds.

Meanwhile, the Sisters worked tirelessly raising money for the new ministry. They spoke of their hopes everywhere they went. Their appeal and their vision struck a chord in people. After a year and a half, they had raised approximately $750,000.

"Everyone we spoke with affirmed the need for such a ministry," Sister Brigid said. But finally she and Sister Donna were tired of fundraising, and ready to move forward with their ministry. They wanted to start building. But additional funds were needed. And so the Sisters of Mercy agreed to take out a loan. The minute they received word that a loan had been secured, Sister Donna and Sister Brigid got started!

An architect in Charlotte donated his services—which was just the beginning of many donations. The architect posed three questions to the Sisters: "What is the purpose of the ministry? What will people need? What will be their relationship to you and with one another?"

The Sisters had known in their hearts for a long-time what people were seeking: a safe, supportive, spiritual, hospitable place. They wanted buildings that would contribute to a person's need for warmth and welcome. The Sisters loved the architect's drawings the minute they received them—three lovely houses connected by a sweeping, southern-style front porch.

"We had a deep sense of stewardship of the gifts people were giving," Sister Donna said. The landscaper parked on the hill and prayed over the property before touching anything. The Sisters realized he wasn't landscaping; he was God-scaping. It was just one more of many wonderful building relationships.

Work on the road began December 14, 1992. They completed ten days' work before the winter rains started. They worked on February 14 and not again until the end of March. It was a long process. Just because it was a vision from God, and a calling, did not mean it was easy. The serene, beautiful place we have today was shaped by a long series of trials, patient endurance, numerous setbacks, and many prayers.

Looking back, there were a lot of things to discourage the Sisters. But they kept reminding themselves that this was not their work. It was God's work, and it would happen in God's time and in the way God wanted it to evolve. Their faith in God has continued to sustain and energize them.

The Sisters made a concerted effort to meet the people in their little rural community. They visited their neighbors, invited their families over and encouraged their questions. It was important to the Sisters that those who lived on and near the land would know their new neighbors and Well's mission.

Everybody turned into a friend except one man who, when the electrical lines were being installed, visited the property to remove his moonshine still. He was not impressed at all that something for the Lord was going to take place on the land. His concern was that the family business was dying out with "these Sisters a movin' in!"

In July of 1995, two Park Model homes were transported onto the property so Sisters Brigid and Donna could live at Well full time, supervise the building, and establish themselves in their new community.

Well of Mercy was dedicated on June 8, 1997, and the ministry began the day after Labor Day, 1997. Detail after detail in the rooms and on the grounds had been intentionally, lovingly planned to provide a place of hospitality for people who needed a sanctuary in their lives.

The choice of colors, furniture, food, supplies—everything pointed to the mission: "HOSPITALITY and HEALING."

Well of Mercy intentionally developed a wide variety of outdoor settings for people to think and pray: prayer benches, sitting areas, hammocks by the creek, and a labyrinth. From night lights and notebooks in the rooms, to bug spray by the hammocks on the trail, to lights for night walking of the labyrinth; everything was thoughtfully chosen to ensure an atmosphere of healing and grace.

Over the years, Well of Mercy resisted advertising, relying primarily on word-of-mouth. It is not a bed and breakfast. It is not a clinical facility. It is exactly what Sisters Donna and Brigid felt God was calling them to create: a space where people could come and be accepted, a place where mercy and hospitality would be extended. Well of Mercy is a place where adults working through grief, loss, transitions, fatigue, recovery, or desiring private time with God can find a healing presence. To serve them more fully, Well of Mercy extended its offerings to include therapeutic services and Spiritual Direction.

The story is as inspiring and remarkable as the place itself. The Sisters' vision, the generous spiritual and physical support of the Sisters of Mercy; the benefactors, staff, and volunteers who *appeared* at just the right time; and the hospitality and healing extended to countless *strangers,* are a testimony of faithfulness, of God's provisions and sustaining grace. Well of Mercy is an incarnation of God's love.