

Member Spotlight:
Mercy Center at Madison

By *The Sea*
Tranquility, Respite and Retreat

In the hamlet of Madison, Connecticut, down a small winding road, the world seems to peel away before the first building even comes into view. Nestled among 33 acres of trees, gardens and a stretch of beach on Long Island Sound, sits Mercy Center, a spirituality center run by the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Northeast Community. “Mercy Center welcomes individuals and groups of diverse faiths and backgrounds to a peaceful place of natural beauty for personal, spiritual and professional renewal and growth,” explains Sister Ann McGovern, RSM, associate director of hospitality and programs for Mercy Center at Madison.

The beauty and serenity of this place comes from understanding the origins of the Sisters of Mercy, knowing the rich history of the location and ultimately, acknowledging their traditions.

< A bench overlooking Long Island Sound is one of the many places at Mercy Center to relax and appreciate nature.

A Spiritual Journey



Suscipe of Catherine McAuley Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy

Origins - Mercy Center at Madison is the sponsored work of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and rooted in the tradition of their founder, Catherine McAuley. Born in Dublin, Ireland, in the late 1700's, McAuley spent the early part of her life as the household manager and companion to an elderly couple. After their deaths, she took the money left to her by the couple, leased property, built a house on Baggot Street and called it House of Mercy. It is from this house she and her associates served the homeless women and girls of southeast Dublin. Several years later in 1831, McAuley and two of her associates professed their religious vows, thereby, founding the Sisters of Mercy. Before her death in 1841, McAuley had expanded the Order with nine additional Convents of Mercy and two more branch houses.

Today, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas continue the work Mother McAuley began more than a century ago, with communities throughout the world and approximately 10,000 vowed members. The Sisters take four vows, the vow of poverty, the vow of chastity, the vow of obedience and the vow of service to the poor, sick and uneducated.

Much like Catherine McAuley, who opened her home and provided hospitality to those in need, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Northeast Community, rolled out the welcome mat and invited the public into their home, Mercy Center.

History - The property where Mercy Center currently stands was originally a farm estate, known as *Stonycroft* and owned by the Hotchkiss family during the late 1800's and early 1900's. The estate was bequeathed to Yale University in 1938 upon the death of the Hotchkiss' daughter and heir, Marie. That same year, the University sold the property to department store entrepreneur and philanthropist, William T. Grant, who leveled the majority of the estate and built a family summer home near the shoreline.

In 1948, Grant gifted his summer home and estate on the banks of Long Island Sound to the Church. The Archbishop at the time accepted the gift, after which he and the Sisters of Mercy exchanged properties, the Grant estate for a parcel of property in Hartford owned by the Sisters. The Sisters of Mercy took ownership of the property and established the Our Lady of Mercy Novitiate and Diocesan Sisters College. Over the next several years, the Sisters purchased surrounding land to afford the novitiate additional privacy and eventually built additional wings onto the main house.

Mercy Center first opened its doors to the public as a spirituality ministry in 1972, recognizing the need for a place people could go for spiritual growth and development. As McGovern describes it, "there is an incredible sense of peace experienced by people when they enter the road leading in to Mercy Center. For me personally, it is a feeling of being at home with oneself, with the Sacred and with creation that enables me to just be!"

Over the years, the Sisters continued to make changes. One of the remaining structures from the Hotchkiss farm, a turn of the century greenhouse, was restored to its previous grandeur and put back into use. In 1995, a three story home, originally owned by Marlo Thomas and Phil Donahue, was donated and moved from Westport, Connecticut, to Mercy Center. Now, the home called *Seascope* serves as a private retreat house on the grounds.

"We have our own organic garden here in which we grow food for our kitchen," explains Charles Frey, executive director of Mercy Center at Madison, "part of the commitment of the Sisters of Mercy to stewarding Earth's resources." And it doesn't stop at the garden; the buildings contain solar panels which heat the hot water system, energy efficient windows that are insulated and low flush toilets. The hallway and meeting room lights even have sensors, so they shut off when someone exits the area, in order to conserve energy.

One of the many special areas at the Center (and there are many) is a labyrinth which stands as a metaphor for the work that happens at Mercy Center. Frey explains, "The journey to the center is not the end and is not the goal. It's how you come to the center, both literally, figuratively and spiritually and then taking whatever you have received here and going back out into the community."

Tradition - The core values of the Sisters: respect; hospitality; mercy; reflection and community are reflected in the vision for Mercy Center at Madison, which McGovern explains is, "to nurture a relationship with the Sacred in self, others and creation that seeks to foster a just and compassionate world." Frey adds, "We believe that a just and compassionate world will come because people have taken the time to connect with what's inside of themselves, with one another, with their God and hopefully build stronger communities, stronger families, stronger ministries, stronger businesses."

The welcome mat is always out for visitors to come on their own, or as part of a group, for a day visit or to spend the night. For groups wanting a peaceful and tranquil place to hold a meeting or conference, Mercy Center at Madison is the perfect place. "One of the things I enjoy about the Mercy Center," relates Frey, "it's not just the retreats and the private time, but we do offer programming as well."

Mercy Center at Madison offers programs through two institutes, the Catherine McAuley Institute and the Awakenings Institute.

The Catherine McAuley Institute offers two programs. The School of Spirituality, which is a two-year spiritual formation program for adults who are seeking to deepen their understanding and experience of scripture, prayer, mission and the spiritual maturation process. The Spiritual Direction Practicum is also a two-year program, which trains and supervises those who are discerning a call to the ministry of spiritual companionship and direction. In addition, the Catherine McAuley Institute provides ongoing formation for spiritual directors and develops and offers themed and directed retreats.

The Awakenings Institute is open to visitors of all ages and invites participants, or seekers as they are called at Mercy Center, to awaken the Sacred in self, others and creation through a variety of offerings. "It is a great place for people to come to disconnect from all the outside noise that inhibits people from going inward and really getting in touch with God's presence in one's self," shares McGovern.

The staff at Mercy Center also offers an On the Road program, which reaches out to communities with visits to parishes, schools and community groups.

Following in their founder's footsteps, the Sisters have developed the Mercy For All program, which provides an opportunity, for groups of the materially poor and the professionals who work with them, to experience Mercy Center at little or no cost. "Sometimes the very people who need it most are the very ones that can't afford it. Mercy For All provides scholarships, so everyone is able to participate," explains Frey.

McGovern sums up her hopes for visitors to Mercy Center, "a deep knowing of God's loving presence all around them. A renewed, transformed relationship with the Sacred that enables them to 'go back into their world' and be the just and merciful presence that is so needed in our world." And the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Northeast Community are helping visitors accomplish just that. The Sisters personify Mother Catherine McAuley's charism of welcoming strangers and visitors, providing hospitality and extending a warm welcome to all. To experience it yourself, just visit Mercy Center at Madison in Connecticut. ☼

Photos from left to right - W. T. Grant Estate and additional wing with solar panels used for heating water throughout the building. The restored turn of the century greenhouse. *Seascope*, a private retreat house. Another area on the beach for private contemplation.

