

## Profile in Mercy: Sister Helen Amos - A portrait of diplomacy

Sister Helen Amos is a diplomat with extraordinary skills and vision. Her talents have benefited the entire Mercy Community since before the Institute was formed. Because Vatican II had mandated that religious congregations develop new understandings of their founding charism and write new constitutions, Helen became involved in this project in 1980 as a newly elected provincial leader within the Sisters of Mercy of the Union. She knew her Sisters. They were thoughtful, firm and opinionated, a resourceful group of strong women. They were fortunate to have her leadership.

Reconciling ideas wasn't easy. There were tensions with the Vatican, as Rome had assumed that a renewed constitution would include elements such as a specified habit and a cloistered space within each convent. These were not a given for the Sisters of Mercy, as Helen says, "In our living a life of renewed charism we had moved past some of these expectations."

There were other obstacles. The Sisters of Mercy were not one body. In the 1980s there was the Federation of loosely organized independent congregations and the Union, made up of nine provinces. Not everyone agreed on the shape of the Community. As Sister Joanne Lappetito, then Executive Director of the Federation, said, "The early days of envisioning the Institute was met with a mixture of fear, suspicion and excitement." The vision of the future had to be carefully crafted.

As all Mercy communities had the same charism, working together should be possible but how? There was a well of energy and support for the project. Helen remembers the beginning steps. "We put out an invitation at the next Federation meeting: 'If you are interested in cooperating about Constitutions revision, come to this room.' Amazingly 40 people showed up. That started us on a path of 10 years work 1980-90."

Sister Helen managed as chair to steer a committee to a unified vision of a Constitution. It was an exciting, creative process that generated energy for her and the others who worked together. She says in her 1991 article *Writing the Constitutions: An Unfinished Story of Words and Deeds*, "This sort of effort was very much in keeping with the exhilarating atmosphere of challenge and promise of the renewal process itself."

She is deeply appreciative of the Sisters who worked with her. "We had people gifted for language, were deep thinkers, and theological thinkers. For the most part, the first 30 paragraphs of the first draft have survived to this day."

Her own talents? She admits she had to keep a relentless pace and balance all the pieces. "Being chair, I discovered it was my job to keep things moving toward the goal. I had no time off between meetings. You had to pick up pieces and focus on the work that is head of us. You had to communicate in a way that kept everyone going and engaged, pursuing the goal. I did have a talent for that."

She's modest. "I don't think I could take credit for any phrase or paragraph, let alone sentence in the Constitution's wording, but I know every word of the Constitution and know where to find it. I find that is my brain trust."

Sister Joanne who worked closely with Helen has a deep appreciation for her work. "Helen's leadership in developing the Constitutions was invaluable; her calm demeanor, her ability to listen to opposing

voices, her preparedness and depth of understanding enabled her to meet many challenges and reconcile differences.”

Her longtime friend Sister Pat Coward said, “Her deep compassion for the people of God combined with insight and creativity have provided us with a great spiritual and strategic leader.”

How did Helen’s degrees of a B.A. and M.A. in mathematics prepare her for her roles? They were key. “I’ve always been proud of my degrees—this is what taught me to be a problem solver. Everything comes down to understanding your goal, asking what is the reasonable path to get there and taking the steps. The Sisters of Mercy believed in a liberal education. I attribute my writing skills to having been invited to a very liberal arts education.”

Helen was the last to serve as president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Union. When her term ended with the founding of the Institute in 1991 she moved on to become president and CEO of Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore. Even as Union president, she had to ask her provincial for permission to take on this new position. “It was an act of obedience,” she said simply. Since 1991, she has applied her problem-solving talents, her diplomacy and vision to healthcare, with special attention to women’s health. She’s proud of the hospital’s centers of excellence approach which offers, in addition to maternal and infant care, cancer care, orthopedics, digestive health and liver disease, and other specialties. Mercy Medical Center is one of founding members of Healthcare for the Homeless, and for more than 10 years Helen chaired a local committee focused on making homelessness in Baltimore rare and brief. The system – known today as Mercy Health Services – is strong and mission-centered in a difficult environment for healthcare, never losing focus on the needs of the poor.

Her strong administrative skills and her vision were advantages. “The other advantage I have is being a sister. When I first came here 30 years ago, it wasn’t long before I got phone calls from the head of hospital association saying, ‘Sister, I need you to testify on this issue because people believe you.’ My conclusion was that, whether I deserved it or not, my job is to put my credibility to good use.”

How does she manage the energy to keep active at 85? She acknowledges that she’s not being overworked in her current role as chair of the board of Mercy Health Services. She has good health. She takes time to walk at least 40 minutes regularly and enjoys crosswords and reading.

Perhaps more important, she can look back with satisfaction on her work in the past and her current focus on enabling others to carry on the charism of the Sisters of Mercy.

“I think it is important to see to it that the charism of the Sisters of Mercy lives on in institutions like Mercy Health Services today. We count on fidelity to mission and values – our legacy from the Sisters of Mercy – as being indispensable to our business success. I’m grateful to have the opportunity to have a role in that.”