

# Recognizing Rural Leaders

The Religious Sisters of Mercy, Jackson, Minnesota  
Receive the 2018 Archbishop Edwin V. O'Hara Award

By Sister Esther Mary Nickel, RSM

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*CRL's Archbishop O'Hara Advocacy Award for Rural Ministry recognizes priests, religious or laypersons who have excelled in service and advocacy to rural communities.*

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In 1981 the Religious Sisters of Mercy were passing through a small town in rural Minnesota. Twenty Sisters were returning to their mother house in Michigan after a retreat in the Pacific Northwest. They stopped for the night and registered at one of the local motels, The Prairie Winds, in Jackson Minnesota. The drive had been long so they went out to pray the rosary in the early days of January. It was very cold! Some of the persons from the town heard that there were sisters in town, and two men drove out in a truck to find them—praying the rosary! They invited them to dinner, and in the course of the conversation realized that a number of the sisters had a background in the medical profession. They expressed their concern for health-care in their town, which was on a very fast and steady decline. The sisters promised to speak with their superior. Two weeks later, one of the sisters who practiced Internal Medicine came with a Catholic cardiologist to meet with the people and assess the needs of the rural community.

At that time, there was a desperate need for medical staff in rural communities. Recognizing that need, the sisters opened Sacred Heart Mercy Medical Clinic in October, 1981 (the first name was Comprehensive Health Care). The medical practice was a collaboration between the Sis-

ters and Catholic lay physicians. There were a number of internists, family practice doctors and an open door to specialties that would come to the clinic for one day each week. The Sisters have a vow of service, and thus all people receive care, regardless of their ability to pay. In 1988, because of their Catholic identity, they departed from working for the city at the hospital, but maintained the clinic. In 1994, the Sisters began to staff the medical clinic with their own sister doctors and nurses while continuing collaboration with the lay faithful. The focus on Catholic identity was not a deterrent for Christians from other churches working at the clinic.

It is clear that their Catholic identity was a source of difficulty, but although that caused no little suffering, the Sisters did not abandon the health care needs of the rural community. Some years ago, as is the case with many hospitals, the small city hospital was purchased by a larger company, Sanford, from Sioux Falls. The sister doctors, as always, have taken call at the hospital, and with their farm only five minutes away, have responded faithfully to many emergency calls, no matter how difficult the weather in Southwest Minnesota.

In addition to health care services, the clinic was a fountain for catechesis. The Sisters taught catechism, held Scripture stud-

ies, and taught Natural Family Planning and the dignity of each human person. They held study groups on the mystery of human suffering. There was a beautiful chapel in the Clinic where there was Eucharistic Adoration every first Friday of the month.

The Religious Sisters of Mercy are worthy of the Catholic Rural Life Archbishop Edwin O'Hara Award. With the grace of the Holy Spirit and the obedience of the Sisters, the clinic bore much fruit for the Church. Although the clinic no longer operates in the same capacity, the Sisters recognize the difficulty of opioid addiction especially among the young, the suffering of farmers and farm families with the changing demographics of rural America, and certainly the deprivation of good and sound catechesis on the dignity of the human person. These were driving forces for Archbishop O'Hara, who was reared on a dairy farm in this diocese.

*Since receiving this nomination, we have learned that Sacred Heart Mercy Health Care Center in Jackson, MN is closing. Thankfully, the Religious Sisters of Mercy continue to provide free medical services in Alma, MI and through mobile clinics serving rural areas in the Diocese of Knoxville and Archdiocese of St. Louis.*