

Reflecting on The Year of Mercy

An Invitation to All Covenant Staff, Physicians and Volunteers

Introduction

Pope Francis has announced a special year-long reflection and call to prayer on mercy, known as a Jubilee. As the term suggests, the Jubilee is meant to be a celebration, an occasion to give thanks for God's gift of mercy and compassion in our lives, inviting us in turn to be effective signs of merciful action to others. The Holy Year of Mercy is from December 8, 2015 to November 20, 2016.

This is a unique opportunity for health care ministries like Covenant Health to consider the significance of our work, given that our very identity is shaped by and informed by acts of mercy and compassion towards others.

Covenant Health personnel are invited throughout this Jubilee year to step back and reflect on mercy, and to revisit the deeper meaning underlying our value of *Compassion*. To take time to discover what compassion and mercy holds for each of us personally. It is an invitation to reflect on the meaning of our work, our calling, and the sacredness of every human being we encounter.

This invitation requires giving our attention to, or "fixing our gaze on mercy," as expressed by Pope Francis, based on our lived experience. Each encounter, be it with a patient, resident, family member, or co-worker, is an opportunity to be the face of mercy to our brother and sister. The motto for the Jubilee, *Merciful like the Father*, is based on the Gospel of Luke, 6:36, inviting each of us to give away the same measure of love and forgiveness as we ourselves have first abundantly received.



Giving Away What We Already Own

To share what we have first received is assisted by casting a look back, recalling times past in our personal and professional lives when we were touched by the same acts of mercy. In health care, we are used to this type of retrospective learning as we do with every quality assurance review or through morbidity and mortality rounds. There are many occasions each day at Covenant Health that invite such reflection. Consider the following examples:

- How is mercy manifest in giving shape to an addictions and mental health strategy, or navigating budget or site capacity pressures that invite creative solutions and imagination?
- What does the face of mercy look like in supporting each other in rolling out e-People, or Path to Home, or pursue other innovations to improve the patient/resident care experience and our commitment to quality and safety?
- How do we reclaim our language of mercy in responding to requests for hastened death while upholding personal and institutional integrity in light of the recent Supreme Court of Canada ruling, without abandoning the person in care, or our providers?

- What is the merciful stance and attitude of collaboration and respect that shapes our work together in supporting our influenza immunization campaign and managing through outbreak management?
- What ways are we called to “be merciful” to self and others when medical error occurs and in guiding our disclosure practices, with an attitude of continuous learning and discovery consistent with our Just Culture policy?
- How does our commitment to mercy call us to work together in clinical care and service and corporate services to continually strive to bridge understanding and respect for differences?
- In what ways do we stand in solidarity and show mercy to the aging adult we serve, or accompany people at the end of life, or heighten our sensitivity and response to the realities of human trafficking within our local communities?

These are but a few examples, and during The Year of Mercy we invite all Covenant Health personnel to reflect how mercy and compassion is manifest in your daily encounters with patients, residents, families, and fellow colleagues. Remembering acts of mercy is a way of keeping our value of compassion alive at work, and in our lives.

Remembering and Claiming our Culture

To that end, some Catholic health care organizations have undertaken “compassion projects” as a way of reorienting their personnel to this deeper meaning of their work.

Without such corrective measures an organization may be at risk of losing focus. As described above, we can all bring to mind everyday examples when compassion and mercy is very much present and alive at Covenant Health. We continue to be the face of God’s mercy to others; this includes the merciful glance we are invited to extend, without measure, to the image we see reflected in the mirror, especially after a long and difficult shift.

Still, as in any relationship, it is important we do not take what is so precious and foundational for granted. Like a marriage, couples may need to rekindle the romance and bring awareness of what is important to the relationship to ensure the flame does not go out.



We are reminded that our organization’s very name, *Covenant Health*, speaks to this sacred, covenantal promise. A commitment we make to live our value of compassion even when it is not convenient or expedient to do so. We declare publicly that our mission and values are important, and thus expect to see evidence in which mercy and compassion is tangibly expressed, as profiled so wonderfully each April during our annual Mission Awards Gala. There is no need for a compassion or mercy project when these values are already an integral part of our culture.

Legacy Day

The Year of Mercy is an opportunity to reorient and fix our gaze on what is important; what has sustained us in the past and will continue to sustain us into the future as a vibrant Catholic health care ministry. It is a year to bring to mind the legacy we are called to create for others, as the Sisters who founded our ministries modeled. It is fitting that the Jubilee year begins and ends with our annual celebration of Legacy Day; a day remembered not simply out of nostalgia, but from an awareness of the invitation this day presents us to create our own legacy to carry forward.

All our founding congregations of Sisters demonstrated this concern for mercy in practical, ordinary ways. They showed compassion to the people in their care, and to the people with whom they worked. They showed no discrimination in their selfless expression of mercy, never failing to go out to the margins, as Pope Francis calls us to do, seeking to lift up people in need.

For example, the Misericordia Sisters, whose own motto, *Derelictis Misericordia* (Mercy to the most vulnerable) showed special attention to pregnant, unmarried women in need. They epitomized mercy, reflected too by the image of the bruised reed on their coat of arms that must not be crushed. All our founding congregations of Sisters modeled this commitment to mercy and practical expressions of love: tending the wounds of others; washing the feet of those in greatest need; lifting up the hurting and broken hearted. The person whose foot we hold in our hands and bring to our lips may not be like us; nevertheless we are called to welcome that person and show hospitality.

And so, who among us today is in need of lifting up? Who is deserving of hospitality?

Doorways of Mercy

Pope Francis has invited parishes around the world to designate a “Door of Mercy,” open to those who have perhaps felt unworthy or undeserving of mercy to enter. The door, of course, is more than a physical structure. It is more than just an opening in a side of the building. Rather, we are called to be a doorway of mercy ourselves, so that those we encounter everyday in the hospital and in our clinics and department meetings can be received without judgment or condemnation. We are called to be passageways of mercy for another. As we have all been touched and showered with acts of mercy and compassion throughout our lives, we are called to do so for others.



We see this spirit of hospitality manifest in many ways. We support those struggling with addiction whose behaviour may be violent and unpredictable. We provide care to incarcerated individuals who may present to our facilities in handcuffs. We provide respectful, quality care to those whose expectations exhaust every reasonable attempt to resolve conflict, and still, we do not give up in finding creative solutions. It is relatively easy showing compassion to the “compliant” and the pleasant personality, but “the other” – the person who may be intoxicated, or homeless, or belligerent, or the gang member, or pedophile, and those who bite or spit will demand a deeper commitment of compassion. For truly they may be the ones most in need of love. Mercy knows many faces, as does the face of societal abandonment.

We are therefore living doorways of mercy and presence. Our Angel Cradles are more than a practical support to mitigate unsafe abandonment of newborns. They are a symbol of this accessible, nonjudgmental support in which we provide a place of refuge to all those of risk of abandonment.



Those at risk of harm or abandonment may present in other challenging ways. The Jubilee Year of Mercy will coincide with the unprecedented moment in Canadian history in which assisted death will become a legal reality in our country. Based on our past experience, we are prepared for the reality that some people in our care may verbalize a request for us to hasten their death. As a Catholic health care organization, we will respond as we have done consistently in times past, with compassion and mercy. We will seek to understand the nature of their request, be it pain and symptom management or emotional or spiritual suffering, and respond

appropriately to ameliorate their anguish. While we will not prolong nor hasten death, neither will we simply abandon a person and walk away.

The Year of Mercy is an opportunity to reclaim the deeper meaning of compassion, of “together, being with” another in suffering (Latin *cum*; with or together, and *passiō*; suffering) without forgoing our ethical commitments. Together, it is an opportunity to “be with” our staff, physicians and volunteers who may be called upon to be present to another in a moment of lamentation who expresses a desire to hasten their death. We will uphold conscience rights of Covenant Health personnel, so that neither the person in care nor our caregivers are ever abandoned.

In this way, we can truly celebrate and participate in this Jubilee year through such practical examples of mercy that continue to define our identity and culture. We have navigated challenging issues in times past without abandoning the people we work with, and serve. And we will do so into the future. The Sisters showed a two-fold concern of mercy for all, and we have learned well.

But do we not make mistakes along the way? Are there times when we are not so merciful, and kind, and able to “be with” another?

We know the answer to this question, and we each have only to examine our own conscience to know the times when we closed and locked the door to mercy; when it did not swing open wide enough to allow another hurting human being to enter. We also know when we have been too hard on ourselves, and denied the same compassionate love and unconditional regard to ourselves that we so freely give away. Burnout, staff bullying, harassment, addiction, disruptive behaviour, divisiveness, pettiness, disrespectful behaviour and unresolved conflict are all indications that we have more work to do.

And so it is good to be reminded; to have this year to reset, to renew our covenant to all those we work with and serve, committing that we will be a merciful people of God.

Does such a commitment negate a place for healthy expressions of conflict, and honest, respectful debate? Reclaiming mercy, in fact, encourages honest conversation in a collective desire to resolve conflict closest to where it occurs, without unnecessarily escalating issues. We must find ways to respond directly and respectfully with one another when conflict occurs, to remain engaged, and to keep the doors open. A commitment to “being with” another in times of conflict *is* an expression of compassion and mercy. Just as the person in our care verbalizing a request to hasten the end of their lives cannot be ignored and abandoned, we also cannot ignore those who we are in conflict with, abandoning all honest attempts to reconcile differences.

Mercy is thus as much about an attitude, a disposition of the heart that is committed to try, and try again, and even still, try one further time to reach out and remain in relationship.

The stories of Jesus and other religious and philosophical traditions provide countless examples of the power of forgiveness. Covenant Health’s newly refreshed vision seeks to create vibrant communities of health and healing. It is a vision that cannot be fully achieved if our own health care community is unable to model healthy relationships within our own walls. And all of us can reflect on the scriptures of our lives to know equally powerful and accessible stories from our experience that speak to what is possible when we stay engaged with another and restore right relationships.

A Pilgrim People on the Way

Pope Francis has expressed a special concern for the sufferings of migrant peoples. His first visit outside Rome in the early months of his pontificate was to Lampedusa, a small island off the coast of Tunisia that has become a symbol of the plight of refugees. His concern for the “global indifference” to those persecuted and forced to flee their homes at the risk of great personal risk has nowhere been so graphically depicted as in two unforgettable photographs taken last summer on another beach elsewhere in Turkey. One image evokes a sense of helplessness and utter despair; another poignant compassion. Both images reflect the face of mercy. Such powerful images and stories of mercy, whether in response to the sufferings of migrant peoples, or in caring for victims of recent terrorist attacks, or the acts we perform everyday in Covenant Health, call us to reflect on what it means to be a merciful people.



As expressed in this photograph, who is the person we may encounter in our work at Covenant Health today we are prepared to lift up, perhaps to carry in our own arms, or at least, in our prayers? Who is the person we will encounter in the hallways and clinical areas, and in our board rooms we are prepared to risk being vulnerable with, and personally impacted by, so that we can be more human, more compassionate, more present to their suffering? Who is the person we serve, and serve with at Covenant Health we are willing to bend with, feeling the weight of their own suffering that we may be the face of God’s mercy?

Indeed, we are all a pilgrim people, migrant sojourners, dependent upon the good graces of God and the mercy of our fellow pilgrims to find our way in life.

I encourage you during this Holy Year of Mercy to recall your own stories and images of mercy in your daily work. Take time to reflect on *Our Commitment to Ethical Integrity*, or our Just Culture policy, or our Just Workplace Framework to see how mercy is embedded in caring for the people we are privileged to serve, and serve along with.

Take time to sit down with patients and residents and their families in the cafeteria, and ask them about their care experience.

Take time to ask yourself why you chose (and why you continue to choose) to stay in health care, and in particular, to work at Covenant Health.

Take time to consider what you will do this year to be that face of mercy to another, beginning first with the memory of your own experiences of unconditional support and mercy, and by being so humbled by those experiences that you then freely give it away to another without measure.

As Pope Francis writes, “at times we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father’s action in our lives.”

Give your attention this year to mercy. Give your attention and fix your gaze on what is possible when we recommit to living our mission and values in all we do, and with every person we encounter in our sacred work.

Be a doorway to mercy, to allow the stranger to come in and be sheltered in the spirit of hospitality, and of mercy.

Be the face of mercy to yourself and others.

Gordon Self, D.Min.
Vice President, Mission, Ethics and Spirituality
November 24, 2015

Please share this reflection with your staff and dedicate time to discuss at department meetings, and to revisit it often during the Year of Mercy.

For more information on the Year of Mercy, please consult the following resources provided by the Catholic Health Association of the United States:

- [The prayer of Pope Francis for the Jubilee](#)
- [A prayer CHA developed for the Jubilee](#)
- [The official Jubilee of Mercy website where there are numerous resources](#)