

Footprints on the Sands of Time

Circles of Mercy celebrate 20 years a-growing

Memories, reflections, a look back on the past with an eye to the future! We are talking about Circles of Mercy. What are they? When and why were they formed? What is the function of a Circle? Who inhabits them?

To begin with, Circles of Mercy were formed in the spirit and practice of Venerable Catherine McAuley Foundress of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, a woman of deep compassion for the homeless, exploited, unseen, forgotten people of her native city of Dublin in the 1800's. On seeing them with the compassionate eyes and heart of Jesus, Catherine set about improving the lives of those desperately deprived people – a task she accomplished with love and compassionate service throughout her life. Ever since then the stamp of mercy and compassion has been the signature mark of the Sisters of Mercy.

In recent times with fewer vocations to religious life the Sisters met to consider a new way forward for the Mercy Order while maintaining the continuity of Catherine's spirit of compassionate service. After much prayer, discernment and discussion, the idea of involving lay people in a closer relationship with the Mercy Order emerged.

Twenty years ago Circles of Mercy came into existence in the Northern Province steered by a Core Group compiled of lay people and sisters. A Code of Practice was drawn up to which all Circles of Mercy adhere.

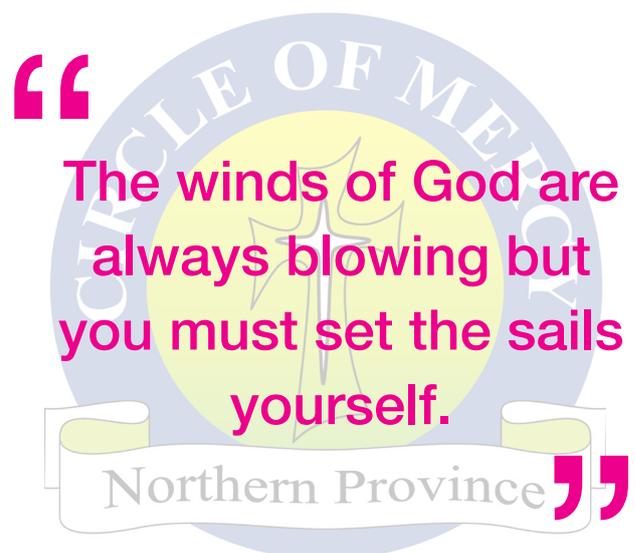
The Identity Statement for the Circles says that "A Circle of Mercy is a coming together of compassionate lay people from different walks of life who, with the Mercy Sisters, wish to live the Gospel according to the Spirit of Catherine McAuley."

The Circle attracts membership by invitation or by volunteering. A preparatory programme is followed for a one year period after which, if happy with the prayer life and work of the group,

the participant is invited to make a commitment to join for one year. This takes place on the annual commitment day when members commit or re-commit to the Circle.

The monthly meetings should be no longer than one and a half hours which includes refreshments. At the meetings, which open with a prayer, members discuss some aspect of Venerable Catherine's life as well as reading a short passage of Scripture related to the theme of the meeting. Members share incidents when they were merciful or experienced God's mercy in their own lives. There are many everyday occasions to perform some little act of kindness: for example, paying a visit to an aged or lonely person in need of a listening ear or just making them a cup of tea. The Circle monthly meetings are warm friendly occasions for all who attend, well worth considering joining a group or forming a new one. All you, dear readers, please think about it.

During the writing of this account the refrain of an old song came to mind, noted here because the words hold a message for all of us. It goes: "If I can help somebody as I pass along, then my living shall not be in vain." And yet one more thoughtful note to end on:



Nancy Irwin, Laytown Circle of Mercy