

# 100 Years of Service

**Presentation Sisters of Aberdeen observe remarkable century.**

**O**ctober this year marks the beginning of an important time of celebration for the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a Catholic order based in Aberdeen, South Dakota, which has spread its work across the globe. Just a few days ago, October 4th, was the start of a 12-month series of programs honoring the 100th year of the order in Aberdeen.

Said Sister Mary Denis Collins, president of the Presentation Sisters: "We are very excited about this centennial year! This special year-long celebration of jubilee is a time of thanksgiving and of remembering God's goodness to us as Presentation Sisters these 100 years. We express our joy-filled gratitude for all of the gifts that God has given to us, especially for those pioneer sisters who went before us.

"With gratitude, faith, and trust, we begin our second century of ministry as Presentation Sisters. We look forward to the challenges that the future holds, and we pray that we will be worthy of the past. We continue to be committed to bringing the gospel message to God's people wherever our ministries take us."

They are ministries which have multiplied beyond the dreams of



**R**ecent years have seen the Presentation Sisters reaching out to a wide variety of people in need: counselling at universities, missions in Mexico and Zambia, helping the urban poor in the U.S.

**S**ister Mary Denis Collins, president of the Presentation Sisters. Behind her is portrait of Mother Joseph Butler, early pioneer and former superior general of the Presentation Sisters.



the order's first members a century ago. Health care and education have been principal fields of service, and the Presentation Sisters have made a tremendous impact in those areas, especially in the Midwest. Yet this scope of service has gradually extended into other vital areas, too, particularly in response to Pope Paul VI's call in 1966 for all Catholic orders to lead their members into a deep spiritual renewal and to also closely relate themselves to the urgent needs of the times.

This papal urging motivated members of the Presentation Sisters of Aberdeen to take up new lines of service: midwifery help to the Navajos in New Mexico, education programs for drop-outs in Chicago, counselling at college campuses, operating chemical dependency centers, starting medical missions in Mexico, and teaching in Africa.

At present, the majority of sisters serve in the original three-state area of South Dakota, Montana, and Minnesota, but others work in 15 different states, in addition to the seven sisters who are doing missionary work in Mexico and Zambia.

Whether it is guiding those struggling with divorce or offering food and shelter to street-people in America's slums, the sisters have greatly extended their horizons.

All of these newer, important activities are extra to their original

work (extensive in itself!):

■ Presentation College in Aberdeen.

■ High schools in Mitchell, Dell Rapids, Madison, Sioux Falls, and Aberdeen, all in South Dakota; and in Miles City, Montana.

■ Grade schools in Mitchell, Jefferson, Madison, Aberdeen, Milbank, Dell Rapids, Huron, Sioux Falls, and Bridgewater.

South Dakota; in Miles City, Montana; and in Anoka and Mound, Minnesota.

■ Health care ministries: St. Luke's Hospital in Aberdeen, St. Joseph's Hospital in Mitchell, McKennan Hospital in Sioux Falls, Marshall County Hospital in Britton, Faulk County Hospital in Faulkton, Mother Joseph Manor in Aberdeen, Brady Memorial Home in Mitchell, and Prince of Peace Retirement Center in Sioux Falls, all in South Dakota; Holy Rosary Hospital in Miles City, St. Joseph's Hospital in Polson, and Garfield County Hospital in Jordon, all in Montana; Vadheim Hospital in Tyler, Minnesota; Dickey County Memorial Hospital in Ellendale, North Dakota; and Presentation Shared Services (called PACE).

That's quite a record!

**H**ighlights of Aberdeen Presentation's history read like a novel.

As an organization, the Sisters of the Presentation had its beginning in Cork, Ireland. A young, wealthy

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**F**rom humble beginnings to a modern complex built in red brick: Presentation Heights in 1985.

# Sisters

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woman, Nano Nagle, had become distressed by the suffering of the poor, and consequently dedicated her life to bring relief. One of the ways she helped was to establish schools for the underprivileged. Out of this service emerged in 1775 the Sisters of the Presentation. The order gradually spread to other sectors of Ireland and even to other parts of the world. The first to be established in the U.S. was in San Francisco in 1854.

The call to the Dakotas came when Bishop Martin Marty invited the Presentation Sisters in Dublin to teach Indian children. He was a missionary from a place the sisters had never heard of: Dakota Territory. This enthusiastic man

sisters to start a school for the children of the Sioux and white settlers.

It was March 1880 when three women—Mother Mary John Hughes; her sister, Mother M. Agnes; and Sister M. Teresa Challoner—left Ireland for distant Dakota. They had a stormy passage, but arrived safely in New York where they were greeted at the dock by a priest, Father Jean Fabian Malo, sent by Bishop Marty to escort them to the West.

The overland trip to their destination, St. Ann's Mission in Charles Mix County in present-day South Dakota, was a long and tiresome one. From New York they went by train to Chicago, where they stopped over for several days to break the journey and to give Father Malo an opportunity to buy needed supplies for the mission. From Chicago, they continued their trip by train to Omaha, Sioux City, and to Yanckton.

Yanckton was the end of the railroad (at that time, there were only 60 miles of railroad track in Dakota Territory), and so they boarded the steamboat, "Josephine," to travel the last hundred miles up the Missouri. The "stern-wheelers" of those days were fueled by logs, which the crew loaded on route. Whenever the fuel supply was low, the captain called out, "Woodpile!" Then the boat would stop and the crew would run ashore, pick up armfuls of wood, and hurry back on board. The fueling process, as well as the infamous shifting sandbars, made river traffic slow and risky.

On the sisters' trip, sudden squalls came up and during one of them the little boat was in danger of being wrecked. "Josephine" managed to weather the storm; however, the barge carrying the sisters' baggage was overturned. The crew succeeded in retrieving most of the supplies, but the water and mud had already done their damage.

trees, giving no hint that only some yards distant lay the flat, treeless prairie.

After experiences such as those, the Irish sisters were eager to reach their destination. New life was returning to the prairies when the sisters caught sight of their future home. It was a beautiful day in April. They were joyous over their new convent, a two-story structure of fieldstone and sod. The large room on the first floor was to serve as church and school, and the second story was the residence for the sisters and the boarders. Planks were used for pews on Sundays and they substituted for desks and seats on weekdays. Despite their crudity, the furnishings were an improvement over the log schoolhouse and slab furniture common at that time in many parts of Dakota Territory.

Indians of the region kept the sisters and boarders well supplied with food: wild fruit, grains, and vegetables in the summer season; venison in the autumn; and an endless supply of fresh fish in the fishing season.

Occasional donations from friends in Ireland and elsewhere helped in the purchase of necessary bedding and clothing for the sisters.

Yanckton, 90 miles away, was the closest railroad station. Transportation was slow and crude—by boat or wagon. Supplies and mail often took a week or 10 days. And even though the sisters were close to "Big Muddy"—the Missouri River—they had to pay a quarter for a barrel of river water during the spring and summer months. In winter, the water supply was not as expensive since melted snow and ice were used.

Probably the most serious adjustment the sisters had to make was with the Dakota weather. They were accustomed to the temperate climate of the British Isles, and had no knowledge or experience with the long, below-zero winters on the prairies. They had a single, little stove to supply them with heat and



**A Tradition of Caring**  
1886 - 1986

Painted a compelling picture of the great needs of the people struggling to build a future in the Dakotas. Education was especially lacking, and he wanted to interest the

Fair weather followed the storm and, from the deck, the sisters watched the stern-wheeler churn the Missouri into "chocolate foam." The steep banks were lined with

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**F**irst Presentation convent and school (TOP) in Aberdeen was in this church, Sacred Heart Church. Sisters used it from October 4, 1886 until 1888 when academy was built. Presentation Academy (BELOW) in this 1908 print. At right is St. Luke's Hospital.



# Sisters

Continued



light. Bedding was scant, blankets few. When nearby Indians heard of their needs, they came with blankets, fur skins, and firewood.

Those first months were filled with many new and pleasant encounters. The autumn of 1880 brought unexpected changes, however. About noon on October 15, a cold wind, bearing snow filled with particles of ice, came up suddenly. A severe blizzard struck with raging force, so terrible that many settlers lost their lives and others left the country in discouragement.

It was an extremely difficult winter, especially for the newcomers. Father Malo kept the sisters supplied with a barrel of salt pork. Settlers and Indians brought them wild game. They also taught the sisters the Dakota way of cold storage: Mother John described in a letter to Ireland how they kept meat fresh all winter by simply hanging it out of doors to freeze.

After such a difficult winter, spring was anxiously awaited. But with its arrival, a chinook wind brought a new disaster. The accumulated snow of the long winter melted rapidly and many lowland areas of the prairie became a vast lake. The Missouri quickly rose to flood stage and swept away everything in its path, including the villages of Vermillion and Fort Pierre. Although St. Ann's was about a mile inland, the sisters had reason to fear a flood. They spent the entire night in prayer, and

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**M**other Joseph Butler held office of superior from 1894 to 1915. She helped organize several hospitals in South Dakota.



when dawn came they saw the danger had passed.

But more problems continued during that spring of 1881. April was warm and balmy with many refreshing rains, and the sisters enjoyed the renewed vegetation flourishing on the prairie.

Each succeeding rain, however, sowed the seeds for a new calamity. During the winter, the frequent intervals of freezing and thawing had cracked their building's mortar and loosened the stones. Finally, a heavy rain and storm completed the destruction of St. Ann's when a portion of a wall gave way in the dormitory. Mother Agnes got the frightened girls out quickly, and, fortunately, no one was injured. But, the next day, the sisters and children moved into sod huts which had been vacated by some early settlers. Everyone felt safer in the huts, even though they were annoyed by toads and lizards emerging from their winter's sleep.

When Bishop Marty heard how the walls of the building at St. Ann's had become unsafe, he advised the sisters to go to Deadwood where another mission was being offered. Mother John accepted at



Vacation school of first communicants at Willow Lake, South Dakota, in June 1935.

once without making any inquiries about the place. She was told there was a large brick building once used as a hospital by the Sisters of Charity in the early days of mining in the Black Hills, and that it was no longer used. It was possible the building could become a school, she thought.

Once the decision to move was made, everything transportable

was immediately packed, because time was of essence. They had to be ready to take the first boat which came up the Missouri. If they missed the boat, their departure might be delayed for as long as three or four months until another stern-wheeler would come. Finally, after

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Photo shows St. Luke's Hospital at about 1940.

# Sisters

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three long weeks of watching and waiting, a boat was sighted.

In the meantime, Indians loaned them blankets and supplied them with food. They were sorry to see the sisters leave. When the day of departure arrived, the riverbanks were lined with men, women, and children, all wearing colorful blankets and fine feathers. They had come to see the sisters off.

During the trip, the water was so low that the boat kept close to the shore, moving slowly while frequent soundings were made. It took three days and two nights to reach Fort Pierre. At Pierre, the party took a train for a short distance, and then began a coach journey from some nameless place. They rode miles and miles across the prairie, stopping only to change horses and to breakfast at



**E**arly superiors are shown in this design by Sister Angela. Clockwise at top left: Mothers Joseph, Aloysius, Raphael, and Agatha. In center is the foundress, Sister Nano Nagle.



**T**ime out for a picnic at Sister Isidore's farm on June 19, 1927: (left to right) Sisters Anna Marie, Robert, Rosaria, Callister, Alexius, Michael, Carmine, Eunice, Thaddeus, Louis Manion (kneeling).

a ranch. This was a night's journey, and after being jolted from side to side, they gave a sigh of relief as they reached their journey's end. Deadwood, where they were met by a kind pastor. He took them to a private home, where the sisters were hospitably entertained and where they enjoyed a refreshing night's rest. Alas, their stay was all too brief.

Soon the pastor came to conduct them to what they thought would be their future home, a fine, three-story brick building. During the course of the survey of the building within and without, everything seemed satisfactory to all. The priest said he was happy to have the sisters there and that they would have daily Mass, except on Sundays, when they would be obliged to go to the parish church one mile away.

Mother John explained they wished to keep the cloister way of life which they were accustomed to

**T**ime of celebration during worship service.



in Ireland and which they had observed at St. Ann's. Since no alternative seemed possible in Deadwood, Mother John reluctantly decided to return to St. Ann's.

And so, on the following day, the sisters were once again en route for St. Ann's wrecked building. After riding two days, they met the mule wagon with their baggage on their way to Deadwood. (The wagons had left three weeks prior to their departure!) The sisters reached the coach, and Mother John gave the driver directions to turn back to St. Ann's with their goods. The sisters reached Pierre that night and sought shelter in a so-called hotel owned by a Catholic family. It was a sad time for all.

There was only one vacant room, and the proprietor brought some mattresses, stretched them on the floor, and bade them good-night. Travellers came and went at all hours of the night so that rest was almost impossible. Early next morning they began their return journey down the river, which seemed more rapid than the journey up.

At midnight they stopped some distance from St. Ann's. Fortunately, it was a bright night, and they found themselves once more before the ruins. Oh, how lonely it looked with its wide-open doors and walls fallen, some in and some out. The weary travellers entered at its best side, threw themselves on the floor, and slept the sleep of exhaustion.

When the Indians became aware of their return, they brought blankets, pillows, and food supplies. The priest who succeeded Father Madden secured a three-room log cabin some distance from the mission. Without delay, the sisters began to make it habitable, and in a few hours they had one room cleared of rubbish of all kinds. A stove was set up somewhat similar to the old one in St. Ann's, and a plank propped up to the wall served as a refectory table. Some of these boards were sawed into small pieces by the saintly priest while the sisters held them in place. Then a hole was made in the earthen floor, and a post placed in each, and on top the square piece of wood. These were their chairs. After exploring the hut,

they found some broken plates, a few old rusty knives, and one handleless fork. Using these primitive utensils, they ate their scanty food with enthusiasm!

After a few days, the other two rooms were arranged. One was to be a chapel and the other a classroom. School re-opened and



there were three sisters on the faculty. Regular daily attendance of pupils numbered five. It was a far cry from the estimate made by Bishop Marty on their first arrival at which time he said he expected

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# Sisters

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more than 200 students!

In July 1881, Mother M. Agnes wrote to Bishop Marty, informing him it would be better to return to Ireland than be out in the middle of the Dakota Territory "on a wild goose chase."

In those days, mail was very irregular and uncertain, but the sisters eagerly watched for a reply. At last the letter came. The bishop replied abruptly, as he was wont to do: "I will forward passages and expenses for return to Ireland."

Mother Agnes now regretted her hasty act. She thought she should have shown a better missionary spirit. So she sent an apologetic letter. She begged to allow the sisters to remain, to which the good bishop responded by inviting the five sisters to Yankton, where there was a large boarding school conducted by the Sisters of Mercy.

The sisters from St. Ann's had to endure yet another one of those famous coach rides, 90 miles from Wheeler to Yankton. Four sat within, while one sat outside with the driver. The trip took 24 hours. No stops were made, and one sister became quite ill from the continual jolting on the rough trails. To add to everyone's physical discomfort, the horse stepped into a deep hole, and, in trying to get out, he forced one of the coach wheels into the same rut so that the carriage was capsized. The sister on top was thrown some distance, but was uninjured except for a broken or sprained ankle. The "enclosed" nuns climbed from the coach unhurt. Helping the driver, they managed to get the carriage on its feet (wheels) again.

The sick sister stayed where she fell, too weak to move and too ill to care what happened next. Dur-



*Singing praises unto the Lord for His goodness and direction, the Presentation community at worship.*

ing the disastrous scene, the coachman kept shouting, "Don't scream, ladies, or you'll scare the horses!" No one spoke. Fright and silence reigned supreme. It was a miraculous escape, especially when the sisters learned afterward that several people had earlier died at that same spot.

Twelve long months had elapsed before the long-expected mission call came. On one of those beautiful autumnal days in August, word was received that Father Joseph Stephan of Fargo had asked Bishop Marty for assistance. The bishop immediately offered it to Mother M. John with the understanding that if she accepted, she would assume all responsibility for the maintenance of her community after the pastor and people had given them a good start. Both communities rejoiced over the glad tidings, and though their stay with the Mercy Sisters was longer than they had expected, still the warm welcome and hospitality was not in the least diminished during the whole year they were guests.

Early in the fall of 1882, the little band of Presentation Sisters left their Mercy home and Mercy friends to try a third foundation. Yankton was then a county seat and also the capital of Dakota Territory. Fortunately, the Northwestern Railroad had extended into that town, and so the nuns, instead of their usual stagecoach ride, took the "last locomotive" to Fargo. The little engine was toiling and panting hard, and as the train rumbled along toward the northern city, the thought kept recurring, "Will this be our future home, our last resting place?"

Fargo was reached, at last. As they alighted, Father Stephan met them with a welcome smile. They stayed in his home for two weeks until a house could be made ready for them near the church. To raise funds for the erection of a convent and school, a fair was proposed. Tickets were sold for one dollar each. The sisters tried to sell as many tickets as possible, even travelling as far as Mandan but with indifferent success.

When the building was finished

and the school started, a deed was made out in the name of the Presentation Sisters. Thus commenced the Presentation Order in the North Dakota part of Dakota Territory. Eventually, the work in Fargo prospered to include an academy and other parochial schools both there and elsewhere in North Dakota.

Then, on October 4, 1886, another invitation came. It was from Bishop Marty, asking if the Presentation Sisters would open a school in Aberdeen. This little town, so-named by a Scotchman from Aberdeen, Scotland, had been founded in 1880. Six years later, it already boasted a population of 2,000.

Answering the bishop's call were three zealous sisters: Mother M. John, Mother M. Aloysius, and Sister M. Joseph. They received a joyous welcome. Rev. Robert Haire even gave up his humble home to the sisters, and boarded with a Catholic family in the Aberdeen neighborhood. He was an extraordinary man, who had charge of the Catholic Church extending over a widespread region covering towns along the Northwestern Railway. His territory included Springfield, Minnesota all the way to Oakes in present-day North Dakota.

South Dakota's "grand old man," as Father Haire was fondly called in later years, became very interested in the struggling Presentation community. The vacated rectory was fitted up as a miniature Presentation Convent, while the Sacred Heart Church was used for a parochial school. It was a familiar routine in those days. The church served as a school on weekdays with classes being discontinued whenever there was a wedding or funeral. There the sisters lived and taught for two years. During that time, they had to put up with many inconveniences and difficulties, but their labors were repaid by the success of their work. Crowds of children and adults came to Christ's own school to receive the necessary instruction for the reception of the sacraments.

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# Sisters

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The people of Aberdeen were generous, helping in both small and big ways. Many times the W. Kearney store slipped in meat and butter as gifts to the sisters' grocery orders.

Their method of buying milk was humorous. Although the sisters lived at the eastern end of the city limits, they had, at that time, an unobstructed view of Main Street. Making use of that advantage, they devised a clever and efficient method to signal the town's waterman or milkman. If they wanted milk, they flew a white flag on the gate of the fence which surrounded the convent. A red flag meant they needed water. (Water still cost them 25 cents per barrel just as it had at St. Ann's.)

With the increasing numbers of pupils, it became apparent that they should have their own school building. A bazaar was arranged with the sisters contributing needlework and art objects, skills in which they excelled. The fund-raising effort was successful, netting \$1,277.14 for the school project. From that amount, the site of Presentation Academy was purchased for \$375, property which is now the site of St. Luke's Hospital.

In the spring of 1888, the foundation of the new convent was laid. It was a three-story frame building and was used as a day and boarding school. The scope of education extended from kindergarten to eighth grade, including a teacher-training department. Courses in music, art, plain and fancy needlework, typewriting, shorthand, and bookkeeping were offered. Though winter brought its blizzards and summer its droughts—reverses which hurt the school when struggling parents had to abandon their homesteads and move their families to better

localities—the school nevertheless established a reputation for scholarship, culture and character-training. Both Catholic and Protestant parents felt fortunate to be able to send their children to such a fine school.

On the feast of St. Teresa, on October 15, the sisters moved into their new convent and the school's enrollment reached the hundred mark. Four sisters came from Fargo to teach in the grades and help in the music department.

By 1895, the enrollment had reached an earlier goal: 125 students.

The Presentation Sisters' entry into medical work in South Dakota began in 1900 when an epidemic of black diphtheria struck the Aberdeen area. There was such

## Epidemic of Black Diphtheria ravaged Aberdeen community.

widespread sickness that the sisters temporarily closed the Aberdeen academy so that they could nurse the sick in their homes and could also convert the school facilities into temporary hospital wards.

The following year, in 1901, they erected a new building, which was named St. Luke's Hospital.

St. Luke's Hospital and other hospitals the sisters have started continue to provide quality medical care for the Midwest.

The great scientific advances these medical institutions have achieved are a modern-day miracle. The education provided by the schools the Presentation Sisters teach continue to provide quality Christian education.

These magnificent accomplishments are a testimony to the power of God, that so much good could have resulted out of the tiny "mustard seed" planted in faith so many years ago along the banks of the Missouri River at St. Ann's. □