Did the Sisters of Mercy Contribute to the Development of Professional Social Work?

Wade Luquet, M.S.W., Ph.D.

The history of the profession of social work starts in 1884 with the wealthy men of Oxford opening a house in London—Toynbee Hall—where these men could help the poor within their own conditions in what was called a settlement house. This house spawned a movement to open similar homes throughout England, and later in the United States. Yet the Sisters of Mercy had done similar work beginning on Baggot Street beginning in 1827. Is it possible that the Sisters of Mercy inspired the men of Toynbee Hall? Or were settlements a natural progression from other forms of social charity that were developing in Europe at that time?

These were questions generated in an Introduction to Social Work course at Gwynedd-Mercy College in suburban Philadelphia after a class viewing of the film The Women of Hull House—a biographical film about Jane Addams and the women who began Hull House in Chicago in 1889, a settlement house that helped the poor settle into their communities and ultimately inspired the professionalization of social work in the United States. Addams’s story of inherited wealth, desire to help the poor, purchasing a large house, and soliciting other women of means to assist her parallels Catherine McAuley and the original Sisters of Mercy.

Addams credits Toynbee Hall with her inspiration after visiting England in 1883–1885 and again in 1888 to see how the various charity organizations deal with the numerous poor people in London. But once again, the Sisters already had similar programs set up in the United States starting in Pittsburgh by 1843 and spreading to New York, Philadelphia, New Orleans, and other major cities. So what kept the Sisters of Mercy, as well as other noncloistered orders, out of the social welfare history books? This paper will attempt to look at various reasons for exclusion of the Sisters from this history, and some possible measures to bring justice to this situation.

Sisters of Mercy Fulfilling Religious Obligations

Some might say that the Sisters, being from a religious order, were obligated to help the poor and their work could not be considered social welfare. However, the Sisters did not begin as a religious order. In the beginning, Catherine was a woman of strong Catholic beliefs but was not a religious Sister, nor did she have a desire to become one. It was only after a threat of losing the house from the local bishop that the women began taking vows that included service to the poor that Catherine and the women of Baggot street became Sisters. And in the big picture, it is probably a good thing since the order has survived based on the rule and constitution of the Sisters of Mercy rather than on the charisma of a leader.

Most importantly, during the 1800s, almost all charities were of a religious nature because of beliefs and attitudes regarding the poor and the moral superiority of the wealthy classes. The mid-1800s was a time in social welfare history when charitable organizations and friendly visitors were the favored form of social services. These means of helping the poor fit well with Victorian attitudes and the fascination with social Darwinism that pervaded middle- and upper-class thinking of that time. On the basis of the teachings of Calvin, Wesley, and social Darwinism, those who had “made it,” both socially and financially, were considered morally superior to paupers and poor persons whose labor provided income, but not enough to take care of their families. These teachings invoked a sense of obligation of the rich to the poor in an effort to help the poor, as well as to satisfy the donors’ spiritual duty. Thus, the “religion” and
The “science” of charity—giving to those who will best use the charity—was born.¹

Yet notably missing from the social welfare literature is the contribution of Catholic religious women who provided direct relief to the poor for many years prior to the settlement movement.

The Sisters’ Relation to Settlement Work

Although the Sisters’ work in education and health care has been well established and recognized, their work with the poor has often been underappreciated. Yet, many of their programs and houses were an integral part of the social welfare system in England and Ireland, and some may even see a prototype of settlement work inherent in the Houses of Mercy.

In the proposal for Toynbee Hall, its founder, Samuel Bennett, wrote that its purpose was “to establish a University Colony in East London where men might live face to face with the actual facts of crowded city life, might gain practice and experience in social questions, and strive to ennable the lives and improve the material conditions of the people.”² This, too, seems to have been the goal of the Houses of Mercy, since the Sisters made direct contact with the poor and worked to improve their conditions. However, settlement houses were more of “a clubhouse in an individual district, where the condition of membership is the performance of a citizen’s duty; a house among the poor, where the residents make friends with the poor.”³ Settlement houses helped the poor settle in their communities and enjoy many of the benefits of the middle class and wealthy—art, lectures, games, and conversation—with some direct relief. In many ways, they were as much about the experience of the wealthy men who lived in them as about those whom they served.

Jane Addams (1889) credited Toynbee Hall and its founders, Samuel and Henrietta Barnett, with influencing her to start Hull House in Chicago.⁴ The Barnett’s credited Arnold Toynbee, a young academic who had a vision to serve the poor, but died before he could fulfill it. Thus, the question arises: Did the work of the Sisters of Mercy have any influence on either the Barnettts or Addams? A search by the archivists at both Toynbee Hall and the English Sisters of Mercy archive in Bermondsey did not find any letters written between the Sisters and the Barnettts.

My search of Addams’s writings at the Jane Addams Peace Collection at Swarthmore College also did not reveal any direct contact with the work of the Sisters. However, it should be noted that Addams’s handwriting, especially in her personal journals, was nearly illegible, so she could have mentioned contact with the Sisters of Mercy, but it was not readable. I also contacted the present director of the Providence Row Charity—earlier known as the Providence Row Night Refuge, a night shelter managed by the Sisters and described later—to see if he knew of contact between the Barnettts and his facility. Although he knew of no written record, he thought that it was highly likely that the Barnettts and the Sisters would have met, since the facilities are only a few hundred yards apart. While the search did not prove any direct contact or influence that was written down, perhaps this is an area of study to be pursued further, especially by social welfare researchers in England who can view primary material first hand.

The work of the Sisters may well be a “missing link” between the harshness of the Poor Laws and the start of social work created by settlement houses. Just as jazz is an evolutionary step that emerged from the sounds of many cultures along with ragtime and then to emerge into its own musical form, the settlement house may have emerged from the compassionate work of the Sisters.

However, the work of the Sisters of Mercy predated that of the settlement movement by sixty years in Dublin and spread to numerous sites across Europe and Australia during that time. If the Sisters cannot be considered part of the settlement movement, two questions must be answered: Is
the work they accomplished with the poor of such a nature that it can be considered a formal part of the social welfare system, and if so, what kept their work out of the literature?

Was the Night Refuge Social Work?
Certainly, the Sisters of Mercy would have had no idea of the practices and values of the social work profession because the profession did not exist during the early years of their work. Yet, if one examines the stated social work values from an introductory social work text, one may say that the Sisters were practicing an early form of social work. In Generalist Social Work Practice, the authors state:

generalist social workers work directly with client systems at all levels, connect clients to available resources, intervene with organizations to enhance the responsiveness of resource systems, advocate just policies to ensure the equitable distribution of resources, and research all aspects of social work practice.

Given this definition, can the work of the Sisters be considered social work or, at a minimum, proto-social work? To determine whether it can, one would have to look at the work itself, and the Providence Row Night Refuge of London is a good example.

In September 1858, five Sisters of Mercy left Wexford, after being commissioned by the Very Rev. Dr. Gilbert of the Church of St. Mary's Moorfield, to come to London to take over the schools and found a night refuge for London's poor and homeless. The refuge opened in 1860 and moved to larger quarters in 1868, where it remains today as the Providence Row Charity. The refuge was London's "first absolutely non-sectarian charity in London." The Reverend Gilbert was so adamant that there should be no doubt of this fact that he had the refuge and the convent paid for by two separate funding sources. As his biographer wrote:

The Refuge and the Convent of Mercy were built at the same time, adjoining each other, but although the Sisters were to be responsible for the management, and although the work could not have been carried on without their help, not one penny subscribed for it was spent upon the erection of the convent, which was paid for by a separate fund, collected entirely from Catholic sources.

John W. Gilbert, the nephew and biographer of the Reverend Dr. Gilbert, wrote this about the Sisters of Mercy:

In dealing with Dr. Gilbert's effort with the poor, mention must be made of the foundation of the Convent of Mercy, which for so many years has been the center of social work in the parish of Moorfield. For thirty-seven years they have been in charge of the elementary schools, for thirty-seven years, they have ministered to the wants of the poor in the Refuge, and in addition they have for years visited the sick in the hospitals and poorer districts of the parish and at times have had control of different cofraternities and associations.

The largest project that the Sisters undertook at Providence Row was the management of the night refuge. The night refuge housed several hundred men and women on separate floors in small, clean, side-by-side beds. It provided hot meals; lavatories; and, for some, job training. Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy described the refuge this way:

The night refuge is a handsome building in one of the most wretched quarters of London, surrounded by labyrinths of dirty streets and dingy alleys, a sort of focus for the poor creatures reputed the dangerous classes. It is designed to give lodging and a meal to such of the decent poor as are for the moment homeless, and for whom no other respectable shelter is provided from the hideous nights of London. People who have come from sweet-smelling villages to make great fortunes in the great Bedlam; creatures turned out of their wretched lodgings and wandered aimlessly about the town; young girls with the fragrance of the daisies still beautifying their weary faces; widowed mothers with groups of sturdy orphans clinging to their scanty drapery—all enter the refuge without let or hindrance; that is, all free from drink. At three o'clock the fires are lit in the great halls, and towards five some two hundred of the most wretched of God's creatures are being thawn out or dried, and getting ready for their frugal supper. Everything is poor, but brilliantly clean. A crucifix adorns each dormitory. The men may see in their fine, airy sleeping place a picture of the beggar-saint who served God so well in poverty greater than theirs. All apartments are well supplied with lavatories—a most necessary precaution, for many of the wanderers present themselves in a state of squalor and filth sadly out of keeping with the boasted civilization of our century.
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Groups of sisters go about among the women, teaching them to sew or read or prepare for the sacraments; dressing the sores of some, consoling the sorrows of others. While a poor father is lying ill in the hospital, the mother and her little ones, who are never separated from her, may have shelter here, if they cannot get better; and the nuns take care of the babies by day while the mother is looking for employment. The men in another large, well-lighted, well-heated apartment are objects of the diligent care of their hostesses, who listen to their troubles, bind up their wounds physically and spiritually, look out for situations for them, and help them to make a proper appearance by providing new garments or redeeming the old ones from the pawn. Many a well-born man and woman, after a long struggling with pride, humble themselves to accept the aid here so graciously given to Christ’s representatives for His sake. The nuns wait on every one of these forlorn vagrants, welcome them with cheering words, prepare and serve the substantial supper in a way their guests often describe as “comforting.” Many a poor fellow fallen into the sorest straits has here taken heart afresh and sallied forth with new courage next morning to find the work that will restore independence.

It should also be mentioned that in a settlement house-like fashion, the men and women of the refuge would gather after dinner for singing and storytelling. Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy stated: “Music and recitations are sometimes executed here which would put some drawing-room performances to shame.”

G. Chesterton also observed:

The evening meal over, the women sit and talk. Somebody plays the piano—it is an excellent instrument—or sings, or recites, and on occasion the company is moved to dance—middle-aged mothers with big families, elderly granddames and girls in their teens.

There is an atmosphere of cheerfulness, but those who wish can pour out their sorrows or discuss their prospects with the Sister-in-charge.

A report completed in 1881 stated that from 1860 to 1881, the night refuge had more than 1,054,000 lodgings each with breakfast and dinner—more than 1,600 people each week (Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy, 1883). Providence Row continues to operate today and is still staffed by Sisters of Mercy and volunteers.

Given the values of modern-day generalist social workers, one may say that the Sisters were doing social work. They worked directly with client systems, connected clients with resources, and sought justice and equity for the poor of England. They also seemed to work from the strengths perspective as they looked for the basic good in each person and sent each off with “new courage [the] next morning to find the work that will restore independence.”

Where Are the Sisters in Social Welfare History?

What seems to be true is that the Sisters of Mercy and other noncloistered Sisters have been left out of the social welfare and social work literature, possibly because they were women and possibly because of the prejudice against Catholics. Men of the Church of England at Toynbee Hall are given credit for the roots of social work even though the Sisters had similar programs and did similar work in similar neighborhoods.

One explanation is the lingering effects of the Penal Laws that were passed in Ireland and England beginning in 1691. As a way of creating a state religion, England took away the rights of Catholics to own land and participate in government. The Penal Laws were especially hard felt in Ireland where 80 percent of its inhabitants were Catholic. Much of the country was plunged into poverty by the laws, and although many attempts were made to repeal them, the laws were not repealed until the passage of the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829, which offered Catholics emancipation and allowed Catholics to participate in government in Ireland and England. However, Catholics continued to be discriminated against in both Ire-
land and England, and it is possible that the works of the Sisters of Mercy were ignored in the early social work literature because of the Sisters' Catholic roots.

A second explanation could be that because the Sisters were women, their work was not seen as important as the work of men and was suspect by the general population. Women, especially religious women, were taught to be humble about their good deeds. As one Sister recently told me, her early religious training emphasized, "More of He, and less of me." However, one wonders how their work would have been viewed in the social work literature if they had remained laywomen living together to help the poor within their community, as the men of Toynbee Hall had done.

Implications for Mercy Education

It is important that our students learn more about religious Sisters' impact on the field of human services and how this has created a more compassionate society. Mercy human service educators should continue the research into the Sisters' direct influence on the field of social work to see if there was contact that influenced the development of the field. At present, this research places the work of the Sisters of Mercy and the work at Toynbee Hall just a few hundred yards apart. Future research could be undertaken in the archives of the Sisters in Dublin; the Bermondsey, England convent archives; and the Toynbee Hall archive to determine if there was a direct connection between the two programs.

Researchers will also need to take an in-depth look at the work of the Sisters to determine if this was indeed an early form of social work or just another form of charity. If the Sisters' work is determined to be a form of social work, changes in the history should come about slowly—perhaps by including the Sisters' works in classroom lectures, papers, or future editions of books on social welfare history. But their work should not continue to be ignored. Women's voices and those of repressed groups need to find their way into history. For whatever reason a group has been excluded from society—prejudice, bigotry, persecution, or intolerance—social work, and those of us who teach in the human services at Mercy institutions, have an obligation to bring justice to the situation.

Mercy education has long prided itself on its nursing, education, and to a smaller extent, its human service and social work degree programs. Given the long and influential history the Sisters of Mercy have had in social welfare, it may be time to put the social work and human services programs on equal par with education and nursing. Our universities are service oriented, and probably no field of study is more service oriented than social work and human services. To be able to train young people to use their compassion to help others in direct service is to live the mission of mercy.

Notes

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2. W. Smart, Toynbee Hall (Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, 1886), 4.


7. Ibid., 104.

8. Ibid.


10. Ibid., 299.


13. Ibid.