

A Chapter in the Little Company of Mary
American Healthcare Ministry:
Evergreen Park, Illinois

Like many American institutions, especially those started in the nineteenth century, the Little Company of Mary ministry has European roots. Its origin is England where Mary Potter founded the Little Company of Mary congregation in 1877 but Rome is where Charles Mair so providentially found the Little Company of Mary Sisters to nurse his beloved wife during their travels there.

Mr. Mair, a Chicago businessman, was so impressed by the kindness and skill of the "blue nuns," so called for the color of their veils, that he offered to underwrite their journey and settle them in a house if they would begin an American ministry.

The opportunity and challenge were accepted and three brave, dedicated women travelled to what was for them a strange, new land arriving in New York on May 9, 1893. They proceeded the next day to Chicago to take up their mission of care for the city's sick and dying.

The three New World pioneers, Mother M. Patrick, Mother M. Veronica and Sister M. Philomena moved into their small cottage convent at 41st Street and Indiana Avenue with few material possessions. However, they had abundant determination, faith and skill.

For 38 years, from 1893 to 1929, the constantly growing community of Sisters travelled from their 41st and Indiana convent, and subsequent convents, on foot and by streetcar to the homes of the sick where the Sisters nursed their patients and assisted in other ways such as child care and even meal preparation.

Toward the end of the 1920s, friends and supporters of the Sisters recognized the need for a community hospital and undertook a fundraising drive that resulted in a state-of-the-art hospital located at 95th and California Avenue in Evergreen Park. Little Company of Mary Hospital, a four-story, 150-bed facility with a 12-physician medical staff, was dedicated on January 19, 1930.

A landmark structure, the Hospital seemed inappropriately located in a vast

expanse of prairie. It wouldn't be long, however, before Little Company was at the heart of suburban development and a vision would be realized.

The year after the Hospital's opening, the Little Company of Mary School of Nursing opened. The school offered a three-year program graduating its first class of nurses in 1933. The first students were Sisters but by 1933, lay women attended. The school operated until 1984.

The residential expansion of the forties placed heavy demands on the Hospital's medical services as the need for beds regularly exceeded the Hospital's capacity. Fortunately, the same vision that led the Hospital's founders to build Little Company on what some called "swampland," led them to construct the Hospital with a foundation that could support nine stories. In 1949, five additional floors were added to the Hospital's existing four, increasing bed capacity from 150 to 350 with the completion of the fifth, sixth and seventh floors. The two top floors of the tower were completed in 1955.

Although the new decade could have been entered with a complacency borne of confidence in state-of-the-art services and expanded facilities, the pioneering spirit never abated at Little Company as evidenced by the hallmark event of 1950. On June 17 the Hospital's name was recorded in the annals of medical history as the very first human transplant was performed at Little Company by three of the Hospital's professional staff members. The three-man team that successfully transplanted a human kidney included Drs. Richard Lawler, James West and Raymond Murphy.

By the late 1950s, the Hospital was serving twice as many patients as it had just 10 years prior and faced the unprecedented demand that was expected as a result of substantial residential and industrial construction in surrounding communities. Expansion was again needed in both bed space and medical services and Little Company's second major construction project began. The five-story,

80,000 square foot addition, dedicated on June 25, 1960, housed patient rooms, new emergency and outpatient facilities, diagnostic and treatment suites, chapel and administrative offices.

It was during the boom decades of the 1950s and 1960s that Little Company earned its reputation as the "baby hospital" as newborns were welcomed in record numbers. In 1930, the year the Hospital opened, the nursery staff cared for 232 babies. To date, the total is 185,000.

Another expansion project was called for in the early 1980s to meet the needs of an evolving community. The 234,000 square foot South Pavilion was added to house 100 private rooms, new emergency room with covered entrance, Radiology Department and new surgical suite. The same year, two neighborhood facilities were opened for the treatment of minor illnesses and injuries. The Care Stations are located in Burbank and Oak Lawn and serve over 36,000 patients per year.

In this the 100th anniversary year of the Little Company of Mary American healthcare ministry, the new, 80,000 square foot Mary Potter Physicians Pavilion nears completion. The Pavilion will house the offices of several of Little Company primary care physicians and specialists.

The dynamic nature of the Little Company of Mary ministry has brought it full circle. At the end of the nineteenth century the "blue nuns" cared for the sick in their homes. Today, at the end of the twentieth century, by empowered laity, patients are again being cared for in their homes through such programs as Mobile Medical Care, Home Care and Hospice.

While the American Province story begins in Illinois, it does not end in Evergreen Park. Healthcare facilities and pastoral/parish ministries are also located in California, Indiana and Ohio. Worldwide, ministries are located in Africa, Australia, England, Haiti, Ireland, Italy, Korea, New Zealand, Scotland, Tonga, United States and Wales.