

MT OLIVET HOSPITAL

A UNIQUE CREATION IN 1950s SECTARIAN-RIVEN BRISBANE

What has been achieved and what is happening now?

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The foundation of Mt Olivet was based on a unique spirit of ecumenism in Brisbane in the 1950s. Yet sectarianism was a key characteristic of Ireland in the early 1800s when the Sisters of Charity were first formed, in the origins of the early settlement and life in 19th century Australia and in 20th century Queensland. Sectarianism is defined in this article as anything that is not broad or open in views or opinion, rigidly adhering to one particular school or sect – such as in Christianity (Catholic vs. Protestant), Catholicism (Benedictines vs. Ignatian), Humanity (man vs. women), Races (black vs. white), Queensland government in the 1950s (Labor vs. Democratic Labor). Ecumenism is defined as the opposite of sectarianism, nonpartisan and tending towards openness and worldwide unity or cooperation.

In spite of the sectarian environment in which it evolved, the founders of Mt Olivet were able to transcend its sectarian obstacles and create a unique ecumenical institution in Queensland dedicated specifically to the care of the sick and dying.

The Sisters of Charity opened Mt Olivet in 1957. However, the origins of the Sisters of Charity go back 180 years previous to 1787 when their foundress Mary Aikenhead was born in the city of Cork. Her father was a successful medical doctor from a leading Protestant family. Her mother belonged to a prominent Catholic family, which had made their fortune from the silk trade. At this time, Cork was a more cultured and affluent city than Dublin due to its port and extensive trade. Leading Catholic families sent their children to France for education; however they were excluded from any participation in political life in Ireland.

In fact, the majority of the population – the native born Catholics – were oppressed and impoverished under the onerous restrictions of the 1703 Penal Code which prevented Catholics (the native born Irish) from owning land, voting and sitting in Parliament and from holding positions of trust in public institutions such as hospitals, universities, the law and the military services. Catholic education was outlawed. In reality, Ireland was England's first colony and repression of Irish language and culture was a key element of society.

An uprising in 1798 against English domination and calling for Catholic emancipation and constitutional reform was brutally put down by use of torture, flogging and hanging of many liberal-minded citizens, both Protestant and Catholic. Many of the prisoners from this uprising were sent to New South Wales as convicts.

Mary's father had been a supporter of the Movement and had helped its leader, Lord Fitzgerald, escape from arrest in Cork. As a doctor he witnessed the oppression and poverty and

was concerned about the conditions of the ordinary people. Upon his deathbed a few years later in 1801 he converted to Catholicism.

Mary Aikenhead had been baptized an Anglican but had been exposed to both Anglican and Catholic religions while growing up. Because of illness while young she had been cared for by Catholic foster parents in a semi-rural area for several years. She converted to Catholicism herself the year after her father died, in 1802 at age 15. Because of Cork's association with France, it also had close links to the effects of the French Revolution (1789 to 1799). Mary's privileged position among the wealthy of Cork society exposed her to prominent Catholic religious personnel such as the Abbe Edgeworth who had ministered to Louis XVI as he mounted the scaffold and to Father Donovan who had been reprieved from the guillotine at the last moment because he was Irish. On his return to Cork he chose as his special task the ministering to prisoners preparing for death. Mary was very influenced by the turbulent times and extraordinary people around her and became convinced of the need to minister to the poor in Ireland.

Upon a visit to Dublin she met Archbishop Murray who was struck by her desire to devote her life to the service of the poor as a member of an unenclosed religious order. At that time no such order existed in Ireland. He was convinced that Mary was just the person to start such an order and encouraged her to make a regular novitiate with an established congregation in order to prepare her for the sound spiritual training need for the practice of religious life.

After several years' novitiate and training, Mary Aikenhead founded the Sisters of Charity in Ireland in 1815. Thus began the first congregation of unenclosed religious women in Ireland and their unique 'walking' ministry to the poor of Ireland. In her submission to the 1833 Commission into the State of the Irish Poor Mary Aikenhead describes the work of the Sisters of Charity at this time:

to attend to the comforts of the poor, both spiritual and temporal; to visit them at their dwellings and in hospital; to attend them in sickness; to administer consolation in their afflictions; to reconcile them to the dispensations of an all-wise Providence in the many trials to which they are subject; education and relive of orphans, single mothers, those in jail.

In fact, one year later, in 1834, Mary Aikenhead, with the help of several of her sisters who had undertaken nursing training in France, established the first hospital in the English speaking world to be managed and staffed by Catholic nursing sisters. St Vincent's Hospital Dublin was opened in a fashionable area of Dublin, with a credo to 'harness science to charity' in order to help the suffering poor – who Mary regarded as God's nobility. Haunted by the misery of the wretched slum dwellings, Mary insisted that the hospital should be a large airy building in a healthy situation in a good locality, with a fairly spacious garden.

Major fundraising was begun and the hospital was to be open to people of all creeds and conditions. Ecumenism and concern for the poor were to be enduring characteristics of hospitals opened by the Sisters of Charity. Nearly 200 years later, the Sisters of Charity would expand their service to the poor across 150 communities in four continents including Australia.

Australia, as a Western nation, could be said to have the same birth date as Mary Aikenhead, as 1787 was also the year that the First Fleet set sail for Australia. Established under the English Penal Code, no Catholic chaplains were permitted in NSW for 30 years. It could be said that the British military authorities brought an anti-Catholic Anglican Ascendancy sectarianism with them to Australia. During this time, an increasing number of Irish political prisoners were sent to Australia (due to the uprising in 1789, the 1795-96 Orange reign of terror and ongoing political unrest in Ireland). The settlement in NSW was on high alert in case of a rising by exiled Irish political prisoners and children born of Irish Catholic parents were registered and brought up as Anglican.

This practice had ended in 1820 with the Bigge's Commission allowing provision for two Catholic Chaplains to minister to the convicts. A Report from one of these Chaplains exposed the brutal and unjust treatment of convicts and led to the eventual cessation of sending convicts to Australia in 1840. When transportation ended, 40% of Australia's white population had been convicts.

In the meantime, Mary Aikenhead had kept informed of the situation in the Australian colonies, long regarded as "the most neglected portion of the Catholic world". In 1838, the Vicar-Apostolic of New Holland, Dr John Polding, sought help from her to look after the women convicts. She selected five from the fifty-two Sisters in her congregation to establish a mission in Australia. They were the first Religious women to set foot on Australian soil.

The Female Factory at Parramatta has been called ‘the cradle of Australia’ as it housed over 600 female convicts, often in degraded conditions and exposed to the brutality of the prison colony. These women were described as ‘the lowest, most degraded and most hardened of their sex’ and were to become the matriarchs of many early Australian families. Over two-thirds of these women were Irish Catholics and in desperate need of help and consolation, without any family or support in the brutal colony. Out of the total Congregation of fifty-two sisters, five volunteered for overseas service.

When they arrived in 1838 they were the first female religious Congregation in Australia and immediately began work at the Female Factory. Their early work consisted of caring for the needs of women and children, of instructing them in religious and secular knowledge, supporting them as they entered married life, establishing a women’s refuge, giving lessons in needlework and other domestic activities, establishing a laundry, ministering to convicts on death row and visiting and opening schools and hospitals.

After the closure of the Female Factory in 1848 the Sisters continued their work including visits to patients in the Sydney Infirmary (later Sydney Hospital). Despite obstacles, some from within the predominantly Benedictine Catholic hierarchy in Sydney who were unhappy with the Sister’s Ignatian rules and wanted them to change, their numbers had grown and they had established Congregations in Sydney and Hobart in the first twenty years.

After an influenza epidemic in 1853 when many died, including three of their own, the Sisters began an appeal to raise funds to start a hospital of their own. They opened their first hospital in Australia in 1857 – St Vincent’s Sydney – following on the traditions established by the original St Vincent’s in Dublin in 1834. In fact, Mother Baptist de Lacy, who was the first Rectress of St Vincent’s Sydney, had done her training in St Vincent’s Dublin in the 1830s. She was probably the only trained nurse in the colony at this time.

Two years later in 1859 the Sisters were once again involved into a clash with the Catholic hierarchy over a sectarian issue. The Sisters of Charity had always insisted that no distinction was made on religion on admittance to their hospitals. In their fundraising efforts to establish the hospital they had been supported by Protestants, Jews and Catholics. However, in 1859 a visiting Catholic priest had found a Protestant bible at St Vincent’s and had reported the matter to the Archbishop. A course of events then occurred that resulted in Mother Baptist de Lacy being removed from her office. The Hospital’s only doctor and its Treasurer, both Protestants, resigned in protest. Mother de Lacy returned to Ireland, leaving only six Sisters of Charity at St Vincent’s Hospital. Fortunately, despite this, the Hospital continued and indeed, flourished to become the major teaching and research hospital it is today.

Seventy years later, the arrival of the Sisters of Charity in Queensland in the 1920s was not without its sectarian challenges as well. When Superior General Mother Berchmans Daly wrote to Archbishop Duhig of Brisbane seeking advice on a location for a retirement home for

older Sisters, little did she know that it would lead to the establishment of a hospital in Toowoomba. And little did she know that contentious comments made by Archbishop Mannix at its opening ceremony would be reported around the world. The Irish Partition Agreement had recently been signed in Dublin, which divided Ireland into North and South. Archbishop Mannix, a fierce Irish nationalist, commented that he ‘had no desire to go into Heaven in company with some of them’ [the men who signed the Partition Agreement] In turn, the Protestant Furnishers Association of Toowoomba wrote to the press with a demand for an apology from the Mother Superior, claiming that they had not been given an opportunity to quote for the supply of furnishings for the Hospital – which had been given to a Catholic furnisher.

Queensland had long had a large Irish Catholic population, the first of whom had arrived as convicts or “involuntary migrants” at Moreton Bay, which was set up to punish convict re-offenders in New South Wales. While the Irish comprised 11% of the entire population of the United Kingdom, over 50% of convicts at Moreton Bay, both male and female, were Irish. And every British Army regiment sent for guard duty at Moreton Bay had seen recent service in Ireland, which had been under repressive British colonial occupation since the 1600s.

The severe punishments metered out to Irish prisoners at Moreton Bay was to give it the reputation as being ‘the most flogginest place in NSW’ with over half of its prisoners receiving more than 95 lashes per flogging. Upon closure of Moreton Bay in 1839, all the convict women were sent to the Parramatta Female Factory, where the Sisters of Charity

were working. Less than 20 years later, in the 1860s, when the new Queensland colony established an Immigration Program to bring out migrants from ‘the old country’, the ‘fractious’ Irish were not included.

However, the enterprising Catholic Bishop Quinn of Brisbane found a way around the Program. He hired a shipping line to bring out several boatloads of Irish migrants who were entitled to land grants under the Immigration Program. The authorities soon amended the Program to include a larger proportion of Irish migrants (26%) than any other migrants from the UK, especially after realizing that more single Irish women were prepared to migrate than women from any of the other nationalities. With their agricultural background, the Irish farmers made good settlers. By the time of Federation in 1900, Queensland was the ‘most Irish’ of all the Australian states.

Around this time, in the early 1890s, two single Englishwomen arrived in Brisbane - Dr Lilian Cooper and Mary Josephine Bedford. They were to become prominent members of the Brisbane Anglican community and, in a great act of ecumenism, were to be instrumental in establishing the first Sisters of Charity hospital in Brisbane.

Dr Lilian Cooper was the first female medical doctor to be registered in Queensland and faced significant discrimination from her male colleagues, with her services being boycotted for several years after her arrival. Both Dr Cooper and Mary Josephine Bedford were concerned with the condition of women and children, as well as the general health of the community. They were active in and served on the boards

of the Children's Hospital, the Women's Hospital, the Kindergarten and Playground Association, Royal Historical Society of Queensland, the Queensland Women's Historical Association and many other community organizations.

During WW1 they volunteered for active overseas medical duty with the Scottish Women's Hospital service in the Balkans. This service was set up by the Suffragette movement. Women had still not received the right to vote in the United Kingdom when war broke out, but the Suffragists had decided to put their militant activities on hold during the war. A section of them set up the Scottish Women's Hospital service to make a positive contribution to healing the wounds of war, as well as to prove that women could contribute by way of courage and by successfully assuming responsibility and management positions. The hospitals were set up directly behind the fighting lines and were completely staffed by women.

Among their community work in Brisbane, they made friends with Father Archibald Mills, an Englishman who had converted to Catholicism. He had dedicated his life to working with the poor, sick and disadvantaged and during the 1930s Depression he started the first St Vincent de Paul hostel in Margaret Street in Brisbane. After Dr Cooper died in the 1940s, Mary Josephine Bedford consulted Father Mills on their idea that after their death, their property at Kangaroo Point – Old St Mary's with its magnificent view of the Brisbane River - could be given as a gift to the community to address an urgent need - a hospice for the sick and dying of Queensland.

Father Mills advised Mary Josephine Bedford to visit the Sisters of Charity Sacred Heart Hospice when she was next in Sydney. Miss Bedford was duly impressed by her visit to the Hospice that all creeds and conditions of people were welcome there – the first patient she met was a Chinese man, the second was a Methodist. She approached the Sisters of Charity in Brisbane as to the possibility and received a positive response.

In fact, her approach was the answer to a prayer which one particular Sister of Charity had been asking for in Brisbane since the 1930s. Sr Mary Agnes Fitzgerald came from a large North Queensland family which had pioneered the Sugar industry in the Mackay area. Several of her family had entered Catholic orders, including her older sister, Sister Mary Audeon of the Sisters of Mercy.

When her sister died unexpectedly in 1932, Sr Mary Agnes had a vivid dream in which her sister was standing on the verandah of a house which was a hospice for the dying and encouraged her to help with this special work. Sr Mary Agnes was very touched by this dream and approached her superiors to open a hospice in Brisbane. Although sympathetic towards the idea, it was not possible at this time. However, Sr Mary Agnes never gave up pressing for a hospice and had persuaded her superiors to purchase land at Enoggera in 1951 for a hospice. When Mary Josephine Bedford offered Old St Mary's for this purpose a little while later, it was decided to sell the Enoggera land and to establish the hospice at Kangaroo Point.

When Sr Mary Agnes visited Old St Mary's shortly afterwards, she was sitting on the verandah admiring the view when she suddenly realized that this was the verandah and the house in her dreams – her dream of a hospice had come true and her prayers had been answered!

Prayers were to play a prominent role in life of the first Sister Administrator of Mt Olivet Hospital – Mother Giovanni Ackman. Mother Giovanni had converted to Catholicism from Judaism in the 1920s and had joined the Sisters of Charity. She had been educated at a Catholic school in Victoria and although she had not received any religious education on the request of her mother, she was attracted to aspects of the Christian religion. She was especially attracted to 'The Thirty Days Prayer' which she undertook and, to her joy and surprise, she received the true Faith on the very last day. She eventually joined the Sisters of Charity and had extensive experience in hospital administration in their hospitals in Melbourne and Sydney.

When she was appointed to oversee the development of a Hospice at Kangaroo Point, starting from scratch, her first recourse was to prayer – followed by a three-pronged campaign strategy – organizing a committee, seeking some funding by appealing for donations and approaching the banks for a loan. As with all other Sisters of Charity hospitals, it proclaimed that it would welcome all classes, all creeds and all colours and in return it received widespread community support

Not that Queensland of the 1950s had thrown off sectarian problems. Indeed, Mt Olivet was opened in early September 1957 just days after the August election had seen the reigning Labor Party lose office and split along sectarian lines – with the splinter Catholic influenced Queensland Labor Party under Premier Gair dividing the Labor vote and ushering in a Country/Liberal Party coalition government which was to last for 30 years until 1989. Previous questions in State Parliament by the Labor member for South Brisbane, questioning whether the government funding for the ambulance service was on the same basis as that for Mt Olivet was described by Premier Gair as ‘mischievous and sectarian in character’.

However, Mt Olivet was to win widespread support from across Queensland. In particular, starting in 1959, an annual State-wide Door Knock Appeal was to be an ecumenical affair with thousands of men and women of all creeds – Salvation Army, Anglican ministers etc – collecting funds across Queensland for ‘our’ Mt Olivet. The 1959 Door Knock alone raised £30,000 and made many new friends for Mt Olivet. In time, many Queenslanders would leave part of their estate to ensure that Mt Olivet would continue its valued work.

Fundraising and grants enabled adjacent land to be purchased and for ongoing hospital development at the Kangaroo Point site over time including:

- 1957 opening of Mt Olivet Hospital of 6 floors with 176 beds;

- 1965 opening of 3 new floors providing an additional 111 more beds;
- 1977 opening of Marycrest Retirement Centre (161 residents) and Lilian Cooper Nursing Home and the Giovanni Chapel;
- 1979 extensions to the North Wing, Physiotherapy Department established; and
- 1981 Rehabilitation and dedicated Hospice Palliative Inpatient Unit and Home Care Services established.

The 1980s saw Mt Olivet refine its original mission of ministering to the “incurably ill and dying” by pioneering palliative care education and services in Queensland. Mt Olivet also hosted the inaugural Palliative Care Association of Queensland. The Sisters of Charity had established hospices in Dublin in 1879 and in London in 1905. St Joseph’s Hospice London was in the forefront of the modern hospice movement. Dame Cicely Saunders, whose pioneer work in terminal care and control of terminal symptoms revolutionized palliative care, began work at St Joseph’s Hospice in 1958 and was its first full-time Medical Officer. Several years later she founded the famed St Christopher’s Hospice. She wrote of her time at St Joseph’s and its influence on her decision to found St Christopher’s – ‘I was trying to found a similar hospice’.

Due to declining numbers of new admissions to the Congregation, and after almost 50 years of administration by the Sisters of Charity, the first lay administrator of Mt Olivet was appointed in 1994. To ensure that the mission

and heritage of the Sisters of Charity continued, however, a program of Mission articulation and education for all staff, strategic planning and heritage management was implemented throughout all Sisters of Charity institutions.

In 2000, Mt Olivet joined other Queensland Sisters of Charity hospitals and health institutions to form an alliance with the Holy Spirit Sisters to create a new hospital in Brisbane, the Holy Spirit Northside. This alliance is called 'St Vincent's and Holy Spirit Health' and oversees the development of all facilities within the alliance.

Current major developments at Mt Olivet will see more services added and the main hospital change its name to St Vincent's Brisbane, in line with the excellence in healthcare and healing ministry associated with the other Sisters of Charity St Vincent's hospitals. The Mt Olivet insignia will continue to be used for the Palliative Care Services.

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Delene grew up in Queensland and studied history at the University of Queensland. At the University of New South Wales she undertook post-graduate studies in archives management.

She has been active in the Australian Society of Archivists Queensland Branch and has also undertaken archival work at the Fryer Library of the University of Queensland and at the John Oxley Library of the State Library.