

GUEST COLUMN

Story of Mustard Seed retold here

Catherine McAuley Center for Women: 'a leap of faith, a dream'

He put another parable before them. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the biggest shrub of all and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and shelter in its branches."

— Matthew 13:31-32

Today in Cedar Rapids "The Story of the Mustard Seed" is being retold. It is the story of how a small seed planted in the right place and with the right care and circumstances has poked its way through the ground and stretches out its arms.

It is the Catherine McAuley Center for Women. It grew out of a small group of Mercy Sisters reflecting on the mission statement of their order. That statement calls the sisters forth to respond with conviction to the challenge of the Gospel message of Jesus. It specifically provides for the direction of their energies and resources to alleviate human suffering, especially that of women.

Catherine McAuley, the founder of the Sisters of Mercy, had a special mission — to serve the poor, sick, homeless and uneducated. It is the belief of the founders of the Catherine McAuley Center for Women that education continues to be a key toward self-determination and independence.

Far-reaching mission

The Catholic Church has a long tradition of education as a means of improving the quality of life for its members. There is a group of women, however, who believe we must go beyond our church walls, neighborhoods and economic structures. We have been educated and encouraged. We seek to listen to those who have not been so educated and encouraged, to lend them a hand, and to be converted by them.

And so it began: the Catherine McAuley

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Center for Women — a leap of faith, a mustard seed, a dream. The seed was planted and its story was shared. The dream grew, others shared it and helped nurture it.

Mercy Medical Center provided a building to house the Learning Center, volunteers came forward to offer their services in tutoring and moral support and encouragement.

A grant was written asking for the help of the Hall Foundation; the foundation responded with funds so a full-time director could be hired.

Members of the community gave their time serving on committees to provide guidance as to program needs and administration. Lawyers helped with legal issues. Realtors searched for buildings. All of this in one short growing season — one small mustard seed.

The Center is now open. Its services are free and they are simple. Economically disadvantaged women who need help with basic skills — whether it is in reading, mathematics or skills needed to complete GEDs — can come to us. We will try to help them. We want to encourage them as we have been encouraged. Others have helped us. We only seek to repay such kindness.

One little mustard seed . . . and then, another. Just a month ago, another "sower of seeds" within the community came to ask the people of the Center to plant another seed. He explained the critical need for housing for women without children. While there are currently housing programs for families, women with children, and single men, there is nowhere for women without children to go.

He asked, "Could we help?" We talked about our fears, the problems, the financial responsibility, the connection with the learning center, the liability . . . and on and on and on. And we decided that we had to help, or to at least try.

Another leap of faith! Another "If God wants it to be, it will happen."

Well, so far God seems to be pushing and shoving, arranging for different people's paths to cross, and saying "This is what I've been trying to tell you to do when you read the Gospel." "Can't you hear me?" Yes . . . we hear.

A house to rent has been found; we will be able to take in four women. We dream of helping more but we will let the seed grow as God wants it to. If "more" is supposed to happen, it will.

Community of believers

Right now we are so pleased with these two little mustard plants. The first little seed was not nurtured by one person. It was planted and watered and tended by a community of people who believed in it. This second little seed likewise will not be nurtured by one person. It too needs a community of people who believe in it.

We are seeking members for this community of believers. We need help of all kinds — prayers, encouragement, money, service, goods — and we invite you to share in the nurturing of these little mustard plants.