News
Opinion



Jane Ferreira (right) has served as Mercy Learning Center's president and CEO for nearly 20 years. (Courtesy of Mercy Learning Center)



by Jamie Manson

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Editor's note: *On Holy Thursday, Pope Francis prayed for the dead as well as for the priests, doctors and nurses who he said represented the "saints next door" during the coronavirus pandemic. Over the next months, National Catholic Reporter and Global Sisters Report will be bringing the stories of Catholics in this crisis: those who have died, but also those whose service brings hope. To submit names of people for consideration for this series, please send a note to saintsnextdoor@ncronline.org.*



Last week, a call came in to the Mercy Learning Center from one of its students.

The woman, a mother of four, had just brought her husband to a clinic. He had been exhibiting symptoms of the coronavirus for three weeks. They were afraid to seek treatment because they are not U.S. citizens. So they waited. The moment he arrived at the clinic, the staff called an ambulance.

Now she and two of her children have the virus. They are at home in quarantine. Her husband hadn't worked in weeks because he was so ill. So, they had no money for

food. Even if they had money, the only stores within walking distance are bodegas with no nutritious foods. To get to a decent grocery store, she would have to take a bus. Because of the virus, bus routes have been cut back; buses now run hourly and only 10 passengers are allowed to ride at a time. Her other two children who do not have the virus are too young to travel by themselves.

She is getting sicker and trying to care for her family. There is no communication from the hospital.

Many of us might think that this kind of desperation could only happen in some other country plagued by war or famine. But this is happening in Bridgeport, Connecticut, a town located in Fairfield County, one of the wealthiest regions in the United States that is home to at least 15 billionaires, according to Forbes.



A class at Mercy Learning Center helps students earn their GED. (Courtesy of the Mercy Learning Center)

My longtime friend Jane Ferreira received the woman's phone call. For nearly 20 years, Jane has been the president and CEO of Mercy Learning Center, a program for undereducated and underserved women. With a team of social workers, teachers and 200 volunteer tutors, MLC aids 1,100 students every year in everything from GED and English as a second language programs, to computer and life skills. They also offer a host of supportive services, like early childhood education, assistance with preparing for citizenship, and mental health, job and financial counseling. (Though the program was founded by women religious, it has operated independently of the church for decades.)

These days, though, Jane finds herself scrambling to help these women and their families meet their most basic needs. Food, medicine, toilet paper and diapers top the list. They are being turned away by smaller local pantries because they don't live within the geographic boundaries or aren't members of the church.

"We have to prioritize who we give food to," Jane told me in a recent phone call. "We start with who is the sickest."

MLC is a microcosm of the impact that COVID-19 is having on groups who are marginalized because of their gender, race or immigration status. It is also emblematic of the extreme economic inequality that is exacerbating the pandemic. Bridgeport is notoriously poor and disadvantaged. But folks in towns just miles away, like Westport, enjoy disproportionate wealth and privilege.

"I delivered 25 bags of food to three different families last week," Jane said. "That will get them through the weekend and half of the week. We'll go out again to make deliveries on Friday."



In addition to classes for women, Mercy Learning Center also provides an educational childhood program. (Courtesy of the Mercy Learning Center)

Jane never had to budget for large-scale pantry support for her students, so she is totally dependent on the kindness of donors. Tutors who used to help women with reading, math and science skills are buying their students gift cards to grocery stores and sewing them masks.

"We ran out of food, so we put out an appeal," Jane said. "We only are able to provide thanks to the generosity of people in our suburban communities."

Most MLC students work in the service industry as housekeepers, nannies or aides to the elderly. Their husbands work in restaurants as cooks or dishwashers. They were already living paycheck to paycheck and never have enough money to put in a savings account. Now they are all out of work. Ironically, most of them caught the virus at their jobs.

"When this happens you really see the divide in our society," Jane told me. "The poorest of the poor are always the ones that suffer the most. But even their suffering becomes extreme."

There is also a digital divide, she said. Of MLC's 1100 students, only about 70 have the equipment and data plans to do their studies online. Tutoring sessions are happening over the phone, but teachers are finding that the women are asking for help with their children's homework. Only 10% of students are native English speakers. Many only have a fourth-grade education level.

But perhaps nothing has become as apparent as the health care divide. Few MLC students have paid sick leave or health insurance. Clinics are overwhelmed, but Jane said that if the government hadn't committed to offering free care to anyone with COVID-19, none of her students would have gone for treatment.



Mercy Learning Center serves undereducated and underserved women in Bridgeport, Connecticut. (Courtesy of the Mercy Learning Center)

"The poor don't get to go to doctors who know their patients and their families," she said. "Health care workers are doing an amazing job, but you can see how broken the system is."

Jane said the real looming crisis is housing. Right now in Connecticut, no one can get evicted or have utilities cut off until June 1. That's fine, but eventually everyone will have to pay back three months of rent and bills. Even those who received the $1,200 stimulus cannot stretch the money that far.

"Our next donor appeal will be for grants to help students' pay their rent and bills to at least stabilize their home life," Jane said. "That will be an unprecedented ask."

Listening to Jane I was reminded of a talk by Paul Farmer that I reported on years ago for NCR. Farmer is the founder of Partners in Health, a nonprofit organization that offers modern medicine to those most in need and alleviates the crushing economic and social burdens of poverty that exacerbate disease.

Farmer's commitment to bringing social justice to public health was profoundly influenced by liberation theology.

"The preferential option for the poor is so radical compared to any ideology," he said in that talk. "It says not only should you take care of the poor, you should take *better* care of the poor. I have never seen that really applied in medicine or public health anywhere."

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Lately I've been thinking the U.S. is as in need of Partners in Health's aid as the ravaged countries they usually serve. This pandemic has laid bare the shocking inferiorities of so many systems in our country: the fragility of our social safety net, our gutted public health system, our stark economic inequalities that are often the result of systemic racism and xenophobia.

Yes, COVID-19 knows no borders and does not discriminate, but the income and race segregations in our society have made the poor and people of color far more vulnerable to exposure, higher mortality rates and severe, long-term economic repercussions.

The only real way our society can rebound is to do exactly what Farmer suggests: give the greatest support and the most robust stimulus to those who are most in need. If we don't, eventually we will all suffer the consequences.

But to do that, Americans would have to have to undergo a serious change of consciousness. We'll have to move away from false libertarian ideas of meritocracy, raw capitalism and rugged individualism. We'll have to open our eyes to the greed, the racism and other structures of injustice that got us into this mess.

We'll also need a transformation of our hearts. Or, as Jane put it, "It's going to take a real generosity of spirit and true humanity to really help people recover."

[Jamie L. Manson is an award-winning columnist at the National Catholic Reporter. Follow her on Twitter: @jamielmanson.]

Editor's note: *We can send you an email alert every time Jamie Manson's Grace on the Margins is posted to NCRonline.org. Sign up here.*

This story appears in the **Saints Next Door** feature series. View the full series.