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Mercy sister president: Arizona Catholic hospital, bishop in discussion

by Joshua J. McElwee

The Catholic sister who leads the western U.S. province of the Sisters of Mercy has said that staff at a Mercy-run hospital in the Phoenix area reported to be at risk of losing its official Catholic status are "in good faith discussions" with Bishop Thomas Olmsted.

Members of the staff at Mercy Gilbert Medical Center in Gilbert, Ariz., "are hopeful that they can come to an agreement" with Olmsted, said Sr. Judith Frikker, president of the Sisters of Mercy West Midwest Community.

Frikker's statement was sent by email to members of the Mercy community Monday after confusion this weekend over whether Olmsted had already revoked the facility's official status as a Catholic hospital.

If Mercy Gilbert loses its official status, the Phoenix area would be without a diocesan-recognized Catholic hospital.

In 2010, Olmsted revoked the official status of the only other Catholic hospital in his 44,000-square-mile diocese, St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix, after he learned of a 2009 procedure he said unethically terminated a pregnancy to save the life of a mother.

On Thursday, a statement on the Phoenix diocesan website said following a change in the ownership structure of the Gilbert hospital, "Bishop Olmsted has a duty to the Catholic faithful to inform them that he cannot state with moral certitude that Mercy Gilbert Hospital provides Catholic health care which is in full conformity with the teaching of the Church."

Following that statement, a report in *The Arizona Republic* Friday night reported that the hospital had lost

its Catholic status. The *Republic* changed its report Saturday, after the Phoenix diocese issued a second statement saying it had not stripped the hospital of its official Catholic identity but was "in the process of renewing its status."

Calls to the Phoenix diocese for clarification on the meaning of the statements were not immediately returned Tuesday morning.

In her statement Monday, which was obtained by *NCR*, Frikker said the Gilbert hospital's staff has been in discussions with Olmsted since January, when the corporation that owns the hospital changed its name from Catholic Healthcare West to Dignity Health and no longer sought to be identified as an official ministry of the church.

Dignity Health is sponsored by six communities of women religious, including the Sisters of Mercy, and operates 40 hospitals in Arizona, Nevada and California, including Phoenix's St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center.

While Frikker says the wider corporation does not seek official Catholic identification, "Mercy Gilbert Medical Center has remained a Catholic hospital, sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy."

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With the change in the ownership structure of the Gilbert hospital, Frikker writes, Olmsted had asked hospital staff to "work with him" to ensure that the hospital continued to "operate in accordance" with a set of norms approved by the U.S. bishops in 2009 regarding Catholic health care, known as the "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services."

"The hospital's leadership assures us that they have received no specific statement from the bishop indicating that he has revoked the hospital of its Catholic identity," Frikker writes.

"They remain in good faith discussions with the Bishop and are hopeful that they can come to an agreement with him. Mercy Gilbert Medical Center continues to abide by the Ethical and Religious Directives and is proud to deliver excellent, compassionate care to the communities it so privileged to serve."

Olmsted's rescission of the official status of St. Joseph's Hospital sparked criticism from theologians and health care professionals, who claimed the 2009 procedure fell within the U.S. bishops' guidelines.

"St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix has many programs that reach out to protect life," Daughter of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, the president of the Catholic Health Association, said at the time.

"[The hospital] had been confronted with a heartbreaking situation. They carefully evaluated the patient's situation and correctly applied the 'Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services' to it, saving the only life that was possible to save."

According to their website, Frikker's Sisters of Mercy West Midwest Community is made up of almost 800 Mercy sisters and more than 500 lay associates in 32 U.S. states and Mexico. It is one of six communities that make up the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, the central group for about 3,800 Mercy sisters across the western hemisphere.

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org.]

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