

## **A Message to Youth – Opportunities abound for vibrant and compassionate leaders in Catholic health care**

**By Steve Hill**

“The mission of Jesus Christ is what binds us together,” according to Carl Roy.

Roy, CEO of Providence Health System in Vancouver, Canada’s largest Catholic health care provider, was articulate and focused. “Our mission is our core strength and greatest asset.” Roy’s message resonated with the 300 leaders attending the Catholic Health Association of Canada’s May 5-7 convention in Edmonton as they reflected on the theme, “*Managing Succession in Catholic Health Care Leadership.*”

Faced with a huge exodus from the workforce by “baby boomers” entering retirement, Catholic health care wants to let young adults know that tremendous opportunities exist in a wide variety of careers, not just as nurses and doctors, but in the whole gamut of gifts, talents and technical skills required to create a community of compassionate care.

Yet, much publicized layoffs from health care in the 1990s may have helped create a public perception that health care workers are over-worked, over-stressed and under-valued. Why would young people want to enter or remain in that kind of work environment?

At the same time as all sectors of the economy face recruitment and retention challenges in human resources, Catholic health care sees itself offering a valued-added opportunity for the next generation of leaders. “We all crave meaning in our lives. Catholic health care offers great opportunities to find meaning. We expect every member of our organization to live our mission everyday,” said Roy.

Catholic health care is counting on its mission to attract new young leaders of today. Indeed, Catholic health care is no stranger to the changing face of leadership. Originally founded across Canada by numerous pioneering congregations of religious women, Catholic health care has very few active sisters today. When the sisters were present at all levels of health care, their example nurtured a gospel-value culture in each organization. The sisters’ personal and corporate integration of faith and service gave visible witness to the 2000-year church history of compassionate care for the sick. Today, lay leaders come from all walks of life but most often they themselves were called forth by the sisters.

Three leaders were recognized for their exceptional service at the convention. The 2006 CHAC Performance Citation Awards were presented to Mary Pat Skene, executive director for the Sisters of Charity (Grey Nuns) of Alberta in Edmonton; Raymond Lafond, chartered accountant and executive director of the Catholic Health Corporation of Manitoba in Winnipeg; and Gerald Herkel, retired administrator of St. Michael’s Centre in Burnaby, B.C., and past chair of the Catholic Health Association of British Columbia. The Performance Citation Award is the highest distinction in Catholic health care in Canada.

The three award recipients exemplify what Catholic health care is all about and all humbly paid tribute to the sisters with whom they had worked. “The Grey Nuns have been my mentor in Catholic health care,” said Mary Pat Skene. “Their vision has always spoken to my heart. Their vision is to be vibrant and compassionate signs of hope in a broken world. It has always driven me to express those values of human dignity and care in every workplace I’ve been part of. That gives me energy every morning.”

The awards banquet saw Toronto World Youth Day singer Janelle Reinhart close the celebration. Reinhart’s recounting of her meeting Pope John Paul II had delegates alternately roaring with laughter and reaching for napkins to wipe away tears. While conference delegates had been discussing ways to call forth youth, the youthful Reinhart paid tribute to the delegates for their special vocation in Catholic health care.

One of the challenges facing Catholic health care today is the need to groom a new generation of mission-centered leaders who have never seen the example of the sisters nor had the benefit of being mentored by them.

An innovation at this year’s convention was the introduction by CHAC CEO, Gerard Lewis, of “*Communities of Practice*” (CoP) networking meetings involving leaders from seven different areas of health care: Human Resources, Communications, Boards, CEOs, Ethics, Spiritual Care, and Mission. Each CoP provided an opportunity for peers to dialogue with peers from across Canada, to share resources and to discuss strategies for attracting talented young people into Catholic health care.

While every Catholic health organization has a unique history and charism, and some are large, multi-site, state-of-the-art, urban organizations while others are tiny, rural out-posts, they all share common ground in the healing mission of Jesus and they all face recruitment challenges in most areas of staffing.

“When people think of health care, they tend to think only of doctors and nurses,” said Lewis, “but today’s health care encompasses a myriad of other jobs. For instance, a young person skilled in telecommunications can play a huge role in providing compassionate health care.”

The link between Catholic values and careers in Catholic health care is a message Lewis hopes will permeate Catholic parishes, school systems, universities and colleges so that young people will see the diverse possibilities for making a contribution in Catholic health care. The same holds true for theology graduates who may not fully realize the need for spiritual care providers and ethicists and for mission leaders who help deepen the mission and values and spirituality of Catholic health organizations.

Closing Keynote Speaker, Franciscan Friar, Dr. Daniel Sulmasy, noted that the despondent disciples on the road to Emmaus had not initially recognized Jesus as he walked with them. Sulmasy is Professor of Medicine and Director of the Bioethics Institute of New York Medical College and author of *The Healer’s Calling*.

Sulmasy encouraged delegates to rediscover their sense of calling as Catholic health care providers and to convey their values to the community. Sulmasy warned that people feel

alienated when the mission of the founding sisters is replaced with a focus on the latest technology and efficiency. "We must remind lay Catholic health care professionals that their baptismal vows actually had to have meaning in the workplace."

"Those who can see their service to the sick as ministry may finally become humble enough to recognize that they are not gods, and respectful enough to recognize in their patients the face of the divine," said Sulmasy. Catholic health care gives witness to the healing mission of Jesus and at the same time helps open our eyes to encountering Jesus himself in every person we meet. "I was sick and you cared for me." (*Matthew 25.*)

Delegates were sent forth in a missioning ceremony to "boldly follow, courageously become, and generously share the Light of Christ." Inviting youth to consider a vocation of service in Catholic health care is a crucial piece of enhancing the rich legacy of Catholic health care that Canadians have inherited from the past.

Information about the Catholic Health Association of Canada and links to member organizations can be found at [www.chac.ca](http://www.chac.ca). Steve Hill is director of mission for the Alberta Catholic Health Corporation in Edmonton. He can be reached at [steve@achc.ab.ca](mailto:steve@achc.ab.ca)