St. Joseph's Hospital & the TB Outbreak

FORMATION INNOVATION PODCAST: Courageous Paths of Hope & Healing Series

March 19th, 2020, marked a significant milestone for St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix, AZ: the hospital's 125th birthday. While things have changed during the past century, it is interesting how the issues our communities face are similar.

When the Sisters of Mercy arrived in Phoenix, AZ, their plan was to build a school for children. What they found was a community suffering from tuberculosis and a smallpox outbreak. Imagine the irony of not knowing exactly how to treat TB and smallpox. Doctors thought the combination of sunlight, citrus, and fresh air was the best treatment. There was a lack of supplies, linen, and workers to run the small, six-room hospital. Many in the community helped by providing food staples and support.

A typical day for the Sisters included a 12-hour shift, many times longer, with no days off. They slept in the living room of the small cottage that was converted to a makeshift hospital, prayed in the early morning hours, and worked to comfort the sick. Most of the patients died; very few were healed. The Sisters made a promise that no one would die alone or in pain. Even then, the Sisters were living our mission: making the healing presence of God known, by improving the health of those they were called to serve, especially the vulnerable.

One hundred twenty- five years later, St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center and CommonSpirit Health are navigating similar terrain. We know very little about this virus, and have much to learn. However, we take comfort in knowing that we are not alone; we have a vibrant and faithful heritage from which we can draw upon, not only now, but every day.

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