

# Vision Born Out of Disaster

## Disaster Strikes

It was a hot muggy Tuesday afternoon—August 21, 1883. The sky in the Midwestern United States was ominous. Black billowy storm clouds moved from west to east across the open plains.

In one particular community, the barometer dropped two inches in a matter of a few minutes. A tornado came sweeping through town around six thirty in the afternoon. The northern part of the town was decimated. Property damage was extensive. Dozens of people were killed and hundreds were injured. Telegraph communication was cut off. The town was isolated from civilization and had no emergency services—no paramedics, no ambulances, no emergency clinics, and no hospitals. The injured were taken to various homes, churches, businesses, and other facilities that had been spared the destructive wrath of the storm. There were no nurses, only a handful of country doctors trying to care for the injured and dying.

The search for storm victims continued through the night by lantern. Limited telegraph communication was finally established and a message requesting help was sent to the governor. In the meantime, the residents of this rural community had to help themselves.

The city leaders quickly realized the need for an emergency hospital and a head physician to oversee operations. Rommel's Dance Hall seemed to be the best facility and the most able country doctor, a man named William, received the charge from the city fathers to lead the emergency care activities. Though William was a capable and trained country physician when many doctors were not, he had no experience running a hospital, particularly an emergency hospital. He had no protocols, very little equipment, and almost no medicine. Worst of all, he had no trained nurses. So in addition to caring for victims, William had to simultaneously establish protocols, procure equipment and medicine, and train nurses.

He needed women who could devote their full attention to tending the patients. Most of the women in town were occupied with their own homes and families, so William turned to a group of teachers. No one in this group was married—they were nuns who had taken religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Furthermore, the timing was good because the teachers were on summer break.

America in the late nineteenth century was not friendly to Roman Catholics. Hence, William—a protestant—had to overcome some internal angst to ask for help from the nuns, but circumstances required him to subordinate his personal prejudice for the well-being of the injured. William met with their mother superior, a fifty-five-year-old woman named Maria Moes. The conversation between William and Maria was quick and easy. She readily agreed to help and immediately dispatched women to the makeshift hospital for nursing duty.

The teachers swiftly learned the nursing trade and proved to be very capable and dedicated. In a short period of time, aid came from surrounding communities. With the additional aid and their own hard work, William and the nurses ably facilitated the recovery of the survivors. The emergency hospital discharged its last patient before the New Year. William returned to being a country doctor and the community slowly rebuilt.

Maria Moes had found a new friend in William and was forever changed by the experience. She recognized the desperate need for ongoing hospital care, not just for emergencies, but also for everyday life. A vision had been planted in her heart.

### Maria's Vision

Until her work in the emergency hospital in 1883, Maria had no special experience in health care. Born in Luxembourg in 1828 into a middle class family, she was the youngest of eight children. For a woman of her time, she was well educated, including attending boarding school in Paris. During her time in Paris she heard a man from the United States speak about life in his country. At age twenty-two, she and her sister, Catherine, embarked on a journey to the United States.

Maria arrived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1850. Her early years in the States were spent learning English as she developed her skill as a teacher. Notwithstanding her teaching skills, she was equally able as a business administrator and leader. In fact, her skill was so outstanding that it engendered jealousy from others from time to time throughout her life. On more than one occasion, she was terminated and experienced discrimination because of the jealousy of superiors. Nevertheless, she never spoke ill of those who unjustly expressed their envy toward her.

In 1878, Maria started a school in the Midwest. Despite meager provisions, the school easily attracted students and teachers because of her commitment to excellence. The school grew and prospered under her competent leadership, dedication, and sacrifice.

The events of August 21, 1883 surprised everyone, except the Lord who orchestrates all events. Little did Maria know that the events of that day would define the rest of her life. Like the biblical character Esther, Maria walked into a situation divinely ordained and orchestrated for her—it was her “such a time as this”<sup>1</sup> moment.

Her experience as an integral part of the emergency relief of the town profoundly touched Maria. As she reflected on the temporary hospital's effectiveness, she realized the value a permanent hospital—providing care for everyday problems—would have. After much prayer, she determined that God was calling her to start a hospital. Yes, it seemed strange that a schoolteacher and administrator with minimum health care experience would establish a hospital, but she was convinced that God was calling her to do it.

### An Interesting Collaboration

Maria paid a visit to William to discuss the idea of starting a hospital. The ever-gracious William kindly listened to Maria's idea, but was very skeptical. He had four major problems with the idea. Number one, his own experience with hospitals had not been good. When he emigrated from England, he had worked in a hospital and witnessed the poor care that was typical of that time. Because of the lack of treatment protocols and poor understanding of medical science, hospital care was generally not efficacious for healing. Instead hospitals during the nineteenth century were places of death. Number two, the cost to build even a small hospital was enormous. How could Maria raise the capital, particularly when her main resource base was a group of teacher-nuns committed to poverty? Number three, other than William's experience with the emergency hospital, he had little experience and knowledge of hospital operations, including surgery and treatment protocols. And number four, the Midwest community where they lived was not large enough to support a hospital.

The conversation between Maria and William that day was cordial, but William could not hide his doubts. Maria, however, would not be deterred. As William raised his objections, Maria would counter. First, she told William that the hospital would provide outstanding care. It would be a place of life not death. Second, she committed to raising the money herself. When William told her that she would need \$40,000—an enormous sum in that day—she did not waver. Third, the issue of medical experience was of no concern to Maria; she had steadfast confidence in William. All she needed was William's commitment to manage the hospital if she built it. And fourth, Maria was convinced that a world-class hospital would draw patients from the neighboring communities; hence, the hospital's success was not totally dependent on the local community. The conversation ended that day when out of the kindness of his heart William agreed to help Maria, but deep down he did not believe Maria would be able to raise the requisite capital.

During the next five years, Maria and her fellow teachers lived very meagerly and worked extra jobs to raise the money for the hospital. Finally, much to William's shock and dismay, sixty-year-old Maria had the \$40,000. She had made good on her part of the deal; now sixty-eight-year-old William had to make good on his—he had to figure out how to design and operate a hospital.

### The Vision Moves Forward

Maria and William found nine acres of land west of town—close enough for easy access to William's office in town, but away from the hustle and bustle of the town. They agreed on the site and Maria procured the property.

William began to study hospital design. He traveled the world visiting hospitals, seeking the best design ideas as well as the best practices. He worked closely with Maria to design the hospital, along with the help of his two sons Charlie and Will, who were also physicians.

Maria issued a contract to build the hospital based on William's design. Over the years, Maria had gained considerable experience in building construction. She wisely insisted on a performance bond. Two prominent local citizens issued the surety bond. They would later regret this commitment when the contractor abandoned the project and the bondsmen had to step up to their obligation. But they honored their commitment and completed the project on schedule.

The facility opened on September 30, 1889, with accommodations for twenty-seven patients. Immediately, the first surgery was successfully conducted—the removal of cancer from a patient's eye. William served as advisor to his two sons who performed the surgery.

### Countering Popular Perspective

Though William developed a clear biblically based operational philosophy, he had minimum experience, and what experience he had was not favorable. In 1845 at the age of twenty-five, his first job after arriving in America had been at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. Bellevue was a dismal place. It was a charity hospital and an insane asylum, which meant that it catered to the poor. Many of the nursing staff were incarcerated people who were untrained as nurses; hence, patient care was rough and unsympathetic. William observed that Bellevue was a place for dying, not a place for healing.

Indeed the general view of hospitals during the nineteenth century was negative. There were few hospitals, and training for hospital personnel was lacking. There were few schools and textbooks, almost no curriculum, and no standards for hospital training. Treatment protocols were primitive due to a poor understanding of medical science. Generally the only equipment that a doctor had was a thermometer and a hypodermic needle. Most treatment protocols involved medication and rest. Surgery usually was limited to the amputation of limbs. There were few protocols for the severely ill. Hospitals had little to offer other than a place to die. As a result hospitals enjoyed a very poor reputation.

Countering popular perspective is always difficult. Maria's idea of a hospital that would deliver excellent health care was definitely counterculture, which was the reason William was so dubious of her ideas. Except for the relational bond that William and Maria had forged while working together in the emergency hospital, William would never have overcome his objections to Maria's ideas, including his prejudice against her for being Roman Catholic. But William put aside his professional and personal concerns and agreed to oversee the operations of the hospital.

Maria's fund-raising effort took four years of hard work and sacrifice. Along the way, William could see that Maria was determined to build this hospital that arguably no one wanted. Since the medical community did not value hospitals, William's commitment was the only hope Maria had of making this a success. In other words, "If you build it they will come" was not an operating assumption. Maria knew that William's support was the key to the success of the hospital. Hence, in addition to raising the money to

build the hospital, she was determined to do everything she could to help him develop the operational policies and procedures.

## A Biblical Worldview and Key Operating Principles

Not only did William take seriously the responsibility for designing the hospital, but also, despite limited experience with hospitals, he wisely established the key operating principles. Whether he knew it or not, these key principles were gleaned from a biblical worldview.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps much of this thinking came from the physicist John Dalton who had tutored William during his teenage years. Dalton, the father of atomic theory, was a solid Christian—so committed that many of his peers shunned him. Nevertheless, he developed a significant understanding of physics, chemistry, and even medicine. William thrived under his tutelage and was profoundly impacted. In large measure, Dalton's influence helped to shape William's thinking regarding the operating philosophy of the hospital. It can be summarized as follows:

- The God who created the universe is loving and self-consistent.<sup>3</sup>
- God created predictable discoverable laws to govern the universe.
- Man's job is to master these laws for the betterment of mankind.<sup>4</sup>
- God is separate from His creation.

Corollaries of this biblical philosophy were the operating principles. Some examples of these principles are as follows:

- The best interest of the patient is the only interest to be considered.
- Patients are to be holistically treated.
- Care is given to all regardless of race, color, creed, or finances.
- Finding and practicing the best health care techniques is a core principle.
- The combined wisdom of one's peers is greater than any individual's wisdom.<sup>5</sup>

## The Hospital Staff

One of the key elements of any hospital is its staff. Given the dearth of hospital training in nineteenth-century America, Maria and William knew they would have to provide on-the-job training. A number of Maria's fellow teachers volunteered to staff the hospital. They would do everything—meal preparation, maid service, laundry, janitorial work, tend the gardens, nursing, assist with surgery, general maintenance, security, operation of the heating plant, and so forth. Maria and William developed all the operational policies and procedures and then trained the staff.

Maria and her teaching colleagues were a wonderful source of labor for the hospital largely because of the biblically based value system they shared in common with each other, as well as with William. Some of their key values were:

- Compassion
- Mercy
- Sacrifice
- Strong work ethic
- Submission to authority
- Service
- Personal calling
- Loyalty
- Excellence
- Trust
- Efficiency
- Hope
- Stewardship
- Learning
- Responsibility to give back
- Teamwork
- Respect for all
- Holistic living
- Dedication
- Commitment
- Honesty/truth

As a result of the biblical philosophy, values, and principles, the staff of the hospital was outstanding. The teachers learned health care quickly and were tireless workers who willingly sacrificed for the good of the patients. Soon the doctors recognized the skill of their newly trained nurses in diagnosing problems. There were few diagnostic tools in those days. Observation of patients was one of the most effective methods. The nurses excelled as astute observers and greatly assisted the doctors even in medical matters.

### Worldwide Research and the Results

The existence of a hospital—which by all rights should not exist—committed to excellence located in a small rural community in the upper Midwest challenged the local medical community. None of the doctors had significant hospital experience, so how were they to use such a facility to work toward healing instead of dying? They knew nothing about proper protocols, processes, and policies. The doctors were not accustomed to a hospital as a healing institution. Now they had to discover, pragmatically and collaboratively, how to use this marvelous asset to best serve their patients. To that end William encouraged his sons to travel the world seeking the best means and methods of health care.

The brothers' research showed the importance of surgical procedures as tools to facilitate physical healing. From the beginning, the hospital's doctors were committed to world-class care, including surgical care.

Because of the doctors' and staff's commitment to biblical philosophy, values, and principles, the hospital's reputation grew rapidly. Soon patients were coming from all over the United States and eventually from all over the world. Additions to the hospital began to take place at a rapid pace. To accommodate this demand required more staff and doctors.

### Medical Specialists

William and his sons began to search for other physicians to join them in working at the hospital. They sought colleagues who showed adeptness in medicine consistent with the world-class status that the hospital was achieving.

With this growth a new concept was developed—medical specialists. William and his sons recognized both the strengths and weaknesses of specialists. The strength was the expertise that a specialist could develop and the weakness was the ego and independence of a specialist. To mitigate the potential weakness of the specialists and to maximize the value of care for the patient, they developed the concept of an integrated medical record and the process of collaborative work. By organizing the requisite medical specialists as a team for each case, the doctors would set aside egos and deliver the highest quality medical care available. The integrated medical record meant that all information about a patient was kept in one place and made available to everyone on the team.

### Facts and Fruits Unveiled

Against all odds, Maria and William built a world-class medical facility in a rural town in the upper Midwest. At the foundation of this organization was a biblical worldview, that is, biblical philosophy, values, and principles.

*What was the name of the hospital?* The hospital was named Saint Mary's Hospital.

*Who were the teachers who sacrificed everything to build and operate the hospital?* A group of teachers assembled by Maria Moes known as the Sisters of Saint Francis.

*Where was the hospital located?* It was built on nine acres in the quaint, unassuming town of Rochester, Minnesota.

*And who were William and his two sons Will and Charlie?* They were country doctors who became world-renowned and operated the Mayo Clinic.

Saint Mary's Hospital and the Mayo Clinic partnered together to deliver world-class health care for nearly one hundred years. The fruit of the biblical worldview that Saint Mary's and the Mayo Clinic experienced was innovation, excellence, and sustained success.

Consider, for example, the following innovations that are almost universally used in health care today, which were pioneered by the hospital and the Mayo Clinic:

- Laboratory analysis as a diagnostic tool, including blood and urine analysis
- X-ray technology as a diagnostic tool
- Surgery as a tool to promote healing
- Holistic patient treatment
- Physician specialists working in equally yoked teams to deliver care to patients
- Electronic nurse call system
- Dossier based patient medical records

Furthermore, a biblical worldview led the hospital and Mayo Clinic to provide service to all in need—regardless of color, creed, or finances.

Interestingly, this unwavering partnership was never formally documented. The partnership was built on the trust of a handshake.

In 1986, the assets of Saint Mary’s Hospital and the Mayo Clinic were merged to form the Mayo Foundation. The institution continues today delivering world-class health care in the tradition of the biblical philosophy, values, and principles that moved in the heart of Maria Moes and William Mayo more than one hundred years ago.

The Mayo Foundation is a living testimony of what can be done when people believe in personal destiny and refuse to be denied that destiny. It is a testimony to how God uses circumstances—sometimes difficult circumstances such as tornados—to create personal relational bonds and to instill vision in our hearts. It is a testimony to the reality that enduring world-class organizations are built based on a biblical worldview, that is, biblical philosophy, values, and principles. After all, there is no other foundation that can or will deliver multi-generational excellence.

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Reference material for this article was found in the following sources:

- Ellen Whelan, “The Sisters’ Story,” Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 2002.
- Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).
- <http://www.mayoclinic.org/tradition-heritage/> December 2006.

1. Esther 4:14.
2. The biblical worldview that enabled William to build a world-class medical facility was contrary to Aristotle’s view, which was popular even among Christians for centuries. Some of the key assumptions that enabled William to develop his philosophy, values and principles were:
  - The universe was created by the God of the Bible.
  - Knowledge can be both deduced *and* empirically induced.
  - God is separate from His creation.
  - God is unchangeable; hence the principles of the universe are both universal and unchangeable.
3. “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17 NIV).
4. “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28 NIV).
5. “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed” (Proverbs 15:22 NIV).