Who Will Save America's Urban Catholic Schools?

EDITED BY *Scott W. Hamilton*

FOREWORD BY *Chester E. Finn, Jr.* AND *Michael J. Petrilli*

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Revitalization of Diocesan "Jubilee" Schools

By Peter Meyer

When you spot a rushing white SUV with a license plate that says "Support Catholic Schools" and a bumper sticker that proclaims, "Miracles Happen," you better slow down or get out of the way. The driver, Dr. Mary McDonald, is on a mission to educate the disadvantaged, and she gave up slowing down for slackers a long time ago.

In fact, if you're in the passenger seat with McDonald driving, you'd better hang on. The vehicle barrels through the city that is home to Federal Express and has a history that includes slave traders, Elvis Presley, and the Lorraine Motel. McDonald talks about miracles and money. She'll first tell you how, just after being appointed Director of Education for this sprawling west Tennessee Catholic Diocese in 1998, with orders from the Bishop to reopen shuttered downtown Memphis parochial schools, she was shown a crucifix without arms. "I had never seen such a thing," says McDonald, who immediately took it as a sign from God. Her guide told her that the crucifix meant "I had to be the arms of Christ." And she'll also tell you how, after working tirelessly for a year trying to raise awareness about the need to reopen Catholic schools in impoverished downtown Memphis and wondering how she could possibly find the money to do so, she received a phone call from a local, non-Catholic businessman who wanted to contribute $10 million to the effort.

The public sector could learn a lot about education excellence if it recognized the core truth of McDonald's lifelong work: miracles come not only to those who believe, but also to those who work at it. "No one stole Catholic schools from the inner city," says the life-long Catholic and Philadelphia native who has lived in Memphis since 1976. "We simply left them in the dust as the Catholic population shifted away from the urban areas." Nearly a dozen parish schools in downtown Memphis had closed since the 1960s. And the three diocese-supported high schools in Memphis were beginning to feel the strain of less enrollment (and revenue) from the loss of their feeder elementary schools.

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There were 6,800 students in seventeen schools in the Memphis Diocese in 1998, when McDonald took over. Now there are 8,500 in 28 schools. And the increase has come almost exclusively from her efforts to reopen abandoned schools, aptly called Jubilee Schools. The "Memphis Miracle," as it has been dubbed, is a tale about defying demographics, believing in what is possible, having faith in a powerful idea, and working hard. And unlike so many public schools that may lack faith even in the academic abilities of disadvantaged children of color,

Memphis Catholics, with Mary McDonald's considerable leadership, have kept hope alive.

McDonald has overseen the reopening of eight Jubilee elementary schools in some of the poorest neighborhoods in America – while managing the affairs of Catholic education in the rest of the diocese. And she has had to break the mold in doing it. The Catholic schools in the "rest of the diocese" (where most of the students and schools are) operate as they have for over a century in America – local parishes open, manage, and pay for them. Yet in much of downtown Memphis, Catholic parishes could barely afford to keep their churches open, much less support a school. And while Catholic schools in the rest of the diocese catered to the sons and daughters of Catholics, in downtown Memphis most of the potential students are sons and daughters of non-Catholics with little or no money.

McDonald mounted an effort in downtown Memphis that was more like that of early missionaries converting a foreign country than tending a backyard garden. She regularly quotes Washington, D.C.'s former Cardinal James Hickey, who said "We educate the poor not because they are Catholic, but because we are."

McDonald put together a multi-million dollar marketing and fundraising operation that subsidizes everything from tuition to food to uniforms for the 1,400 children now attending the "new" Jubilee schools. Tuition at the reopened diocesan schools, like at the rest of the diocesan schools, is already a bargain: $3,800 per year for Catholics and $4,450 for non-Catholics in grades prekindergarten to six, and $4,000 and $4,725 per year in seventh and eighth grades. The cost of a public education in Memphis is over $6,500 per pupil, and over 90 percent of it is paid for with "scholarships" from a special Jubilee nonprofit organization McDonald established. (There are no Jubilee high schools yet, but McDonald has plans to allow Jubilee scholarships to follow students to one of these secondary schools, where tuition is $5,175 per year for Catholics and $6,125 for non-Catholics.) The Jubilee fund now boasts an endowment of some $50 million, which tantalizingly suggests something new: endowed diocesan schools.

Lay Reinvention

"When the priests and nuns left the schools," McDonald explains, "Catholic schools and those who benefited from them were devastated. It has been mostly lay people who have kept the schools alive. But we've had to reinvent them." And reopen them, she might have said.

Both reinventing and reopening schools have involved an unusual blend of sacred and secular. But it's not just fundraising among non-Catholics that is key to the Memphis miracle; it's a reorientation of decades-old institutional habits, organizational and spiritual.

Both reinventing and reopening schools have involved an unusual blend of sacred and secular. But it's not just fundraising among non-Catholics that is key to the Memphis miracle; it's a reorientation of decades-old institutional habits, organizational and spiritual. For instance, McDonald has introduced, out of necessity it might be said, the ecumenical spirit in teacher and student recruitment. In the new Jubilee Catholic schools, 30 percent of teachers and administrators are from "other faith traditions," as are 81 percent of the students, 86 percent of whom are black. And it is important to note that Dr. McDonald takes the distinction between "non-Catholic" and "other faith traditions" seriously. "We don't care that you're not Catholic," she says matter-of-factly, "but you have

to believe in our mission, which is to educate these children in the Catholic manner." That means that each teacher is expected to "bring Christ to the students and bring the students to Christ."

This does not mean the diocese skips reading, writing, math, or science. In fact, the Church's Canon Law (the rule for Catholics the world over), Section 806, paragraph 2, says that "Directors of Catholic schools are to take care under the watchfulness of the local ordinary that the instruction which is given in them is at least as academically distinguished as that in the other schools of the area."

"I'm an educator," says McDonald, who was a teacher and school principal in Catholic schools, mostly in Memphis, for 20-plus years before being appointed director of education and superintendent of schools for the Memphis diocese. She has a Ph.D. in Leadership and Policy Studies from University of Memphis, as well as an instinctive sense of efficiency and a distaste for waste. In a near-perfect rejection of standard public school improvement techniques, McDonald has increased school enrollment by 25 percent without increasing administrative costs. Her entire administrative staff still consists of an assistant superintendent, two administrative assistants, and a part-time grant writer and maintenance supervisor, who also doubles as an elementary school principal.

Reinventing Catholic education has not been easy. The parish-support model, which relied on the neighborhood or parish constituency to cover the majority of the costs of the school, could not work in economically devastated neighborhoods. And the annual "Bishop's Appeal," which asked richer parishes to contribute to their less fortunate brethren, was simply not enough to sustain schools that had no parish support whatsoever.

The traditional business model for Catholic schools took stable demographics – and a near militaristic enforcement of Catholic support for schools – for granted. In the past, says McDonald, there just wasn't much planning or budgeting. "The schools lived year to year – because they could." Today, in addition to the intense, ecumenical fundraising efforts on behalf of the Jubilee schools and their ecumenical staff and student body, the diocese now has a business plan for its schools that extends several years into the future. McDonald has also put in place a "Teacher/Principal Incentive Program" that makes no-interest loans to any teacher, principal, or teaching assistant who wishes to return to school for certification or advanced degrees – as a way to shore up the system's instructional base. The program includes grants to schools to implement innovative, teacher-designed programs as well as cash incentives for publishing professional reports and stipends for joining leadership programs. McDonald says the program has been a great success, contributing to a decrease in turnover in the diocesan teacher ranks.

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McDonald also created a leadership academy, so that the diocese could train its own school leaders. The first year the academy graduated sixteen future administrators; the following year nine of them were either principals or assistant principals in diocesan schools.

The diocese also partners with the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) at the University of Notre Dame and thereby receives several teachers a year who are working on their master's degree; it has a similar agreement with Christian Brothers University in Memphis through its Lasallian Association of New Catholic Educators (LANCE) program. Among LANCE's "core" values are educating the poor and underserved, which is also the center of Jubilee's mission.

"We're heavy into leadership," says McDonald, "creating it, promoting it, celebrating it." Principals at each diocesan school, including Jubilee schools, are expected to manage their own budgets (totals for Jubilee schools are set by McDonald and her staff, and range from $600,000 to $1 million) and do their own hiring and firing. In many ways, this is a reworked version of an ancient Catholic tradition – subsidiarity – and similar to the site-based management in the public and business sectors. While many non-Catholics believe that the papists walk lockstep behind the robed man in Rome, the Church in fact believes – and practices – that the central authority delegates decision-making to the lowest competent authority. Applying modern business practices to the paradigm, McDonald created leadership teams for everything from curriculum to public relations and development.

Members of the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Leadership Team, for example, were directed to meet with teachers throughout the school system. One of their more interesting findings, McDonald explains, was that despite the fact that average pay was about $10,000 a year less than in the public system, "teaching in a Catholic school is a vocation, a calling rather than just a job."

McDonald used this finding to emphasize the importance of mission to the Catholic school community as she spread the Jubilee word on the Web, on the radio and in video, in booths at community events, and at job fairs. "For those who are not Catholic," says McDonald, "there was the assurance that their chosen way home to God is always respected." The team made a video that was sent to colleges and companies to show workers approaching retirement and to "hundreds of friends of the schools."

It worked. "The advantages of the Catholic system for teachers," says Jamie Bremmer, who has taught at a Jubilee school since 2002, "are the discipline, the smaller class size, and the spirituality."

Surrounded by Failure

A big part of what makes the Memphis Miracle possible – and, in the Church's eyes, necessary – is the failure of the city's public school system. With 120,000 students (and falling) and 190 schools, Memphis has the 21st largest public school system in the country. And it is one of the worst, with a reported graduation rate of 65 percent (apt to be much lower in fact) and 58 of its schools failing to meet NCLB proficiency benchmarks. "And that number would probably be closer to 100," says George Lord, director of research at Partners in Public Education, a Memphis nonprofit dedicated to improving the public schools. "If it weren't for the 'safe harbor' provisions of NCLB, which discount actual proficiency levels for such things as improvement rates, it would be much worse."

Memphis also lives with its charged racial heritage. Unlike cities in the Northeast, whose schools were crippled by deindustrialization, Memphis was shattered by the civil rights revolution. It took more than a decade for resistance to *Brown v. Board of Education* to disappear, says Steven Ross, who directs the Center for Research & Education Policy (CREP) at the University of Memphis. "But then people just left. There was a lot of white flight." And even then, as history records, the city bears the scars of the death of Martin Luther King, who was in Memphis to support striking African American sanitation workers and assassinated there on April 4, 1968.

Many churches took advantage of the opposition to integration by starting their own private schools. Though nominally open to blacks, most of these schools were segregated – and most were successful. Today, says Ross, Memphis has some 65 private schools and ten independent school organizations, giving it one of the healthiest private education sectors in the land. These schools are, for the most part, white – as is the area's second largest public school system, Shelby County, which has 45,000 students. Memphis City Schools, however, has become increasingly black and disadvantaged; it is 86 percent black and 70 percent of its students qualify for the federal Free-and-Reduced-Lunch program.

There have been attempts at reform, including millions of federal dollars for New American Schools "design adoption" by schools, but they produced few and fleeting achievement increases. Ten charter schools have opened in the last four years (Tennessee did not allow charters until 2002), with several more on the way. According to a study conducted by the University of Memphis's Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP), there have been "mostly positive" results in both academic achievement and parent satisfaction at most of the charters, but with only 2,000 students served out of Memphis's 120,000 the charters are unlikely to have a huge impact anytime soon.

In 2003, Carol Johnson came to Memphis as superintendent of the city's school system, following a well-regarded term as head of Minneapolis public schools and bringing with her an engaging enthusiasm for change. Yet little changed during her tenure, which was brief. In 2007, Boston wooed her away to run its public schools. Adding insult to injury, Johnson left in her wake a major operational scandal, characterized by Education Week in a front-page story in early January 2008, as arising from "mounting questions about lucrative, no-bid contracts awarded to busing companies."

"Especially in Memphis, Catholic schools are not simply competition," says Greg Thompson, education program officer at the Hyde Foundation, a big supporter of the Jubilee effort. "They are also ways to illustrate what works, what is possible in places and with people where lots of people have given up hope."

A Bishop's Vision

"When I became Bishop, in 1993, I was shocked that our schools were closing," says Memphis Bishop J. Terry Steib. "I thought, that's not the Church's way. Catholic schools are meant to make a difference in people's lives. They are the primary vehicle for evangelization." An African American who grew up poor in Louisiana, Steib had always wanted to be an African missionary. Even now, after fourteen years at the helm in Memphis, Steib says, "If I had my druthers, I'd be in Africa."

But the Church is still not particularly druthers-oriented and Steib has had to apply his missionary zeal to inner-city Memphis. "It is the mission of the Church to be places where others aren't," he notes, as if bemused to think he chose a white woman from Philadelphia, now a grandmother, to wade back into the meanest, blackest areas of Memphis.

"It was daunting," McDonald recalls. "I just went out and started talking to anyone who would listen – even those who didn't – about the value of and need for Catholic schools."

That first year, says McDonald, "all I saw were silos, individual schools that didn't see each other." She also saw that the 80-year-old Memphis Catholic High, in downtown Memphis, was on the brink of closing. "We had closed all the feeder schools. Naturally, it's going to fail. Why didn't anyone think of that?"

Since it was now McDonald's job to reopen those feeder schools, the bishop, over objections, decided to keep the high school open. Eventually, the diocese would raise a million dollars for renovations. Meanwhile, McDonald kept talking, promoting the value of Catholic schools on the one hand and entreating any Memphian she encountered to contribute to the cause of reopening inner city schools – not for the Church, but for the children.

Some of the stiffest resistance to her efforts came from the parishioners themselves, those whose schools had been closed. "The people who were left were still angry," recalls McDonald. "They felt they had been abandoned by the Church when it failed to come in and help them save their schools and were not sure they wanted to trust the diocese to reopen them."

Yet it was a new Church with a radical new mission: to bring education to mostly non-Catholics. They could not reverse the demographic trends and bring the white Catholics back. But they could, thought Steib and McDonald, bring the Church back to needy neighborhoods. "These were among the poorest zip codes in America," says McDonald. And the playgrounds at the schools she was told to reopen had become hangouts for drug pushers, prostitutes, and gangs.

"I knew I had to just get one school open," she recalls. "If I could just get one school open, I could show that it was possible – and I would surprise the bishop."

McDonald set her sights on St. Augustine's in south Memphis, which had only closed in 1995 and whose facility, built in 1939, was in decent shape. The parish was, in fact, established for black Catholics and its school won three city football championships in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when it had over 600 African American students and was one of the largest Catholic grammar schools in the state. (Though integration would come to Memphis Catholic schools a little easier than to the city's public schools, it was still not until 1963 that the local Christian Brothers Academy, a high school, admitted its first black student.)

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In time, however, St. Augustine succumbed to poverty and crime, which engulfed the Calvary Cemetery neighborhood and chased even the black middle class families away. By 1994, the school had only eighteen students enrolled.

Still, McDonald estimated that it would take less than $50,000 to renovate the still sturdy building, and just twice that sum to put a kindergarten class there, with teachers and a principal. However, since the parish was poor and most of the prospective students would be non-Catholic and poor, McDonald knew that the school would need a full scholarship program, which would require donations in order to work. She did not want a big and flashy opening, but she wanted a beachhead. She wanted to get a class of children being taught in the Catholic way – integrating a Christ-like life into all aspects of a school – to show what was possible. She knew that the educational need was there. But where was the money?

Then came the miracle.

Philanthropy Makes It Happen

On May 7, 1999, McDonald got a phone call from a local businessman who wanted to meet her to hear her ideas on education. "I met with him that day and we talked for a couple hours," she says. "Later that same day he called and invited me to meet with him and another businessman and their attorney to discuss possibilities. I met that afternoon, late in the day. I went back to the office after the second meeting and told the bishop that if he wanted to reopen St. Augustine, I just found a way." When she presented to her anonymous benefactor the plan for reopening St. Augustine, she said that renovation, startup, and operational costs for five years would be about a million dollars. The donor said he would give $10 million.

McDonald quickly went back to the drawing board and worked feverishly – and in secret – on a plan to reopen six schools. It was front-page news in Memphis on July 15, 1999, and for the next two weeks McDonald was a constant presence on local radio and television stations, talking about the miracle. As she told the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, "I know a miracle when I see one. These donors wanted to invest in the education of the children in Memphis living in poverty; those children and families underserved and undereducated for generations. They wanted to save our city. They wanted to provide a way out of poverty through education, and they concluded that to do that, the best investment was in Catholic education."

One of the first meetings that McDonald convened after the May 7 phone call was with the pastors of the parishes earmarked for school reopening. "The bishop wanted to tell them himself," recalls McDonald. "These were parishes with 80 parishioners, no money, an average age of 80. It was like six old men sat down at the table that day and six young ones got up. They couldn't believe it. They were rejuvenated. They knew what this would do for the neighborhood."

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The $10 million, according to McDonald's plan, would reopen six inner-city schools, but it would be on a staggered schedule, one or two a year, each starting with kindergarten and adding a grade a year until the exit grade. "Starting small and deliberate would allow us time to monitor and adjust to ensure success."

By the time the day came to apply for St. Augustine's on August 1, the line stretched around the block. "The first lady in that line was crying," McDonald recalls. "She was saying, 'I just can't leave my baby in those other schools.'"

But despite the application demand at St. Augustine, McDonald was so determined to get it right that first year that she reopened the school with just six students.

McDonald and her staff quickly worked out the kinks and were able to reopen future Jubilee schools with more students and more grades. Still, the challenges were great.

In the context of running a school, this need to "keep them safe and keep them alive," as McDonald explains it, has meant adjusting the enrollment goals downward. "We have long waiting lists at each of our schools and I would love to add more classes," she says. "But we have to succeed as schools." That means making tough decisions about whom to admit, a process that involves the

One of the toughest reopenings for McDonald, who is a small and slender grandmother, was Jubilee's sixth school, at the Holy Names parish, in the center of one of the city's most blighted neighborhoods. The school had been closed for 37 years. The shadows of its mostly empty building and playground had become an attractive gathering place for prostitutes and drug dealers. It was a scary place, McDonald recalled. But the diocese reopened Holy Names School in 2002 in a fighting mood, with grades three to six instead of just a single class of kindergartners. Today, it has 91 students in grades three through eight. "With the school reopened, it forces people in the neighborhood to see the children," says McDonald. "The drug dealers now stay away. So do the prostitutes." The parish itself is also coming back. Having been without a priest for years, two clerics now live in the parish house.

Inside the solid red brick Holy Names school building, it's all business – and probably much quieter with 90 instead of the 400 students it once schooled. Sister Donna Banfield, a sweet-smiling black nun from Harlem, who is with the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, wears a gray and white scarf and floor-length grey and white robes. She notes that the children that come to Holy Names are two and three years behind in all their subjects, "functionally illiterate," she says, "even though they've already had five and six years of public schooling." This was a rescue operation.

Jamie Bremmer taught at Catholic high schools for thirteen years before coming to Holy Names the year it opened. "It was an opportunity to be involved in this movement and help build a school from the ground up." All that was left of this ravaged neighborhood, in fact, was the old school building. "I really learned the absolute necessity of creating relationships with kids," says Bremmer. "They come from a world in which they can trust nobody. They don't have the safety net of family that middle class people do. For them, it really is 'I don't care how much you know until I know how much you care.'"

principal, teachers, and McDonald. "We require some parental commitments," says McDonald, "but we are not skimming – all of these kids are extremely needy."

The diocese is mindful that what they need most of all is an education. In fact, as Janet Donato reminds us, that's the Canon Law directive. "We have to be equal to or better than the local community schools academically," she says. "It's not enough to just teach religion."

Thus McDonald built Jubilee schools mostly one grade at a time, one child at a time, with academic excellence firmly in mind. And along with the extended day and eleven-month school year, the schools offer after-school tutoring twice a week for children who need the extra help. "This has been a super boost for the kids," says Dave Ellis, a retired businessman who came to his reopened alma mater, St. John's school, as a teacher, 40 years after graduating. "The kids don't like the summer school because all their friends are out for the summer, but they get used to it. And it really pays off."

It has so far proven difficult to make direct academic comparisons between public school children and their Catholic school counterparts. Public school students take state tests, and Jubilee students take the nationally normed Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). The Jubilee students are tested both at the beginning and end of the year.

"There's a big difference," said St. Augustine's principal Sister Lynn Marie Ralph, "especially in the new students in the course of the year." A CREP study to be released at the end of 2008 on the academic performance of the Jubilee schools may confirm the big difference Sister Ralph claims, but the diocese has not and will not make public any such data before the study is completed.

Strong results would be welcome news, since in the 38106 zip code area where St. Augustine School is located, anywhere from 15 to 30 percent of the public school elementary students – almost all of them poor and minority – score "below proficient" on state reading and mathematics tests.

According to McDonald, Jubilee students are reading at grade level within a year of arriving at their schools; they are then outperforming their peers. And this is not adjusted for family income and background, as McDonald says, "because we want to prepare these kids for life in the real world and the real world doesn't make such adjustments."

According to McDonald, Jubilee students are reading at grade level within a year of arriving at their schools; they are then outperforming their peers. And this is not adjusted for family income and background, as McDonald says, "because we want to prepare these kids for life in the real world and the real world doesn't make such adjustments." So far, none of the Jubilee students is old enough to have graduated from high school, but McDonald is optimistic. "We have a 99.9 percent graduation rate in our three high schools. And virtually no one drops out." Given the lackluster performance of Memphis public schools – with its graduation rate in the low 60s and dropout rates of over 15 percent – the Jubilee schools, which serve the same disadvantaged population, are clearly on the right track.

McDonald admits that the schools' weaknesses are their inadequate use of tests and data, and she is pushing on that front. "We need that data to drive system-wide improvement," she acknowledges. And while there are several studies of academic outcomes in the works, including that of CREP, for now Jubilee schools have the most important evaluation of their success in their parent and teacher testimonials, waiting lists, and continued investor support.

"I don't have nothing against public schools," says Tony King, the mother of a Holy Names sixth-grader, "but I couldn't get my child a better education than here."

Disabled with Crohn's disease since 1984, Mrs. King, a single mom, is thankful that her daughter's education is free – made possible by the Jubilee endowment, which funds full scholarships for most of the students. (Other than a reimbursement for students who qualify for the federal Free-and-Reduced-Lunch program, which is managed by an outside provider, the Memphis diocese has requested no state or federal aid.)

Walter Williams, an unemployed father of three, recalls riding by St. John's School on Lamar Avenue when he spotted a banner on the side of the building offering scholarships. He never thought he could afford Catholic school but decided to inquire. "I went in and talked to the principal and she said I should apply," recalls Williams. "I couldn't believe it. They took both my boys. It was $7,000 a year for the two. And I was not even working at the time."

Revitalizing More Than Schools

Though the schools do not "push" Catholicism, faith is part of daily school life. All children go to Mass and say the Rosary together once a week. (All the children, in all the Jubilee schools, prayed the Rosary when McDonald was stricken by a stroke – her rapid and complete recovery is another one of those miracles.) School hallways are dotted with statues and pictures of saints, bishops, and popes. The entryway of each school has a plaque on the wall that says, "Be it known to all who enter here that Christ is the reason for this school. He is the unseen but ever present teacher in its classes. He is the model of its faculty and administration, and the inspiration of its students."

And such investors come in all kinds of packages, from the multi-millionaires to the man who volunteered to lay the entryway flooring in the renovated St. John's school.

But religion is so seamlessly woven into the schools' fabric – walls are also decorated with Saxon Math posters and pictures of Elvis – that parents seem not to notice. Most appreciate the moral values and accept Jesus as "the inspiration of its students" as a small price for a good education. As do the Jubilee school donors, many of whom, including the original anonymous businessmen, are not Catholic.

Mary McDonald understands this, emphasizing that these philanthropists are "investors" not donors. "They are investing in a better education for children," she says.

And such investors come in all kinds of packages, from the multi-millionaires to the man who volunteered to lay the entryway flooring in the renovated St. John's school. "See that furniture," says McDonald as we toured the newly refurbished library in the basement of Holy Names School. "It's from a casino." McDonald has formed "many partnerships," but the schools, she says, "belong to everybody." Such a sentiment echoes the thesis of the groundbreaking 1993 book *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* by Anthony Bryk and two colleagues: that Catholic schools do a better job of accommodating the common good than public schools do.

"All along my goal was to spend as little as possible on bricks and mortar – and more on programs," she says. She has streamlined operations and established a separate 501(3)c nonprofit organization, the Catholic Memphis Urban Schools Trust (CMUST), to raise and manage money for the Jubilee schools and oversee the majority of the scholarship programs. (As McDonald will admit, another reason for CMUST is to keep Jubilee funds separate from the diocese's general funds, which are susceptible to all Church liabilities, including the kinds of scandals that have bankrupted some dioceses and usually have nothing to do with schools.)

McDonald's Jubilee marketing campaign is dizzying: press releases, press packages, CDs, PowerPoint presentations, press conferences, and "Postcards from God." McDonald uses every vehicle possible to get the word out – cell phone, Blackberry, e-mail, Fedex. A team of television reporters from Detroit came to investigate the "Memphis Miracle" and returned to the Motor City recommending that the Bishop of Detroit NOT close the city's Catholic schools.

The children themselves are the best promotion. They look sharp, they act sharp. Visitors to a classroom are always greeted to a full class, "Good Morning."

"Something as simple as writing thank you notes to donors has an unbelievable impact," says Jamie Bremmer. "A Fortune 500 CEO receiving a manila envelope with cards from a class of third-graders does wonders."

So far CMUST has raised $60 million and spent $10 million, most of it, as McDonald promised, for renovation and construction.

"Our initial projections estimated that we would need a $28 million endowment to run eight Jubilee schools," says Lance Forsdick, a retired hotel magnate who is chairman of the CMUST board. "That was based on the assumption that parents and guardians could pay 40 percent of the cost. But they can't. They're now paying closer to 20 percent, which means we needed a $60 million endowment."

While parent and neighborhood support for the schools is enthusiastic and generous, some 90 percent of the endowment has come from less than two dozen groups and individuals. Under the diocesan umbrella, using the CMUST financial management organization, the Jubilee school effort has become the equivalent of a private sector voucher program. There is a scholarship for everything, from tuition to clothes. The Angel Robe Program provides uniforms, and even the shoes – classy Bass suede lace-ups and Nike sneakers – are donated.

The Memphis-based Hyde Foundation provided $600,000 early on to the Jubilee program and in the spring of 2008, announced its intention of giving $5 million more over the next ten years. "This is a sizeable gift for the Hydes," says Greg Thompson, "and represents their commitment to increasing educational opportunities for the most disadvantaged children of Memphis."

In addition to the CMUST program, nearly 300 Jubilee students receive tuition assistance through the Memphis Opportunity Scholarship Trust (MOST), which was founded seven years ago by businessman Robert Somson and his wife. They provided about 150 scholarships to pay for tuition at private schools their first year – and nearly 9,000 applications poured in the following year.

"When the Catholics announced their intent to reopen inner-city schools, they came to us and asked us to partner," says Gayle Barnwell, Executive Director of MOST. "We had many of the same financial guidelines and serviced the same kids…. It was a natural partnership. And the Catholic system, historically, has a very good track record. They provide a good education for very little money. Their tuitions are still way under the top-tier private schools."

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In a 2002-03 study of its scholarship recipients, MOST found that over two thirds of the parents reported improvements in their children's academic performance and classroom and study behaviors. And on comparisons with Memphis City Schools performance indicators, "the average MOST student performance on [nationally-normed Terra Nova] tests exceed that of Memphis City Schools…."

Though she is a true-blue, Bible-quoting Catholic who believes she is doing God's work in providing education for inner-city Memphis children, Mary McDonald also recognizes how universal that mission is. "These people invest in the structure of the Catholic schools," she says. "Since they are not Catholic, they are not investing in the structure of the Church, or in the Catholic Church." The brand name "is a by-product of their generosity, their investment, but the focus is education as a means of lifting up children in poverty and providing the city with an educated citizenry. They see Catholic schools as the best means to do that."

After seeing an increase in seminarians studying to be priests or paint going on houses in formerly abandoned neighborhoods, she likes to think that the Jubilee schools have contributed. They are, after all, "there to give people hope." And she is building a system to make sure that such hope will last. "It's not some platitude," she says. "We're not just passing through town."