Summary: In 1944, Sister Mary Dennis Donovan, CSJ, embarked on the task of developing a Christian Social Living (CSL) curriculum for middle school students as envisioned by the Pittsburgh diocesan school superintendent Father Thomas Quigley. Drawing upon her upbringing in a socially conscious household in a Western Pennsylvanian steel mill town, she saw her work culminate in the publication of the co-authored textbook *The Christian Citizen*, which brought the principles of CSL into many classrooms in the United States. Her CSL work in the 1940s through the early 1960s provided middle school students with the tools to carry out Catholic Action. As Catholic Action was evolving within the post-conciliar church in the mid-1960s, Sister Mary Dennis co-authored a new textbook, *The Responsible Citizen*, and created a program of educating the laity of all faiths on race relations. As part of an initiative to improve race relations, the Pittsburgh diocese adopted this Catholic Action program and, subsequently, hired her to implement it. By the 1970s, her work had broadened to human relations. This article examines the contributions of this woman religious to Catholic Action and human relations in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, from the late 1940s through the early 1970s.

On September 3, 1929, fourteen-year old Patricia Donovan walked through the doors of the motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, Pennsylvania, to enroll in their St. Joseph’s Preparatory High School. Two years later, Patricia entered the Sisters of St. Joseph and received the name Sister Mary Dennis. Coming from an anti-Catholic and anti-union steel mill town, Sister Mary Dennis would find herself drawn to social activism, human relations, and Catholic Action. Over the course of her life, she co-authored two civics textbooks; established race relations programs; served on executive boards; co-founded organizations; and became the first sister to serve on the Pennsylvania Human Rights Commission. Her contributions to society did not go unnoticed, and her work was summed up accordingly: “Watch-dog, crusader, organizer, advocate, humanitarian, scholar, teacher, author—by turns Sister Mary Dennis assumed all these roles as the fissures and fractures in our social fabric became more visible.” From the late 1940s to the early 1970s, drawing from her life as a woman religious, Sister Mary Dennis brought Catholic Action not only to the Catholic laity but also to those of other faiths. Shaped by life in the heavily industrialized, labor-focused Western Pennsylvanian region, Sister Mary Dennis found herself being drawn into the world of Catholic Action when she was tapped in the 1940s by her congregation to work on a Catholic Action civics textbook. Building on this pre-Vatican II work, she embraced the new opportunities made possible in the 1960s. Moving beyond her congregation, she took her ideas to a broader audience, channeling her energy into working as a department head within the...
diocese to bring people to understand race relations. By the 1970s, Sister Mary Dennis had fully shifted from race relations to the broader concept of human relations. Part of a generation of “new nuns,” Sister Mary Dennis Donovan and her work serve as an example of the way that Catholic Action inspired and empowered women religious to take on new roles and ministries from the 1940s through the 1970s. Additionally, during the ten years in which she worked within the structure of the diocese, Sister Mary Dennis’s contributions add to our understanding of the transformation of American Catholicism taking place within the Diocese of Pittsburgh during those years.2

Foundations in Catholic Action
Sister Mary Dennis’s foundations in the region and her initial work within her congregation were the building blocks for her involvement in Catholic Action. Born in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, in 1915, Patricia Donovan was greatly influenced by her family. She was the oldest of eight children of second-generation parents of different ethnicities—a fact that impacted her childhood, as her father’s family “always felt [her father] married below … because he was Irish and [her mother] was German.”3 In addition to this exposure to family bias, Patricia was also affected by Aliquippa residents’ attitudes towards ethnic and religious diversity. These local prejudices were further orchestrated by the local steel mill, Jones & Laughlin Steel Company (J & L), as it devised housing plans to intentionally separate ethnicities, thereby creating an environment of division among the residents.4

While Patricia experienced hostility towards her heritage and religion,5 she would later watch her father become involved with attempts to unionize the mill. During that period, her mother lived in fear of her father either losing his job or facing physical intimidation—especially after the Pinkertons beat up a neighbor. There was a reason that CIO organizers called Aliquippa the “Little Siberia.”6 In spite of this, her father continued with his involvement in union organization.7

For the Donovans, the Catholic Church was very much a part of their lives. Patricia’s mother was a member of the Catholic Daughters of America and involved in their local parish; her father listened to radio-priests Fulton Sheen and Charles Coughlin.8 During her early childhood, Patricia attended public school where she encountered teachers who concealed their Catholic faith in order to gain employment. From sixth through eighth grade, she attended the newly opened St. Titus School where she encountered the Sisters of St. Joseph and subsequently made the decision to attend high school as an aspirant to this congregation.

In September 1929, Patricia packed a trunk and headed across the Ohio River to the Sisters of St. Joseph’s Preparatory School.9 Founded in 1924, this preparatory school was part of a “campaign for vocations to the teaching religious orders movement” and provided teenage girls with the opportunity to explore religious life.10 For Patricia, this would be a life-changing experience; in her own words, becoming a “Prep” …

… opened up a whole new world for me. I just fell in love with everybody. The Prep kids. The Sisters. Everybody. That … I knew was … my life. So, I had no problem making the decision to come from Prep to entering.11

In September 1931, just two days shy of her sixteenth birthday, Patricia entered the Sisters of St. Joseph.12 Two years later, Sister Mary Dennis, as she was known now, found herself teaching 72 second graders at St. Raphael School in Pittsburgh.13 Her final profession was in 1937 and, like most sisters at the time, she served as a teacher. Teaching during the war years had a profound effect on Sister Mary Dennis, making her consider her role in the lives of students. Her reflections later demonstrated the depth of her thoughts: “When I had kids who graduated from eighth grade and were killed in the war and then I began to ask myself, ‘What have I taught them that would prepare them for that and for eternity.’ And that was the turning point in my life.”14
These were also years when the Catholic Church was grappling with issues such as Communism and materialism. Consequently, the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC) placed a focus on Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which addressed the condition of the working classes, and on Catholic Action, which defined the laity’s role to defend the faith and spread social action, working as an extension of the Catholic Church in the world. Acting on these concerns, Pope Pius XI gave the Catholic University of America in 1938 “a mandate to provide a system of education … to better the teaching of Christian social thought.” Christian Social Living (CSL), as it was called, was to provide students with the foundations for applying “the Great Commandment given by Christ” in the real world, and to use as a tool for Catholic Action. Having participated in early conversations on CSL at conferences, Pittsburgh’s newly appointed diocesan school superintendent, Father (later Monsignor) Thomas J. Quigley, decided to establish CSL curriculum for middle school students.

Seeking a partner for this endeavor, Quigley found one in the Sisters of St. Joseph. In 1944, Sister Mary Dennis was summoned to the motherhouse where the mother superior informed her that she was to take over work on a CSL textbook. (Sister Rose Gertrude Martin, another Sister of St. Joseph from Baden, was originally to be the author but she removed herself from the project as she had considered the writing too theoretical for her.) Setting to work, Sister Mary Dennis spent the next couple of years reading and researching, ultimately establishing CSL teaching methodology through trial and error at Pittsburgh’s Holy Rosary School.

As part of her own CSL education, Sister Mary Dennis completed her undergraduate degree at Duquesne University. It was there that she met Henry C. McGinnis, a professor who taught social philosophy. “When I went to Duquesne, I took people; I didn’t take classes,” she later proclaimed; McGinnis was one of those “people” who greatly influenced her. As part of her course work, she examined her understanding of human relations, ideas that would be reflected in her later work:

> When we really understand the oneness of the human race, we lose our race prejudice, our desire to dominate others, to exploit others to win at the expense of others. Unless we regard the Negro, the
In 1948, the year Sister Mary Dennis completed her undergraduate degree, the textbook *The Christian Citizen — His Challenge* was finally published. Although Quigley was listed as co-author, Sister Mary Dennis was in reality the primary author. She accomplished the bulk of the research and writing with help from her fellow Sisters of St. Joseph.24 The CSL curriculum of *The Christian Citizen* provided middle-school students with methods on how “to practice justice, mercy, and charity every day and all day…”25 Taking CSL on the road, Sister Mary Dennis gave workshops both locally and nationally.26 Twenty-three dioceses eventually adopted one of the editions of *The Christian Citizen* textbook, with the Archdiocese of Chicago ordering a specially revised 1952 edition for their teachers and students.27

Fittingly, the introduction to the first edition of *The Christian Citizen* written in the 1940s begins with a description of a soldier statue monument in Sister Mary Dennis’s hometown of Aliquippa. The statue becomes a metaphor: individuals act like “statues of Christianity” but instead should act like “soldiers of Christ.”28 Throughout the curriculum, civics lessons are infused with Christianity, in order to have students “become habituated to the Christian viewpoint of the civil order” and recognize “subtle attacks on democracy.”29 Beginning with the value of the individual, the curriculum builds to the family unit, the community, the government (local, state, federal, and church), the foundations for the democratic republic, and the world community. With this civic curriculum framework being interwoven with Christian social thought, the students would thus learn that “Christian citizenship is the putting into practice of God’s command to love our neighbor” and would gain the tools for Catholic Action for life.30

### The Responsible Citizen: Foundations in Religious Life, Catholic Action, and Pittsburgh

When Sister Mary Dennis entered religious life in 1931, she became part of a world that was shaped by the 1917 Code of Canon Law, which imposed new strictures on apostolic sisters and defined their work “primarily in terms of convent-centered prayer.”31 Educated before the advent of the Sisters Formation Conference, Sister Mary Dennis had spent fifteen years of part-time course work to obtain her bachelor’s degree, ultimately graduating alongside a person who had been one of her third-grade students in the 1930s.32 She was able to further her education on social philosophy with McGinnis at Duquesne University, completing her master’s degree in 1951. Throughout the 1950s, Sister Mary Dennis continued her ministry of serving as a teacher and a principal, while applying her knowledge by teaching history and CSL to junior high students in the Pittsburgh diocese.

As part of the Catholic Church in Pittsburgh, Sister Mary Dennis also was part of the region’s subculture. Bishop John Dearden, Pittsburgh’s bishop from 1950 to 1959, had set the tone for the area and, concurrently, its large immigrant population. Focusing on Catholic separatism and devotions, his emphasis was on closing ranks against the forces of anti-Catholicism, materialism, and Communism. In 1959, Dearden’s successor, Bishop John Wright, was transferred to Pittsburgh from the recently established Diocese of Worcester, Massachusetts. Serving as the first bishop of Worcester for nine years, Wright had demonstrated his “ability as a spiritual leader and an intellectual”33 and placed a focus on the laity’s involvement in the church.34 When Wright became bishop of Pittsburgh, it was on the eve of major changes both in the Catholic Church and in society. While Dearden’s term was defined by devotionalism, Wright’s tenure in Pittsburgh would become defined in terms of social justice ministry.35

Social justice under Dearden had emphasized labor relations, with figures like Father (later Monsignor) Charles Owen Rice joining the efforts to protect workers in a diocese dominated by the steel industry. However, social justice under Wright focused on race relations. Indicative of the looming shift was the 1954 establishment of the Pittsburgh Catholic Interracial Conference (CIC), “an organization of laymen and clergy working to solve the problem of race relations.”36 Just like the first CIC established by Father John LaFarge in New York, the Pittsburgh CIC sought to end prejudice and promote equality for Blacks in Pittsburgh.

The substantial Black population in Pittsburgh had its roots in the Great Migration, with the numbers of Blacks living in the city more than doubling between 1910 and 1930.37
A 1939 New Deal WPA Federal Writers’ Project documented the early years of racial tensions and the need to establish understanding:

In spite of economic, political and social achievement, the Negro in Pittsburgh, as anywhere else, is made to feel that he is a member of a minority group, and he lives not only under the disadvantages of all such groups but also under the added one of having a black skin … Little has been done … to promote interracial relations, to explain Negro to white or white to Negro; to inform white students in schools of Negro history and culture.38

The numbers of Blacks in the city continued to increase while the white population decreased, resulting in a shift in Blacks as a percentage of the population from 12 percent in 1950 to 20 percent in 1970.39 The overwhelming majority of Blacks lived in “highly concentrated segregated ghettos,” with Pittsburgh’s Hill District being the primary location.40 After the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision Brown v. Board of Education, desegregation and the civil rights movement began to gain momentum in Pittsburgh.

The issue of race relations entered into public discourse at a time when Catholics in Pittsburgh were steadily moving away from their “separate cultural world” and becoming a part of the world around them.41 And as the Catholic Church entered the 1960s, Vatican II propelled the Catholic Church even further into the work of social justice and altered how Catholics—including women religious—viewed their role in the world. The changes within the church that were started by Vatican II impacted Sister Mary Dennis as she was striking out more and more on her own as an independent thinker, a trajectory that took her passion to educate out of the classroom and into the world.42 But her first major effort in the 1960s was still geared toward the school setting, which was a collaboration with Sister Thecla Shiel, OSU.

One of the life-changing events in Sister Mary Dennis’s life in the years leading up to Vatican II was her meeting Sister Thecla at St. Louis University during summer courses in the mid-1950s. Originally from a West Virginia mining town, Sister Thecla entered the Ursuline Sisters of Louisville, Kentucky, at age 14 in 1925. Later, as an educator, she had used The Christian Citizen textbook in her classroom.43 Upon meeting Sister Thecla, Sister Mary Dennis discovered that this “was one person who really took my book and really worked with it … and before she even knew me, she had started to work on it.”44 A lifelong friendship was established during those summer days in St. Louis.

In the early 1960s, Pope John XXIII promulgated two encyclicals that would inspire both sisters: Mater et Magistra (1961), which focused on the duty to social justice, and Pacem in Terris (1963), which called all to a peace based on truth, justice, love, and freedom. When the two new encyclicals drew her publisher’s attention, Sister Mary Dennis was asked for a new revision of The Christian Citizen.45 She countered with the proposal of a new book and a collaboration with Sister Thecla. As she explained, “Mother [sic] Mary Isabel [Concannon] had made some kind of negotiations with the company about revising the book… And so I said no, we wouldn’t revise it but we would rewrite it completely if Thecla and I could work together we would.”46 The publisher agreed and the co-authors went to work. The two sisters were not only motivated by the two recent encyclicals but were also inspired by President John F. Kennedy’s challenge to “right the wrongs you see—not just complain about them” and from Vatican II’s promotion for “an understanding and respect for persons.”47 In fact, Sister Mary Dennis identified the two Johns—John Kennedy and Pope John XXIII—as heroes for both herself and Sister Thecla.48

The Responsible Citizen, as the new textbook was titled, was designed for junior high students. Influenced by St. Thomas Aquinas and drawing from Cardinal Joseph Cardijn’s “See,
Judge, Act” method for Catholic Action,49 the co-authors used “Observe, Judge, Act” as a tool for the students. This new program was in the vein of a “Social Problems course, a course which is rarely even tapped until high school level.”50 Basing the textbook on Social Action, Sisters Mary Dennis and Thecla addressed topics ranging from poverty and immigration to labor unions and government.

Taking on human relations issues, the sisters contended that racism denied “the unity and solidarity of the human race as God created it,” and asked students to “Act” by doing something specific “to correct false impressions about racial inferiority.” Quoting directly from Pacem in Terris, the sisters provided support for the equality of human beings: “It is not true that some human beings are by nature superior and other inferior. All men are equal in their natural dignity.”51

The Responsible Citizen and accompanying curriculum material were used in the sisters’ home cities along with a few other cities, such as Hartford, Connecticut, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.52 While The Christian Citizen had many iterations, the 1967 version of The Responsible Citizen was the only edition. Coinciding with the work on the textbook was the ever-increasing activity of Sister Mary Dennis in human relations within her diocese. This would eventually take over her life.

Project Understanding:
Bringing Catholic Action Beyond the Catholic Church
Race relations came to dominate the 1960s, with President Lyndon Johnson launching his Great Society program and the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Within the Pittsburgh Catholic community, Bishop Wright guided his diocese on how to live out the documents of Vatican II, the recent papal encyclicals, and Catholic Action. Underscoring the importance of race relations, Wright used his homily at Pittsburgh’s 1966 Labor Day Mass to emphasize “the urgency of the racial question, particularly in terms of religion” and “exhorted union members to wage a ‘conscience crusade’ on behalf of civil rights.”53

Responding to the race issues, diocesan programs took center stage. In 1964, the Pittsburgh CIC underwent reorganization, and the Pittsburgh diocese established its Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to administer federal funds through programs like Ready Five, Youth Leadership, and Project Breakthrough. This was also the first year of the federal Model Cities program in Pittsburgh, with the government encouraging “academics, blacks, labor leaders, civil liberties attorneys, and Roman Catholic clergy to work with the OEO to improve housing, job training, and education for the poor.”54 The National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice program Project Equality, which focused on racially-just hiring practices was yet another item introduced into the diocesan race relations dialogue.55

In 1966, Wright established the Diocesan Human Relations Commission (DHRC) “to promote and maintain civil liberties, social justice and the general welfare of all people regardless of color, creed or national origin.”56 And in 1967 he established the Diocesan Pastoral Council as his advisory group “on how the Church can combat racism and
promote community harmony.”57 It was the DHRC and the Diocesan Pastoral Council that would directly affect Sister Mary Dennis, who found herself increasingly involved with Catholic Action.58

When the Pittsburgh CIC reorganized, Sister Mary Dennis became a member of its executive board. While she was nominated to serve as the first vice president of the reorganized group, she declined because “this particular organization at this particular time, when we are going to be in the position of exhorting the diocese to set up ‘Project Equality’ as well as other programs, that we would be in a better position with a lay person.”59 While she turned down the nomination, she did serve on the executive board until 1968.

Just as the CIC recognized Sister Mary Dennis Donovan’s knowledge on social justice, so did her congregation. In September 1965, the Sisters of St. Joseph in Baden announced their plan for a Human Relations Committee. This committee developed from a “‘grass roots’ movement that … received its vitality from several sources where the Holy Spirit has been especially active in impelling [the Sisters of St. Joseph] as a group to deepen [their] knowledge of and plan intelligent approaches to social problems.”60

At the very first meeting of the committee, Sister Mary Dennis provided the momentum.61 She stated the committee’s purpose, which was to evaluate “personal, educational, and community attitudes, customs, and activities in the light of [their] constitutions, Christian social teachings, and the needs of [the] times.” Based on the resulting insights, the sisters would then integrate that knowledge in promoting social justice.62 With the blessing and support of Mother Superior Mary Isabel, Sister Mary Dennis advanced the committee and its work.

For this new internal committee, the sisters were to follow the format “To evaluate … To enlighten … To act,” a variation on the Catholic Action language used by Cardinal’s “See, Judge, Act,” and Sister Mary Dennis’s “Observe, Judge, Act” in The Responsible Citizen, which was in production at the time. Through this committee, Sister Mary Dennis sought to lead her own congregation to understand human relations and act in ways that followed the “Christian principles of social living in the encyclicals.”63

This committee work evolved into a program created by Sister Mary Dennis that she entitled “Project Understanding.” As she explained,

… I did this proposal for a Project Under standing which would help our Sisters with race relations. And I take the proposal to [Mother] Mary Isabel and Mary Isabel says “Oh … I’ll have to show this to [Bishop] Wright to see if we could do it,” because in those days that was a no-no. I was going to involve non-Catholics and all the people in the areas where we lived.64

Involving others would become a hallmark of her program. For the congregation’s human relations committee, she included not only representatives from throughout the congregation but also a CIC liaison and lay advisors “on invitation.” And now, the program had the attention of the bishop.

In the fall of 1966, the DHRC was asked to establish a special committee to review a project of the Sisters of St. Joseph. Sister Mary Dennis gave a report on this proposed “Project 67”—the name that the DHRC gave to Project Understanding—and in this way, took her first step in bringing this endeavor to a wider audience.65 After the DHRC heard the report, Wright weighed in on it, commenting that “if, in fact, it is a teaching project, a tremendous contribution can be made.” He recommended that the program be tested in six parishes and that “this Commission should approve the project, bless and commend it and co-sponsor the project with Sister Mary Dennis [sic].”66

The DHRC readily adopted Wright’s recommendations and
Project Understanding became official.67

For the next nine months, Sister Mary Dennis worked on launching her pilot program. At the same time, she was completing five years serving as principal for St. Joseph High School in Natrona Heights and participating in her congregation’s General Chapter on the renewal called for in Perfectae Caritatis.68 Her work with Project Understanding began in earnest with a spring meeting of pastors and principals of the six pilot parishes. Shortly after, the headline in the Pittsburgh Catholic proclaimed “St. Joseph Nuns Plan Race Relations Project,”7 with this news story juxtaposed with an article of the diocese refuting CIC claims of the lack of school integration within the diocese. With unanimous approval by the Diocesan Pastoral Council at its first session, Project Understanding was given diocesan blessing.69

In their September 1967 newsletter, the Pittsburgh CIC placed the following announcement that gives an overview of the program’s approach:

**PROJECT UNDERSTANDING** is an ecumenical pilot project to train leaders in race relations in six local areas. It is being sponsored by the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Diocesan Human Relations Commission. There will be eight weekly sessions on Thursdays from September 14 through November 2. The six project areas are: St. Bede’s, Point Breeze; Annunciation, North Side; St. Canice, Knoxville; St. Bernard’s, Mt. Lebanon; St. Bernadette, Monroeville; Blessed Sacrament, Natrona Heights. Teachers and community leaders from these six localities are being invited to attend the eight sessions. Speakers will be national and local experts. Sister M. Dennis is Co-Chairman.70

Daniel P. Beyer, associate director of the Diocesan Catholic Youth Organization, served as Sister Mary Dennis’s co-chair.71 Within her congregation, the sisters summarized the early beginnings of the program in an internal newsletter:

You have probably heard of Project Understanding, Sr. Mary Dennis’ brainchild, born of the Human Relations Meetings conducted last year. For the past eight weeks sisters from the parishes involved have been meeting and discussing problems of Human Relations with civic leaders to develop leadership in attacking problems such as employment, housing, education, etc. Mother Mary Isabel, Sr. Mary Agnes, and Sr. Ursula have been attending from the Motherhouse.

Sr. Mary Dennis feels that the meetings are successful. The discussion groups which follow each lecture are most helpful, for here the people speak their minds and get ready for action. Now if the follow-up of these meetings shows that the campaign for action is successful, Bishop Wright will get more of the Diocese involved. He approved of the project as a much needed program to provide moral motivation for stepped-up involvement in civil rights programs.72

From the onset, Bishop Wright placed his full support behind establishing this program as one way to address race relations concerns.73 In a July 1967, in a memo to the DHRC chairman Judge Harry Kramer, the bishop was adamant that there would be “early, effective and complete press releases”:

Publicity on behalf of the Project Understanding program … is absolutely indispensable to the success of the project. In a word, I would hope that a major story on Project Understanding, the plans for Thursday, September 14 in all their exact details of time and place, the subjects of the series, etc., etc., plus full credit to the Sisters of St. Joseph would be sent to the PITTSBURGH Catholic and to all other news media. I would hope that it would indicate that the program is under the patronage of the Human Relations Commission but under the direction of the Sisters of St. Joseph. The letterhead of Project Understanding … indicates the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Human Relations Commission as co-sponsors.74

An August 24 press conference held by Sister Mary Dennis, DHRC Vice Chairman Monsignor Paul Bassompierre, and the Mayor’s Commission on Human Relations Executive Director David Washington supplied some of the publicity championed by Wright, who was intent on the program’s acceptance in the community at large.75 Additionally, Wright served as the first speaker for Project Understanding’s opening event, helping to draw further attention to the program. Joined by Pittsburgh Mayor Joseph M. Barr and Rabbi Walter Jacob of Rodef Shalom Congregation, Wright’s address was on “The Ecumenical Era and Human Relations.”76

After the initial launch, Bishop Wright left Sister Mary Dennis to her work. The intent of the program was to encourage people “to examine and readjust their values in order to undertake the task of erasing the causes of racism” and to “initiate better communications among the various ethnic, religious and civic groups within urban communities.”77 The pilot program provided speakers such as civil rights activist James Farmer; chairman of Detroit’s Project Commitment Joseph L. Hanschanecht, Jr.; dean of Howard University’s
Graduate School of Social Work Dr. Mary Ella Robertson; and Roosevelt University’s Chair of Political Science Dr. Charles V. Hamilton—in essence, Blacks speaking to mainly white parishioners. Sister Mary Dennis’s enlistment of Hanschanecht as a speaker indicated a link to Detroit’s Project Commitment, which Detroit’s Archbishop John Dearden (former bishop of Pittsburgh) had established years earlier as “an educational program, with the assistance of Detroit-area parishes that would enlighten Detroit’s Catholics to the new realities of civil rights and equal opportunity in housing and employment.” While Dearden’s program was exclusive to Catholics, Sister Mary Dennis expanded her program to be inclusive of others, bringing Catholic Action beyond the church.

While Project Understanding’s pilot ended in November 1967, Pittsburgh’s Knoxville neighborhood continued a six-session workshop for both public and parochial school teachers. In January, the DHRC took time to assess Project Understanding, noting that five out of the six pilot groups had been active and organized. At the following month’s meeting, the DHRC’s recommendation to Wright was for Sister Mary Dennis not only to continue her work but to do so in a full-time capacity.

Wright’s decision was not long in coming. With the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the resulting civil disorders unfolding, Wright was quick to make a decision that would place an emphasis on human relations. Sister Mary Dennis and her program were officially brought onboard, and her appointment as the full-time director for Project Understanding was announced in the Pittsburgh Catholic. On the heels of the creation of this official diocesan department addressing race relations was yet another assassination, that of Bobby Kennedy on June 4.

In the shadow of these events, the Pittsburgh Diocese moved forward with its scheduled meetings on June 15 and 16 to discuss how to “combat racism and promote community harmony.” With Wright serving as chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Social Action Department and as one of the primary authors for the Catholic Bishop’s “Statement on National Race Crisis,” this meeting drew considerable attention. The results of the meeting were ten resolutions passed by the Diocesan Pastoral Council. Four of these would have direct bearing on Sister Mary Dennis: 1) Catholic junior and senior high schools civics course would include a study of the Kerner Report; 2) staff the DHRC with two full-time employees; 3) establish educational programs on racism for qualified teachers; and 4) establish a diocesan Urban Task Force (UTF). Upon filling her new position within the diocese as an official departmental administrator, Sister Mary Dennis worked to expand the programming in earnest, and in the process, addressed four of the ten Diocesan Pastoral Council’s resolutions. By the end of the summer, she had initiated 35 parishes into Project Understanding; prepared a guide for the study of Blacks in history; conducted an orientation for diocesan teachers for the use of this guide; and developed discussion guides on the Kerner report for use with junior high students through adults. Her work in Catholic Action became focused on human relations, bringing the message of social justice to any who would listen. Over the next few years, Project Understanding programs were popping up all over the diocese, some with reportedly large numbers in attendance and with non-Catholics as participants. Sister Mary Dennis invited speakers versed on a wide range of topics, such as University of Pittsburgh’s Sociology professor Dr. Hoshi Wagatsuma speaking on “The Roots of Prejudice;” Pittsburgh Chapter President Byrd Brown on “Black Militancy … What is it All About;” and the national “Action Caravan on Race” workshop, which was headed by Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler, a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame from Chicago.

While initially taking place in church settings, Sister Mary
Dennis also took Project Understanding to more diverse audiences. She spoke to hospital employees and women’s groups and she even appeared on KDKA-TV. In 1969, Sister Mary Dennis teamed up with University of Pittsburgh’s Dean of Student Affairs N. Ronald Pease to put on what she called “mini-Project Understanding.” This university based program, titled “White to White: A Look at White Racism,” challenged white university students to take a hard look at themselves and the subject of racism. Sister Mary Dennis had expanded the program outside of diocesan venues.

In the fall of 1968, Sister Mary Dennis found herself with the additional charge of the Neighborhood Apostolate of the Sisters (NAS). The NAS was a relatively new program that included two initiatives—Adult Armchair Education and Operation Post Office—both of which received funding from the federal Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC). According to Sister Mary Dennis, the program’s overall goals were for the NAS and “their lay co-workers” to educate and communicate with the people that they served so to increase an understanding of those communities. The idea was for the sisters to hold regular discussion groups in order to “share the experiences and knowledge … gathered.” The sisters were provided tools with which to conduct a neighborhood study focused on the buildings, communication, ethnic groups, and the “black man’s situation.”

In the case of NAS’s Adult Armchair Education, which had been initiated by the OIC and adopted by the NAS, the sisters focused on teaching secretarial skills to older residents of Pittsburgh’s Oakland neighborhood. The OIC recruited students while the NAS recruited teachers. As part of her search for sister-volunteers, Sister Mary Dennis reflected the period by relaying Wright’s safety requirement that the sisters “must look like Sisters” so that sisters would be afforded the protection of their clothing. In September 1969, Sister Mary Dennis turned Adult Armchair Education over to a Franciscan sister, Sister Margaretta Fischer, as the second NAS program—Operation Post Office—required more attention.

Well under way by the end of 1968, Operation Post Office provided sisters with an opportunity to work with individuals to study for civil service exams. When Sister Mary Dennis requested volunteers, the response exceeded her expectations, with more than 100 volunteering when only 25 were anticipated. Over the course of four years, the sister-volunteers tutored 1250 individuals, of whom 751 took the exam, resulting in the employment of 331 in the post office. Sharing her knowledge and methodology with others was important to Sister Mary Dennis. Drawing from her work in race relations, Sister Mary Dennis was able to report on her efforts to other sisters during seminars in Chicago. Within the local NAS newsletter, she was able to promote her Catholic Action curriculum by highlighting her textbook The Responsible Citizen as an approach for educating others “to get to know the neighbor.”

With her strength in education, Sister Mary Dennis found herself coordinating the summer training of teachers working within urban “ghetto areas.” She assumed this additional responsibility in her role as part of the diocesan UTF. Mirroring the National Urban Task Force, this local UTF focused on programs for the poor and minorities. Headed by Father James Spelman, the UTF worked with “existing departments, teaching communities and groups of priests and laymen to help them redirect some of their programs and priorities to meet new and pressing needs,” and Project Understanding now fell under its umbrella, a foreshadowing of the future for Sister Mary Dennis in the diocesan organizational structure.

Sister Mary Dennis Takes on Human Relations Education

The 1970s were marked by the full shift of Sister Mary Dennis’s Catholic Action from race relations to human relations at a time when the Diocese of Pittsburgh was undergoing a self-examination. Intent on transitioning the diocese from the 1960s to the 1970s, Bishop Wright planned for a synod to be held in 1971. The establishment of the Diocesan Pastoral Council began the preparation for the synod. But just as planning was getting underway in 1969, Wright was called to Rome to serve as the Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy. Before departing Pittsburgh, Wright appointed John Hannigan as the assistant director for the UTF. With a background as a lecturer and program coordinator from the University of Pittsburgh’s Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, Hannigan was a source of knowledge and energy, and within a short amount of time, he became director of the department.

In June 1969, the Pittsburgh diocese welcomed Vincent Leonard as its new bishop. Born in 1908 to an Irish family in Pittsburgh’s Hill District neighborhood, Leonard’s background was exclusively Pittsburgh-based. After being ordained in 1935, Leonard rose through the ranks and, by 1964, was serving as an auxiliary bishop. His social activist background was based on his role as a member of the Mayor’s Committee on Human Resources, a War on Poverty program. Leonard’s style was markedly different from Wright—Wright was considered a “hearty, ebullient man skilled in public relations,” while Leonard “maintained
a low profile.”

As part of the synod’s planning, input was requested from clergy, religious, and laity throughout the diocese. Questionnaires were sent to “the Sisters missioned in this Diocese” to give them “an opportunity to speak up on the issues which are of concern to the Synod.” In the survey results, there was a section entitled “Community Affairs” that focused on social justice. The sisters in the diocese were asked their opinions on items ranging from public speaking on social issues to individual parish commissions on community affairs. Ninety percent of the respondents felt the need for adult education programs to promote the “teachings of the Church regarding civil rights, poverty, family, etc.” The next highest ranking was an eighty-seven percent approval that a religious could speak publicly on social issues as long as it was understood that she was representing herself and not “the Church.”

These answers to the diocesan synod’s questionnaire by Pittsburgh’s women religious mirrored the importance of social issues in the Catholic Church. For northern cities in the 1970s, attention was expanded to include not only Blacks but also immigrants from Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Sister Mary Dennis remarked on this shift in her approach to race relations:

As our Nation continues to struggle with its identity and purpose in the 1970’s, a new appreciation of our diverse ethnic history and cultural heritage will play an increasingly important role. The unfulfilled hope of the early 1960’s ended in the alienation of many young affluent students, the angry bitterness of the poor black and brown urban community, the economic, social, cultural, and political anxiety of the heavily ethnic working class.

Today’s challenge requires a new vision and perspective that will redefine America with a new sense of identity, a new sense of purpose, a new sense of unity. The painful process of developing a new awareness and self-image becomes personal as one struggles with the questions: ‘Who am I?’—‘Who are We?’

With a new bishop and a change in society, Sister Mary Dennis’s role within the diocese was also changing. Even though her Project Understanding programs continued as part of the UTF in the first half of 1970, Sister Mary Dennis’s days of contributions within a diocesan office were coming to an end.

In a March 1970 report to the DHRC, Hannigan related the breadth of activity undertaken by himself and Sister Mary Dennis as part of the UTF. Not only had they provided education on human relations through Project Understanding and other avenues, but they also supported and advised many organizations. Hannigan’s list of examples was lengthy and included: the city Commission on Human Relations; New Professionals Association of Pittsburgh; Community Action Pittsburgh; National Conference of Christians and Jews; Office of Community and Education Programs; University of Pittsburgh; the University and City Ministries; and the Office of Planning and Development of the Board of Public Education.

For Sister Mary Dennis, her position became more focused on diocesan schools. John T. Cicco, appointed as Pittsburgh’s first lay superintendent of diocesan schools in 1970, addressed the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference recommendation that each diocesan school system have a human relations study program. Establishing such a program, Cicco asked Sister Mary Dennis to serve as its head. Initially, Sister Mary Dennis hesitated, citing a “reluctance to accept the ‘job’ UNLESS we get support for some really effective programs for parents, teachers, and students without interference from pastors.” In the end, she agreed; one of her first jobs was to assess the curriculum and orientation programs for teachers.

In this new position, Sister Mary Dennis focused on multi-ethnic studies and intergroup relations. Based on her experience, she understood the challenge that she faced:

My planning activities to date have convinced me that we, the parochial school administration and teaching personnel, are uncomfortable with the concept of comparative ethnic studies and unready to incorporate them into our education system with any success. For that matter, public school and university personnel are not any more comfortable.

That November, in her explanation to school supervisors, she stressed the need to appreciate differences in the individual and not “homogenize’ students for citizenship.” For a resource, Sister Mary Dennis looked to Dr. Jaipaul, the director of the Nationalities Service Center of Philadelphia, and his work on a social studies curriculum that brought together parochial and public students. She piloted programs at three Catholic elementary schools, focusing on intergroup education that would “enable racial, religious and ethnic groups and individuals to work and live together democratically.” In spring 1971, Sister Mary Dennis directed and guided a nine-week pilot that incorporated socio-cultural perspectives into American history courses at
Lawrenceville Catholic High School. Reflecting the times, this multi-ethnic curriculum was seen by social scientists as a valid approach when combined with human relations to help pull together the American society.

Not mincing words, Sister Mary Dennis emphasized the need for multi-ethnic studies to the teachers in the diocese:

English history, literature, and to some extent the social studies as presently taught from kindergarten through graduate school are to a large extent ethnic studies for those students whose ethnic origins are of the dominant Anglo-Saxon strain. Those Americans whose ethnic origins are in other cultures, especially the black and the brown child are being deprived. This inequity is overdue for correction. Ethnic studies are therefore presented as a valid and necessary expansion of the cultural offerings of an elementary and secondary school.

Working to convey her message to educators, she pulled together a two-week summer multi-ethnic institute for teachers to be held at Duquesne University; this would be the first major training program of the Human Relations Education (HRE) department.

To develop a pilot program in Pittsburgh’s North Side neighborhood, Sister Mary Dennis collaborated with Alice Carter, director of education for Pittsburgh’s Urban League, to expand an existing six-week junior high public-school program. This series was initially for seventh graders, and involved special curriculum material, guest speakers, special events, inter-school exchanges of students, and field trips. Annunciation and St. Peter parochial schools were to introduce the program to their eighth graders for the 1971-1972 school year.

While Sister Mary Dennis was organizing programs through the HRE Department, the Department of Social and Community Development was officially established in April 1971. Arising from a 1969 study completed by a management consultant firm on the structure of the diocesan administration, this new department was to oversee programs that advance the “understanding of human rights among clergy and laity.” Placed under Hannigan’s direction, this new department merged the activities on race relations and community action that had been covered under the Fund for Neighbors in Need, Human Relations Commission, Project Understanding, and Urban Task Force.

While the new department was being established, several organizations recognized Sister Mary Dennis’s impact through her work that same year—Teacher of the Year by the Ladies Auxiliary of Catholic War Veterans (Allegheny Chapter); United States Civil Service Commission Special Service Award; and Distinguished Woman Award in Human Relations by Kaufmann’s Triangle Corner, Ltd. With greater freedom that came with Vatican II’s renewal of religious life, Sister Mary Dennis was able to bring her knowledge and skills to other organizations. The year 1971 could be considered a snapshot of her community involvement during this era. Along with her position in the diocese, the 55-year-old sister was serving on many boards, everything from local to national, from church to non-church, from executive to advisory—USCCB National Task Force on Urban Problems, Religion and Race Council of Pittsburgh, Allegheny County Women’s Political Caucus, Women in the Urban Crisis, National Coalition of American Nuns (NCAN), Education Advisory Board for Ursuline Sisters of Louisville, Pittsburgh Public Schools Law Advisory Committee, and Pittsburgh Diocesan Council of Catholic Women.

Through her work in intergroup relations and multi-ethnic programs as part of the HRE, Sister Mary Dennis was also able to work on Jewish-Catholic relations through education. One of the established goals for the HRE was to promote the understanding between Christians and Jews by establishing shared values. In her first HRE bulletin, which was published in January 1971, she emphasized the multi-ethnicity, highlighting resources and teaching advice, with a focus on Blacks for several pages and ending with
By the early 1970s, Sister Mary Dennis Donovan served on many boards, including Women in the Urban Crisis.


a page on resources on Jewish history. She highly recommended schools have full participation in the World Affairs Council of Pittsburgh. In 1975, Sister Mary Dennis served as the co-coordinator of a course on Judaism, the first in the country to educate parochial school teachers “in the history and theory of the Jewish religion and its relationship to Catholicism.” Sister Mary Dennis had the additional responsibility of coordinating peace and justice programs in diocesan schools. She also had the honor of being named by Pennsylvania Governor Milton J. Shapp as a member of the state Human Relations Commission, with the added distinction of being the first sister to serve.

With the steady decline in the steel industry in Pittsburgh and the surrounding area, the diocese felt the economic toll. In 1977, Leonard tightened the diocesan belt and eliminated programs including the HRE Office. He offered Sister Mary Dennis a position as education consultant, which she declined. In her letter of resignation, written to Auxiliary Bishop Anthony Bosco in May 1977, Sister Mary Dennis took time to reflect on her work from the 1940s to the 1970s:

For over [thirty] years the diocese has given me the opportunity to fulfill what I consider my social responsibilities while performing my major ministry as an educator. This fortuitous juxtaposition has enriched me and, I hope, has benefited the diocese.

… During my tenure I have established warm personal relationships not only with school personnel but also with many persons in the parishes and the civic community. I have been treated with the utmost courtesy and respect in my educational, civic and social action activities. I consider it a privilege that I was given the opportunity, not only to perform the usual work of the school department, but also to be involved in a number of original and far-sighted diocesan programs, i.e., the Urban Affairs Office under Father Spellman [sic]; Project Understanding which involved community dialogue on racial issues in the sixties; and Human Relations Education work which involved me in numerous ecumenical and civic projects.

She goes further with her introspection, harkening back to the early days: “As a result of my work I have grown, been sensitized and been actively engaged in the ministry of social justice inspired by Monsignor Quigley long before it became the ‘in’ thing.”

Through her work, she married her two ministries—education and social justice—meeting issues head on through Catholic Action. From the 1940s through the 1970s, she resisted “the inclination to give up when giving up seems the only thing to do.” Her influence was felt not just within the church but in society at large, so much so that she was recognized for her varied contributions. And to what did she attribute her success? She responded: “an interest in people, politics and social justice … and willingness to spend long hours listening, learning and attending meetings.”

In 1976, Auxiliary Bishop John McDowell described Sister Mary Dennis with these words:

The impact she has wherever she goes is extraordinary… Sister Mary Dennis is scholarly, an able administrator, a talented writer, a gifted teacher; a sensitive, sincere, dedicated person with the highest moral values; a responsible, active, and involved citizen. She teaches what she believes, and she lives what she teaches.

Afterword: Sister Mary Dennis’ Renewal

After stepping down in 1977 from working in the diocesan school system, Sister Mary Dennis spent the next few years initially working in higher education within the diocese and then working in the admissions office at St. Joseph College in Rensselaer, Indiana. In 1982, her life would once again intersect with her good friend Sister Thecla—this time in Lompoc, California. Sister Thecla, who had been working with the poor in Morgantown, West Virginia, accepted a position in the Lompoc’s parish of La Purisma. Upon learning that the school required a principal, Sister The-
cla reached out to Sister Mary Dennis, who eagerly took on this new ministry, for to her, this was bringing “her career full circle back to its beginnings.”

After serving as principal for five years, the 71-year old Sister Mary Dennis retired from education and moved on to a ministry in the Catholic Charities in Santa Barbara. As always, Sister Mary Dennis took on her new role with vigor and within a short period, she and Sister Thecla started Santa Barbara’s first chapter of Older Adults Services and Intervention Service (OASIS), which was a volunteer organization to identify frail elderly and help them meet their needs. During these years, Sister Mary Dennis, who was coordinating OASIS, once again was acknowledged for her impact on a community by receiving several awards. In 1990, she returned to her motherhouse and lived out her remaining years researching and writing; volunteering with an adult literacy program; and active within her congregation. She died in 2014 at the age of 98.

Much of her life of ministry had been intertwined with the struggles within the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh to the pursuit of Catholic Action and human relations—whether working in the classroom or diocesan ministry, authoring books, or establishing organizations. Her impactful efforts were acknowledged publicly with awards and honors. Drawing from her years as a woman religious living and ministering in Western Pennsylvania, Sister Mary Dennis brought Catholic Action to the people by educating laity of all ages and religions on how “To Observe, To Judge, To Act.”

Endnotes:
1 Anonymous, Sister Mary Dennis Donovan Papers, Box 1, ff1, RG303.2, Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden Archives (CSJBA).
3 Sister Mary Dennis Donovan, interview by Sister Sally Witt, January 18, 1993, transcript, Martha Smith, CSJ. Ph.D. Archives & Research Center, with a copy housed in CSJBA (hereafter SMD, 1993).
4 Kirstin Kennedy, “Aliquippa Housing Plans Show Journey of Immigrants,” The Times (Beaver, PA), February 25, 2015.
5 SMD, 1993.
7 SMD, 1993.
8 In the 1930s, Catholic priests such as Father Charles Owen Rice became involved with the unionization movement at J&L. See Kenneth J. Heineman, A Catholic New Deal: Religion and Reform in Depression Pittsburgh (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 123125.
9 SMD, 1993. According to the school’s ledger, the sisters did not charge Patricia with tuition. St. Joseph’s Preparatory School Collection, CSJBA.
10 Clipping, source unknown, 1924, CSJBA.
14 Ibid. St. Mary’s College, Notre Dame, Indiana. The author thanks Sally Witt, CSJ; Patricia Byrne, CSJ; and Thomas F. Reyczik, PhD for their input and encouragement on this article.


19 Monsignor Quigley’s first association with the Sisters of St. Joseph was during his grade school years at Annunciation grade school in Pittsburgh where the sisters taught.

20 SMD, 1993.


23 Sister Mary Dennis Donovan, “Teaching Christian Social Principles in the Upper Elementary Grades,” Social Encyclicals Course 551, Mr. H.C. McGinnis professor, Duquesne University, August 1950, 14, Box 1, RG303.2, CSJBA.

24 In the book, Sister Mary Dennis Donovan listed the names of sisters who developed the tests, questions, and activities for each chapter; sisters who prepared the manuscript for the printer; and Sister Mary Isabel Concannon, who reviewed the entire manuscript. See Monsignor J. Quigley and Sister Mary Dennis Donovan, The Christian Citizen — His Challenge (New York: Mentzer, Bush & Co., 1948), v-vi, 375.


32 SMD, 1993.


35 Kelly, Transformation, 21.


39 Kelly, Transformation, 121-122.

40 Ibid, 122.

41 Ibid, 107.

42 According to both Patricia Byrne, CSJ, and Sally Witt, CSJ, Sister Mary Dennis was a formidable individual, with a drive and an intellect to match that. She stood out as a unique member within the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden. Patricia Byrne, telephone interview, November 8, 2020. Sally Witt, telephone interview, November 16, 2020.


44 SMD, 1993.


46 SMD, 1993.


49 Joseph Cardini’s (1882-1967) model was applied in many social movements, including Catholic Action groups in the United States. For background on the transformation of Catholic Action from before to after Vatican II, see Bonner, Connolly, and Denny, Empowering the People of God.

50 “Sister-Principal Writes Textbook on Citizenship” The Record (Louisville, KY), June 29, 1967.

51 Shiel and Donovan, Responsible Citizen, 67-68.

52 Sister Thecla Shiel Collection, Ursuline Sisters of Louisville Archives.

53 Heineman, “from City,” 136.

54 Pittsburgh was one of the first ten cities to receive Model Cities funded. Kenneth J. Heineman, “Model City: The War on Poverty, Race Relations, and Catholic Social Activism in 1960s Pittsburgh,” The Historian 65 (Summer 2003): 869.

55 Other programs introduced during the 1960s included the Neighborhood Development Program, Interfaith Housing Corporation, Citizens-Clergy Coordinating Committee (CCCC), Upward Bound, Fund for Neighbors in Need, and Office for Black Catholic Ministries.

56 Historical Note, Finding Aid for RG22 07A Records, Office for the Community Service Liaison, Diocese of Pittsburgh Archives (hereafter DFA).


59 Board of Director Minutes, Box 1, ff 3, CIC Records, AIS.1976.09, PITT Archives.

60 Community Circular, September 14, 1964, CSJBA.

61 “Memo to Superiors and Principals,” Community Meeting Records, October 18, 1965, CSJBA.

62 Human Relations Committee Purpose and Objectives, c. 1965, CSJBA.

63 Ibid.

64 Human Relations Commission (hereafter HRC) minutes, November 11, 1966; December 9, 1966; January 13, 1967, Box 2444, RG 22 07A, DFA.

65 HRC minutes, January 13, 1967, Box 2444, RG 22 07A, DFA.

66 Kelly, Transformation, 208.

67 During her years at St. Joseph High School in Natrona, Sister Mary Dennis continued to teach CSL. One of her former St. Joseph students stated that CSL affected their approach that she and her deceased husband, who also had been a St. Joseph student, took within their careers in the medical profession. Rita Ann Stanko, telephone interview, November 30, 2020.


71 “In-R-City Baden Borba, October 1967, Brazil Collection, CSJBA.

72 See Kelly, Transformation, 198-221, for further information on other race relations activities in the diocese. Project Understanding is mentioned on pages 208, 209, and 212.

73 Bishop John Wright to Judge Harry Kramer, July 29, 1967, Box 2443, RG22 07A, DFA.


77 Historical Note, Finding Aid for Archbishop’s Commission on Human Relations Collection, Archdiocese of Detroit Archives.

78 “South Hills Community to Sponsor First Project Understanding Results,” Pittsburgh Catholic, January 26, 1968.

79 HRC minutes, February 1968, Box 2444, RG 22 07A, DFA.

80 Headlines in Pittsburgh Catholic, April 12, 1968, edition: “Violence-battered nation mourns King,” “Churches are spared, launch relief efforts,” “Bishop Eulogizes Dr. King,” “Pope: King’s killing ‘cowardly, atrocious’,”
“A Message Bishop Wright: Easter, 1968, USA.”


In February 1968, the federal National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders released its report (“Kerner Report”) on the causes of the 1967 race riots.


Study guide on Blacks in American history was per Bishop McDowell’s request. See Sister Mary Dennis to DHRC, September 6, 1968, Box 2443, RG22 07A, DPA.

The Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, and Pittsburgh Catholic have several articles announcing programs. According to the article “Lately Move into Human Relations,” Pittsburgh Press, February 15, 1969, “more than 700 lay leaders from Protestant denominations and Catholics in two of the 13 deanery areas of Pittsburgh Catholic Diocese will take part Thursday in a human relations program.” [n.b., the effectiveness of Project Understanding, the HRC, and the Urban Task Force caused the Pittsburgh CIC to debate its own purpose. See Minutes, August 27, 1968, Box 1, fl 3, CIC Records, A15.1976.09, Pitt Archives.]


“Nuns Set to Conduct Workshop on Racism,” Pittsburgh Catholic, June 27, 1969; Koehler, New Nuns, 15. Sister Mary Dennis had previously served as the caravan contact with the CIC Committee on Religious Education — Bulletin #1, Box 2443, RG22 07A, DPA.


CV, Box 1, RG 303.2, CSJBA. Kaufmann’s Department Store sponsored Triangle Corner Ltd., which was a program to promote Pittsburgh professional women.

She was a charter member of NCAN and Women in the Urban Crisis. She helped lay the groundwork for Pittsburgh’s Diocesan Sisters Council and for Network, a social justice lobby in Washington DC. CV, Box 1, RG 303.2, CSJBA.

Diocesan School Human Relations Education Program, 1971, Box 2443, RG22 07A, DPA.

“Office of the Superintendent of Schools Diocese of Pittsburgh Human Relations Education — Bulletin #1,” Box 2443, RG22 07A, DPA.


John Cicco to Rev. Edward Bryce, Molly Rush, and Mary Winter, March 13, 1974, Box 2444, RG22 07A, DPA.

Sister Mary Dennis Donovan to Bishop Anthony Bosco, May 1, 1977, Box 1, RG 303.2, CSJBA.

Ibid.

Anonymous, Box 1, RG 303.2, CSJBA.


Auxiliary Bishop John McDowell to Mrs. Julius Herman, February 25, 1976, Scrapbook, Box 2, 303.2, CSJBA.


Sister Mary Dennis received Santa Barbara County Commission’s Woman of the Year for the fourth district in 1988, United Way Silver Award in 1990, and Florence Charleston Award in 1990, Box 1, RG 303.2, CSJBA.