

IHM Sisters - Then and Now

August 2009



Sister Genevieve (William Joseph) Petrak grew up in Minnetonka, Minn. She was received in the IHM congregation in 1955. After five years of teaching at St. Raymond and Blessed Sacrament in Detroit, she was sent to Immaculate Heart of Mary in Minnetonka, where she taught for seven years. In 1971, Sister Gen became involved in parish team ministry at Mary, Mother of the Church, Burnsville, Minn. For 12 years she worked with catechists, pastoral and liturgical ministers in their formation and enrichment.

After finishing her studies for her master's in pastoral studies at St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., she answered a long-felt call to Africa, which took her to Zimbabwe for 13 years. She spent her first eight years teaching on a secondary level on the rural missions of Mutoko and Embakwe, both of which were recovering from the devastations of a liberation war.

During her teaching ministry, she taught various subjects - sewing, English, religion, Southern African History and literature. On an extended home leave in 1991, Sister Gen enrolled in a three-month spiritual direction internship in Milford, Ohio. On her return to Zimbabwe, she worked with the Redemptorists in the townships of Tafara and Mubvuku, setting up the formation of catechist and RCIA programs, and also taught the Redemptorist candidates. She describes her time in Africa as "pure gift," one which had challenged and stretched her as no other previous experience had.

In 1997 Sister Gen returned to the United States, where she lived and ministered in the Desert House of Prayer in Tucson, Ariz. In 1998 she joined the pastoral care team at the Motherhouse and in 2000 became a member of the Motherhouse Resident Community administration team as director of worship and spirituality. She officially retired in 2006 but has remained active as a liturgy assistant at the Motherhouse.

Sister Gen says, "I look back on my life with gratitude. I've been happy in every ministry I've had."



She enjoys reading and has several favorite authors, including David Whyte, Albert Nolan, Barbara Kingsolver and Alexander McCall Smith (Ladies Detective Agency). She also enjoys bird watching and quilting.

In a moment of reflection, Sister Gen says "The only thing that really matters is the quality of relationship on every level - creation, others, myself, God."

Note: To learn more about Sister Gen's ministry in Africa, read "Compelling Vision," by Mary Jo Maher, IHM.