

Ministry in Africa

Susan Rakoczy, IHM, ministers in Africa. In this "Ministry of the Month" she describes her life there over the last 25 years.



Sue Rakoczy, IHM, with Linus Ngam, FMS, of Cameroon. Sister Sue supervised Linus's thesis.

When I stepped off the plane in September 1982 in West Africa, there was civil war in El Salvador, the personal computer revolution was an infant, apartheid was still firmly in place in South Africa and Jerry Rawlings had taken power in Ghana through a coup nine months earlier.

Now, 25 years later, the world is dramatically different. Apartheid and Rawlings are both gone; El Salvador has faded from the world's attention which is now focused on the war in Iraq and the tragedy of Darfur; computers are a way of life; and "globalization," "global warming" and "climate change" are part of our vocabulary.

I spent five years at the Centre for Spiritual Renewal in Kumasi, Ghana's "second city," where I did retreat work, spiritual direction and leadership development with charismatic prayer groups. After about three years in Ghana, I began to sense there was "more Africa" ahead for me. This turned out to be South Africa, where IHMs had begun ministry in 1985.

I arrived in South Africa in October 1989, just as the most radical changes to end apartheid were about to begin. A few months later, President F. W. DeKlerk lifted a 30-year ban on the African National Congress (ANC), and the country began the process of negotiations for a new political dispensation. I count it as one of the most significant experiences of my life that I was an election observer in Howick during those three days of voting in April 1994 and saw history change as black women and men voted for the first time.

During these many years in South Africa, I have been on staff at St. Joseph's Theological Institute, Cedara. In 1990 we had about 75 students, predominantly from South Africa. Now there are 225 men and women from 26 countries. I have taught various courses in spirituality and systematic theology and coordinated the post-graduate program. My teaching has informed my writing and vice-versa.

These years of teaching in a rapidly changing South African context have been endlessly challenging for me as a woman. At Cedara, I have heard many variations of "my culture says that women are lower than men." As a feminist theologian, I have found support and encouragement from my sisters in the Pietermaritzburg circle of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians because they hear the same chants from men in their churches.

HIV/AIDS was just emerging on the world's horizon in 1982. Now it fills our consciousness in South Africa, which has one of the highest infection rates in the world. Gender issues and HIV/AIDS are tragically enmeshed, and we say that "HIV has a woman's face."

Although I have lived in Africa for 25 years, I know I can never be truly African, but to my friends here I have become an "adopted South African." The concerns of the country—poverty, ANC policy, crime, the state of the land—are my concerns.

At the same time, every time I speak, people hear my American accent. This has become especially problematic during these years of the war in Iraq since some people identify me with

"Bush imperialism." It is very hard for them to believe me when I adamantly say I do not support the war.

Thus I belong and I do not belong. I will always straddle the two cultures, the two continents. The challenge is to find a way to do this with grace and openness to the Spirit who led me out of my American culture into "mother Africa."

--*Sue Rakoczy, IHM*