"I desire to be everywhere when I see so many needs"

-Louis Florent Gillet, CSsR

50 Years of IHMs in Africa

In 1969, in response to a plea for teachers from the general superior of the Bannabikira Sisters (Daughters of Mary), Sister Margaret Brennan, then general superior of the IHM IHM missionaries to Africa. At the time, IHM overseas missionaries were located only in Puerto Rico and Brazil.

Sister Margaret had received the invitation from Mother Vincent through the Conference of the Major Superiors of Women (pre-cursor to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious). The Bannabikira was the largest and oldest community of African sisters on the continent, having been founded by Bishop Henri Streicher in 1901 at the request of three young Baganda women who had been trained as catechists and wanted to become sisters. The request was for secondary teachers who could help prepare sisters for entrance to university. Thus began a 50 year presence of IHM Sisters on the African continent building the capacity of indigenous women and men to assume leadership in the Church and society.

It is significant that Mother Anna Marie Grix was the first IHM missionary to Uganda. She had preceded Sister Margaret as IHM general superior and had sent the first missionaries to Brazil. Mother Anna Marie, along with Sisters Julia Seim and Ellen Balle, were blessed and given their mission crosses at a departure ceremony in the Motherhouse Chapel on Aug. 15, 1969, and arrived in Uganda on Aug. 28.
An account of this first IHM African mission is detailed by Mary Jo Maher, IHM, in *A Compelling Vision: History of the IHM Overseas Missions*, including first-hand accounts of these first IHM missionaries to Africa. The role of Sister Mary Jo in the development of the IHM Missions to Africa cannot be underestimated. She, in consultation with the General Council and later the IHM Leadership Council, and as provincial of the IHM Overseas Missions, responded to requests for IHMs to go to Africa and visited sites prior to asking sisters to consider such ministry and making final decisions about the places and ministries to which the sisters would be sent.

It is difficult to summarize 50 years in ministry anywhere but especially in Africa. The primary focus in most of the ministries in Africa has been on capacity-building through education. In Uganda, IHMs educated religious women, seminarians and university students, much of this during a time of great turmoil leading to deportations and murder of missionaries (1969-1987 and 1997-2011). During all of this, IHM Leadership consulted with those in the mission to determine whether or not they should remain in the country, knowing they were at risk of harm or deportation. In every case, the decision was made to remain in solidarity with the people among whom they were living and working. In all, 11 IHMs served in ministry in Uganda during this time. Two sisters moved from ministry in Uganda to service in a minor seminary in Kenya during this time. Marie Miller, IHM, became a Maryknoll Associate Missioner in Mombasa, Kenya from 1979-1983. IHM ministry in Kenya, was an extension of the mission to Uganda.

In 1974, Sister Mary Jo received an invitation from Bishop Rudolph Akanlu to send IHMs to work in the minor seminary in Navrongo, Ghana. The bishop made a special visit to meet Sister Mary Jo and make his request. He did not come seeking money but only IHM Sisters to teach and to be attentive to the young boys studying for the priesthood. Mary Jo was impressed with his humility and simplicity and promised to visit him in Ghana.

In February 1976, she made a two-month visit to seven countries in Africa, visiting Ghana first, in fulfilment of her promise to Bishop Akanlu. The bishop personally drove her around the poor diocese in the northeast corner of Ghana. In September 1976, after a few months of preparation, Agnes Anderson, IHM, and Marie Rebecca Vonderhaar, IHM, were on their way to Ghana. Eight IHM Sisters were missioned to Ghana in the fields of education, teacher training and spirituality (1973; 1976-96).
During this trip, Sister Mary Jo also visited Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to follow up on a request given to Sister Margaret Brennan by Mother Lydia, whom she had met at a meeting of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) in Rome, for U.S. women religious to provide secondary education for their sisters. A liberation war during the 1970s discouraged Sister Mary Jo from seeking IHM volunteers. But in 1983, after a second trip to Zimbabwe and a request by the new government for secondary teachers, she approached Genevieve Petrak, IHM. Gen always wanted to go to Africa and was eager to take on this mission. She spent 13 years (1984-1997) in education and pastoral ministry in Zimbabwe, during which time she was joined by three other IHM Sisters.

In 1985, IHM congregational leaders through the IHM Overseas Mission Provincial were requested to send missionaries to South Africa to work with the Redemptorist Fathers in their formation program and parish in the Archdiocese of Durban. Seeds of this collaboration had been nourished by Annette Boyle, IHM, in her short term prayer ministry beginning in 1974. There was a great desire for collaboration between these two congregations, members of the Alphonsian family. The request for personnel came during a time of violence under the apartheid regime in South Africa, which could have prevented Leadership from sending four IHMs, Sisters Annette Boyle, Judith Coyle, Eileen Karrer and Annette St-Amour, to this new ministry. However, IHMs trusted in the discernment of the Redemptorist provincial, Rev. Kevin Dowling, CSsR, who assured them that the sisters would be safe. Following discernment with the sisters involved and approval of leadership, the four IHMs were missioned to South Africa on Oct. 10, 1985. Thus began more than 30 years of ministry in South Africa during apartheid (1985-1994) and since 1994, a democratic country. These years included former General Superior Mary Kinney, IHM doing teacher training in the rural and remote areas of the country and Joan Mumaw, IHM, doing development work for the same agency, the Catholic Institute of Education. Fourteen IHM Sisters have been missioned to South Africa; Judith Coyle, Peg O’Shea and Susan Rakoczy continue this mission.

IHM Sisters became involved with Solidarity with South Sudan in 2013, when Sister Joan, following a second term in IHM Leadership, offered her services for capacity-building in South Sudan. The UISG, at the request of the bishops of Sudan, initiated a new model of ministry, Solidarity with South Sudan: priests, brothers and sisters from various congregations and countries collaborating in the training of teachers, health care professionals, farmers and diocesan pastoral teams. Sister Annette St-Amour joined the team in 2014, working with the pastoral team training catechists. Sister Joan was asked to work in the U.S. and develop a not-for-profit organization, Friends in Solidarity, to raise awareness of the situation in the country and the work of
Solidarity and to seek funding for the work being done in South Sudan. She works out of the LCWR Offices in Silver Spring, Md.

IHM Sisters have been impacted by the presence of sisters on the African continent. Stories shared and relationships developed have broadened horizons and contributed to a more global vision and mission for the congregation. For detailed, first-hand accounts of the life of IHM Sisters in mission in Africa, go to A Compelling Vision: A History of IHM Overseas Missions by Mary Jo Maher, IHM publication, 2000.

Joan Mumaw, IHM

Leaving after 34 years

As I gradually put things in order to hand over to others, many reflections come forth about what it has meant to be in Africa these past 34 years, 28 in South Africa and now five plus in South Sudan. Little do we realize until we look back that each ministry has been a preparation for the next one. Ministering with Solidarity with South Sudan has been a unique experience, both in the ministry and in living religious life in a mixed community of various congregations of both men and women.

I was attracted to Solidarity by both the community situation and the opportunity to train people for ministry. Solidarity developed out of a request from the bishops of South Sudan asking the UISG and USG in Rome for religious to help build the country following 21 years of war between the Arabic Islamic north and the black majority Christian south of Sudan. As I prepared to come to South Sudan, less than a month before my planned date of departure, a new civil war broke out in the two-year-old independent country of the south, this time between two major ethnic groups and eventually spreading throughout the country affecting all communities. This war is not over; though a peace agreement has been signed, yet most people wait to see.

Areas of Solidarity ministry focus on teacher training, training nurses and midwives and pastoral formation. My work was with diocesan pastoral teams and training full-time catechists who were the backbone and Church presence in most areas. Then, in response to the outbreak of war and trauma, we entered into the work of trauma-healing. A variety of workshops led us to each of the seven dioceses in the country, traveling by World Food Program planes or helicopters, since road travel was too dangerous with soldiers, rebels and criminals attacking vehicles and robbing passengers. Conditions of hunger and poverty as well as desires for peace and end
to conflict were the same everywhere. It was amazing to find such dedicated people in Church communities, the Doctors without Borders in hospitals, UN personnel in camps and other NGOs (non-governmental organizations) offering services. I was inspired by so many who generously responded to needs in very difficult conditions and the people of the communities so resilient and going on with life the best they could.

Another dimension of my ministry was being based at the newly opened Good Shepherd Peace Center, 18 kilometers southeast of Juba and forming the team to develop the center in its first three years along with the Solidarity ministry we were engaged in. It was a good combination, since several of the workshops were held at the center. It was a wonderful place to meet so many people who came for such meetings as those for the South Sudan Council of Churches, which offer a plan of action for peace, Church and local justice and peace groups and religious in the country who held assemblies and annual retreats at the center. There certainly have been many challenges, but I leave with rich memories and know in it, it was God who “grasped me by the hand” and led me through it all.

Annette St-Amour, IHM

We saw history change

On April 27, Freedom Day, South Africa celebrated 25 years of freedom from apartheid as it became a democracy in 1994. All South Africans 18 and over could now vote.

There were three days of voting in 1994: April 25 for elderly and disabled people and April 26 and 27 for the general population. I was an election observer those three days at the SAWAS Hall in Howick where I lived with other IHMs. The Independent Electoral Commission ran pre-election workshops for observers. I attended one at St. Joseph’s Theological Institute where I teach, since the Institute wanted to be involved.

On Tuesday, April 25, at 5.30 a.m. with Eileen Karrer, IHM (now a former member), we arrived at the hall as instructed. It was dark, before sunrise and cool. A group of us waited for the doors to be opened. Then, we organized everything to be ready for the first voters. By 6:30 a.m., there was a line forming.

The doors opened at 7 a.m. and people entered – people of all races. Remember that under apartheid only white South Africans could vote. We observers guided people from desk to desk – present ID, sign in, move to the voting station then vote.
By 7:15 a.m., I saw history truly change: black people were voting. It was one of the most unforgettable events of my life. All day long until 7 p.m., people came. In the township of Mpophomeni, IHM Sisters Peg O'Shea, Rita Rennell and Annette St-Amour who were election observers and monitors reported that family members brought their elderly members in wheelbarrows to the voting stations. Sister Judy Coyle, IHM, was also busy as an election observer in Howick.

On the TV that evening and in the next days, the reporters interviewed people who, in effect, said, “Lord, dismiss your servant, I have voted.” During the next two days of general voting, TV news showed long queues of patient people waiting to vote. At SAWAS Hall the feared South African police turned friendly – watching young children and holding dogs while parents and dog owners voted. The political parties had observers and during one of the days an observer from the National Party – the party of apartheid – who was in his 40s, said to me, “I never expected to see this in my lifetime.” And he was glad to see it. Sometimes things really do change.

Sue Rakoczy, IHM

Overseas Update Format
The Overseas Update is now available only in a digital format on the IHM website and via email to South African friends. Doing our share to save a few trees!

Thanks to
all those who pray for our ministries and contribute in various ways to them, to Mika Kotanova for her work on the layout and to Mika and Dorothy Diederichs, IHM, who coordinate the distribution of the Overseas Update.

The Next Issue
will be published in October 2019. Please send any news and articles to Sue Rakoczy, IHM (srakoczy@sjti.ac.za) by Sept. 15. Thank you.