

IHM Overseas Update



Spring 2020

Number 46

A Time Like No Other

How true this is! Remember New Year's Day? Celebrations for the new decade ... with news reports of a new virus in China. But China is very far away ...

And now, the world is totally different. What we completely took for granted is now dangerous: hugs and shaking hands, going to a sports event or a film, flying someplace, visiting friends and neighbors. Now, we have our wardrobe of masks. "Social distancing" and "flatten the curve" are new phrases in our vocabularies. Attending a liturgy in a church is a thing of the past. Email, Zoom and Skype keep us in contact with family and friends.



The lockdowns and "shelter in place" regulations began in Lent. At first, I thought it would have been easier liturgically during Ordinary Time of, let's say, August. But then I realized that it was exactly the right time — a Lent we did not choose and then a Holy Week and Easter utterly strange. It gave me (you?) the opportunity to go deeper into the mystery of death and resurrection, even as the number of infected people rose to incredible numbers, as did the deaths.

During this time, people are finding new ways to practice their faith in their homes. Families are doing Scripture sharing. My sister Nancy is a Lutheran pastor in New York and on Sundays, I can join her Zoom Liturgy of the Word. And there is the IHM Liturgy of the Word four times a week. Many questions are raised about the shape of the Church when the virus abates. We don't know; as the saying goes "we make the path by walking."

I am a hermit in my cottage — and I am very aware that this is a place of privilege. In contrast to millions of South Africans, I have water, electricity, food and internet

access so I can continue my academic work with my students. My job is not under threat. That is not true for millions here who have no or limited access to water (so much for “frequent hand washing”), are food insecure, have lost their jobs and are in dire poverty.

There are many government and private initiatives to help those in need and they multiply daily. The bitter fruits of “state capture” under the previous president Jacob Zuma, when about 1 trillion rands (about \$55 billion) were stolen, are clear for all to see. The country simply does not have the money it needs for relief. A R500 billion Solidarity Fund has been announced — partly from the 2020 budget and the rest from loans from the IMF and the BRICS bank. President Cyril Ramaphosa became presidential in March when he announced the first phase of the lockdown, now known as level 5. We are at level 4 and perhaps in June most of the country will be at level 3. Now we can walk (with or without dog), jog or cycle from 6 to 9 a.m. Level 4 brought a curfew from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. More stores and businesses are opening but government decides what can be sold. The sale of alcohol and cigarettes continues to be banned. There are echoes of apartheid regulations since the police can stop you and ask to see a permit for what you want to do.

This issue of *Overseas Update* brings news of the experience of Covid19 in South Africa, Puerto Rico, Brazil and Michigan. Stay safe, all.

Sue Rakoczy IHM

Looking Through the Gate



Sitting down in the garage of my house, and looking through the gate, I see a spectacular blue sky. I hear the birds chirping and flying from one place to another, filling the spaces with their sweet tweets. I feel the strokes of the breeze in my face, which make me feel more human.

Hope beyond the gate is translated into gratefulness to a compassionate God, who gives us the opportunity to see, listen and feel again, which the daily routine takes away from us so easily. At the same time, through the gate I can feel the hopelessness, fear, uncertainty, hunger and pain of the people also.

The gate is closed. It is closed to the hugs and kisses of the people. How hard it is for us Puerto Ricans not to hug and kiss! It is like if someone cuts our hands and seals our lips.

Through the gate, I can see the solidarity of the people, extending their caring to help the most needy. I too can hear the stories, thanks to the internet, the most utilized tool for communications, and for information as well as for misinformation in the planet. I am in the other side of the gate, in my safe place, asking nature to forgive us for the harm done to her.

When the gate opens again, the world will have changed, and it will be up to me to decide how I want to live on it.

Sandra E. Poupart Valentín, IHM

Lockdown in Puerto Rico

Since the quarantine of almost two months, I missed visiting our people, hugging them and listening to their stories. At the same time, I have had time to read, take some sun, and contemplate the beautiful sky and all nature. I am patiently waiting for this to be over, while I pray for the people in Puerto Rico and in the rest of the world.

Juanita Bernard, IHM

Everything summarizes in two words: highly stressed. The pandemic brought up challenges at all levels, personally and professionally. It affects the most simple quotidian tasks, such as grocery shopping, cooking and cleaning the house, to those related to our jobs.

Carolina Diez De Andino, IHM

Heightened Awareness

Heightened awareness of vulnerability
Heightened awareness of humankind, of global existence, of peoples of all nations
Subjected to sickness, death, isolation, grief, craving comfort, care, and connectedness.

Heightened awareness of helping hands, of giving hearts, of brilliant minds.
Heightened awareness of front-line workers, of 12-hour shifts for doctors, nurses, care-givers, of essential workers wearing masks in grocery stores, in sanitation work, in deliveries.

Heightened awareness of my own ability to carry and spread sickness and death, no matter how unwittingly
Heightened awareness of my desire to protect those I love, to reach out to those who mean so much to me, to connect with, be with and to see those who make my life meaningful.

Heightened awareness of the need for inner strength, the need for others, and interdependence.
Heightened awareness of the need to connect with the outdoors, with nature, with beauty and the need for self-expression in creative ways.

Heightened awareness brought on by the unwanted coronavirus
May the devastation of the virus' presence in the world go away but ...
Heightened awareness of what we have learned ...
don't go away, stay with us even after this crisis passes.
Change us for the good of all!

Candy Rekart, IHM

Lockdown in Howick



Taken aback by the sudden emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in Howick (the first known imported case in South Africa was in the next suburb, Hilton), it was not long before President Cyril Ramaphosa contacted Bill Gates and other stakeholders to devise a plan to protect the people here.

In mid-March, our staff at St. Joseph Preschool had to close (hopefully, not permanently), the children at Khazimula Home were quarantined and our HIV/AIDS Support Group was reorganized. Donor nurses from the United States have supported all three projects for many years by sponsoring wine and cheese parties to raise funds! Happily, the founder of Tias Arms, Joanne Baker, visited both projects and interviewed the AIDS Team in early February. She was thrilled to see how their funds were being used. Unfortunately, a few weeks later Joanne was stranded in Cape Town and detained by the lockdown before returning to California.

Like almost everyone in South Africa I have spent the past months at home. I spend the day watching Mass with Pope Francis and Bishop Barron on the internet, praying over the daily homilies our pastor, Scott Davidson CSsR, sends via WhatsApp and emails to our parishioners, phoning and emailing Judy Coyle, IHM, and Sue Rakoczy, IHM, walking on the property where I live, watching the dedicated channel on TV that (so far) is helping to unite the country and to keep everyone informed, checking with BBC and Al Jazeera for global news, relaxing, cooking (ugh), connecting with my teachers who are continuing food outreach to the poor.

Although this pandemic is terrifying on many levels, a part of me believes that a new world is sorely needed and the virus is forcing us all to stop and re-evaluate. Can we keep going in the old way of “normal”? How much loss are we willing to accept to move toward a different future?

Pope Francis said early on that he prayed for a Church that is poor (different from a church that gives to the poor); care for the environment; an end to violence; hope. Is the “normal” that we have been living (and perhaps are longing to return to) moving us toward those goals?

South Africa is already talking about a new way of life here after the worst of the virus has passed: a South Africa that many people struggled to bring to birth more than 25 years ago; a country where the poor have a stake, a job, health care, etc.

It may be a dream, but I pray that we can be carriers of God's dream for our whole planet and beyond.

Peg O'Shea IHM

From Detroit

I have been trying to keep track of the number of coronavirus cases in Brazil. Actually, Brazil is the Latin American country with the most cases. There have been more than 168,000 cases in the country and more than 11,500 deaths. The state of Pernambuco, where we were located for so many years, has the fourth-highest number of cases. One of my friends in Cabo, Pernambuco, lost her brother to the virus. In other parts of Brazil, various indigenous communities are at great risk of getting the virus with very little help from the Brazilian government.

Here at our house, Hartman Hall, both Barbara Stanbridge, IHM, and Diane Brown, IHM, had the coronavirus. Nancy Sylvester, IHM, and I had to take care of them for the two weeks that they were quarantined. They have fully recovered.

Here on the Marygrove campus, there have been seven or eight families staying at the former convent as they were in need of a place to stay as well as food. They have since left. There have also been some food deliveries here every two weeks or so. Lots of cars have lined up to receive the necessary food.

In the meantime, I have been doing some work on Hilde-Garden with a mask and gloves and have planted some herbal plants. Hopefully, things will get better soon and I can actually begin to sell some teas and salves!

Ann Nett, IHM

Community Immunity

In April, as the Covid pandemic continued to rage, Paula and I got a call from our friend Nina Simons, a friend we have known for over 16 years through our connection with Bioneers. After a bit of explanation, Nina was checking in to see if she could connect us with Azita Ardakani. We said "yes!"

Three or four days later, we met and chatted with Azita over Zoom. She explained the Community Immunity process/program and invited us to consider being part of it, being the conduit for it in Detroit, the city where we live and work. We said "yes" of course! Easily and painlessly, the funds we could share were transferred to the Great Lakes Bioneers Detroit bank account. Having been part of a variety of funding sources and systems, this is indeed the most user-friendly and the most freeing system we have ever experienced – not even one string attached.

To date, we have shared \$5,000 of the \$5,000 gift received. The money has provided assistance to 13 households (26 adults and 22 children/youth). The focus has been to help people to buy groceries and with other basic needs like paying water and gas bills during the Covid pandemic.

Michigan's governor has enforced a "stay at home" approach inviting all of us to do just that and only go out for basic shopping or health-related needs, unless, of course, we are first responders. We know that millions that have lost their jobs and grieve the loss of lives – Detroit has been hit particularly hard. Our mostly African-American populations (85%) are suffering and dying as a result of the inequities that they have experienced for generations, leaving them more prone to illness given depleted immune systems due to environmental-related issues. Paula and I live in Southwest Detroit near one of the most polluted zip codes in Michigan (48217) – a place where a variety of industries have managed to ruin the air, water and soil for many generations. We call this environmental racism.

Now for some anecdotal details about the 48 individuals who have been touched in Detroit via the Community Immunity fund. Paula and I reached out to a colleague, Maureen Taylor, who works with Michigan Welfare Rights. She has the pulse of needs in the community and she could help us identify some families or individuals who needed immediate help. Within a few days she came up with five households; Paula and I came up with four more and as the network grew and we 'listened' to our community's needs we identified 13 households to date (early May).

Recipients are, for the most part, people of color (African-American and Latino Detroit residents). One of the families was recently homeless; two families had experienced water shut offs (a very common reality in Detroit); one of the families came from New Orleans and experienced Katrina. Two women (one elder and one younger) are experiencing depression – the former because she has little support and the latter because she has lost her job. One of the women is Gloria's beautician who applied for unemployment and was denied. She takes care of her two grandchildren. (She has been assisted by our friend Maureen to re-apply and has a good chance of being approved.) Two of the families (from Mexico and Honduras) are here without proper immigration documents – which leaves them out of any government support even if their children were born in the U.S. Two of the women are restaurant waitresses and their places of employment have been closed for more than two months. Their plight brings to mind the inequities that restaurant workers experience, particularly if they are women.

Being in touch with all of these individuals has been a great blessing for us as we have seen the creation of a network of care and response, gratitude from all and tears from some realizing that these gifts come at a time where they need them the most – two or three have asked if they have to pay it back or if they have to sign a receipt! There is something very fundamental and spiritual about this generosity and we have been blessed by being its instrument.

To conclude, let us share a bit about one of our families, the one from Honduras. They don't live in Detroit; they live in Pontiac, a city nearby where there is a lot of poverty. The father works in a factory. Gloria met him (let's call him Antonio) over the

phone when she was asked to serve as translator for him. He had called a Southwest Detroit organization that was distributing food. Unfortunately, this organization could not provide food for him, due to the distance, however, we were able to connect him with some food banks in Pontiac. Shortly after this first solution, Antonio sent a text asking if anyone could help him with rent as he was two months overdue. He needed \$1,500. Paula thought of a friend of ours, a very generous woman, so she called and asked – of course she could help. So, three days later we drove to Pontiac with the money for Antonio’s rent. We met him; this is one of the ones with tears. In the course of the conversation, Antonio mentioned his immigration status, his concern that he had not been able to find a lawyer to help him. Gloria works as a translator with a pro-bono organization that provides legal assistance to people in Southwest Detroit and in Pontiac; the connection has been made and Antonio has a lawyer now! He sent in his asylum application to him and we hope for good news.

Thus, the network of connections continues, expands and deepens. We know that life will not go back to “normal,” whatever that means for those who say that. There is something very real happening among us in Detroit and the world – we are creating circles and networks of care. This reminds us of the mycelia networks in the soil of a healthy forest. They build support, provide nutrients and water to all the trees and plants in the forest. They know what to do, who needs it, how much and what they need because they are so intimately connected to each other and to the rest of the forest. They are one community; so are we. In the words of the Earth Charter, “we are one human family, one earth community with a common destiny.” May this continue to guide and motivate us and lead us to wholeness and health.

*Paula Cathcart, IHM
Gloria Rivera, IHM*

Overseas Update Format

The *Overseas Update* is available only in a digital format on the IHM website and via email to South African friends. Doing our share to save the 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, Dorothy Diederichs, IHM, and Annette St Amour, IHM, who coordinate the distribution of the *Overseas Update*.

The Next Issue

will be published in October 2020. Please send any news and articles to Sue Rakoczy, IHM (srakoczy@siti.ac.za) by October 1, 2020. Thank you.