

# *IHM Overseas Update*



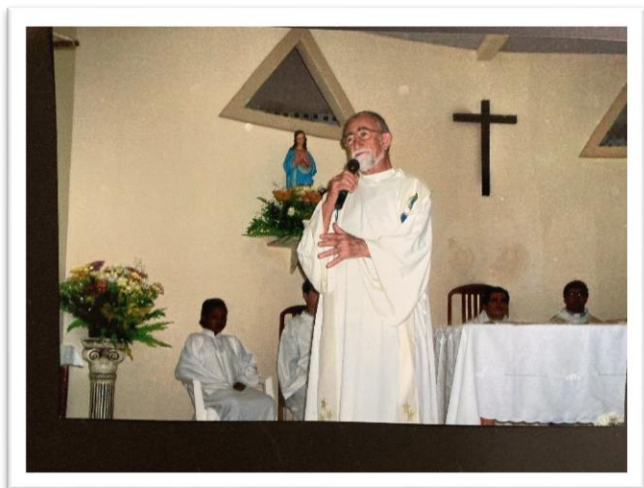
**Spring 2021**

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## **Remembering Rev. Robert Singelyn (1935 -2021)**

The mission in the area of Nova Descoberta in the city of Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil began in 1965 with two priests from the Archdiocese of Detroit and four IHM Sisters.

In 1970, Rev. Robert K. Singelyn, a young priest of the archdiocese, arrived as the newest member of the "Detroit/Recife Mission Team." Padre Roberto, as he became known, with his curly brown hair, very tall height and ready smile, captured the attention of the people.



Rev. Larry Dunn, IHM Sisters Mary Jo Maher, Carol Quigley and Dorothy Diederichs were the welcoming team. They ministered in the parish of Nossa Senhora de Lourdes. Over the years, seminarians and archbishops would arrive for short visits. Ministering in the era of Archbishop Dom Helder Camera, Fr. Bob and the team were part of the Church's struggle for justice and an end to 20 years of military government in Brazil.

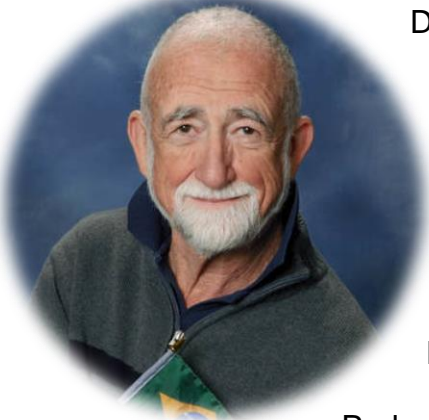
The priests' mission was to accompany youth, children and workers and celebrate the Eucharist in the main church of Nossa Senhora de of Lourdes and other areas as well. Some celebrations were in chapels and others in local communities that didn't as yet have any chapels. Fr. Bob organized workers' groups, couples' groups and childrens' groups. He spent the next 35 years walking the hillsides, sharing life with these people, listening to their stories; helping them to come together in communities; reflecting; training leaders; celebrating how God loves them.

Bob's own deep spirituality had a unique way of inspiring people as he shared Scripture and celebrated Eucharist. Living a simple lifestyle (he slept on the floor of his house as the people did) and given his easy-going spirit, he adapted well to most unforeseen circumstances.

After a time of spiritual renewal in 1989, Bob continued his missionary endeavors in Nova Descoberta, growing in age, wisdom and holiness with the people. As Bob reached retirement age, the Detroit/Recife Mission was formally closed in 2005. Returning to the United States, he established residence at St. Mary Church in Monroe.

However, "he left his heart in Brazil" and his plans to return to Nova Descoberta for six months of each year (November-May) were carefully elaborated and faithfully followed; he lived with a Brazilian couple on a hillside in Nova Descoberta.

In May 2020 he could not return to the U.S. because of COVID-19 restrictions; in March 2021 he contracted the virus, and as one of his Brazilian friends said, "He became an archangel." The Archbishop of Recife paid special homage to him, celebrating his burial, and his memorial Mass in Nova Descoberta on the day of his death. Archbishop Allen Vigneron presided at a memorial Mass, with the family and members of the Archdiocese of Detroit, on March 13 at St. Mary Church in Monroe.



Ann says, "I am very grateful for having worked with Fr. Bob in Nova Descoberta until I moved on to a rural area where I began work with various communities and eventually began a project with herbal remedies."

Padre Roberto will be missed by many people, but his spirit lives on in "o povo de Nova Descoberta."

*Dorothy Diederichs, IHM, and Ann Nett, IHM*

## **COVID-19 impacts IHM ministry in Puerto Rico**

It is well known that COVID-19 has affected everyone in the world one way or another. However, the most affected have been the marginalized individuals and communities who have no access to even the basics for living, such as water, food, employment, health, education and the technological resources needed to communicate, request and receive services, including the benefits of high-quality education programs. In Puerto Rico, we are mindful, particularly of those in every corner of the world, who do not have even one person by them to help and care for their needs, especially when they get sick.

So, we share our response to the question: what have been the effects on your ministry/ministries, after one year of COVID-19 lockdowns? We want to acknowledge these realities beyond ourselves. Congruent with this, the first answer that comes to mind is that the pandemic has exacerbated a sense of urgency to collaborate and

respond to the diverse and very complex life realities. We acknowledge that what we share is really nonsignificant, compared to the deep suffering of many people.

For our associate María, COVID-19 has impacted her ministry in terms of relationships. At her agency, the need to go online has limited the ways to interact with her colleagues, friends and family, demanding the use of technologies that help, but at the same time represents a challenge in terms of the quality of the interactions. It has also caused anxiety to diverse members of her family because of the need that they feel to protect their lives.

Carolina indicated that she prefers contact education but that through the use of technology, she has been able to create much deeper relationships and bonding with her students and fellow professors.

Juanita feels that she has had more time to think and pray. She also feels more connected, with people living afar, through letters and telephone calls. She misses the hugs from her sisters, family and friends from the United States.

For Sandrita, after retiring as a public-school teacher, the pandemic has been an obstacle to find a new ministry outside her local community. Nevertheless, this has provided the opportunity to be in solidarity with the people closest to her, who are in need. It has offered her the opportunity to serve the congregation through the Spirituality Direction Committee. It has given her a space to deepen her personal and spiritual growth. She is joyful because she has been in good health. However, she misses her family, particularly her mother.

For Lisandra, the pandemic has provoked an experience of deep inner silence and a space for contemplation beyond her expectation amid the challenges to work at the computer for long hours during the day. There has been so much to see, to think, to feel, to ponder in her heart, to pray for, to act upon, that has left her with less to say. Going online in her ministry has been a learning experience, as well as a way to connect in a different manner with others. Although she does not disregard how the online alternative has made possible to extend to others in great and fun ways, she still appreciates the possibilities that the in-person mode offers for education and other interactions more.

She spends most of her day at the computer or phone, which is sometimes frustrating for her need for physical movement. However, it is extremely life-giving for her, perceiving how much of the dynamic of the soul can be shared in everything, including the classes, regardless the mode of education. She is grateful for the privilege of the profound and transforming experiences with her students. This gift still surprises her.

She has felt more than ever the constraints of time that come with the growing new institutional demands. Several times, it has become difficult to keep engaged in the congregational affairs, as she used to do. Living in community has helped her bridge this gap many times.

Lisandra has tasted the depths of wisdom from several people who lived or are living the most painful experiences. She feels deeply touched by these brave and loving

people who garnished the bread at the table with tears, words and actions of hope after struggling fiercely for their life or after having their dignity ripped apart. Within all, it is amazing how they live knowing that our God of Life is one with them. They have discovered that they are called to Life, and to “have it to the full” (John, 10:10).

May we all continue walking this new path during the pandemic with this sense of connection with our God of Life and with one another.

### ***Vaccination update***

According to the last report from the CDC at this writing (April 9, 2021), Puerto Rico is at level 4, with a red alert notification for COVID-19. The number of deaths has reached 2,152 and the number of confirmed cases 101,783. As reported by the local newspaper *El Nuevo Día*, between April 9 and 10, the hospitals had 352 people hospitalized; 30 of these were pediatric cases. Regarding the vaccines, the Puerto Rico Health Department has reported that around one million citizens in Puerto Rico have been vaccinated with at least one dose of the vaccines.

*The IHM community in Puerto Rico  
Juanita Bernard Robles, Carolina Diez de Andino,  
Sandra E. Poupart Valentin, María Toledo Velez  
and Lisandra Pedraza Burgos*

### **IHM Ministry Grant helps a dream come true in Ghana**

So what happens when two creatives get in a room and ponder the question, “What can we do to have an impact in the Afrikan Diaspora?” Well, you get an NGO that serves this purpose, and such was the creation of the Akoma Educational Charity Foundation (AECF) in Elmina, Ghana, West Africa.

The foundation has four arms: education; food sovereignty, cultural preservation and research. This year, we focused on the Research Center, the Akoma Center for Pan-Afrikan Research, Self-Determination, and Nation Building. Why a research center? There are several reasons, including the desire to “know thyself” on a Pan-Afrikan level; the need to recover and understand the indigenous self; and the need to be able to articulate Afrikan stories and experiences with the Afrikan diasporic voice.

As fate would have it, NGO Partner Chekesha Aidoo runs a school that had a bit of space we could use for the research center, so we went for it. The space needed to be cleaned out, painted, outfitted with furniture and fixtures, books and equipment. The NGO was blessed to receive a grant from the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, with sponsorship from Sister Gloria Rivera.

So, we have space and we secured funding. Then we had to actually execute our plan to refurbish and re-envision the space that we would convert for the use of the community and our research endeavors. This took more than a little doing!





As you can see we had a bit of work to do to transform the space!

So off we were. We hired local carpenters, artisans and furniture-makers and in turn we were able to support the community and highlight the craftsmanship housed within the community. This was a source of pride for the whole area.

Here are some of the wonderful products provided by the community:



*Hand-carved doors*



*Wall mural and chairs*



*Handcrafted cane furniture*



In the end we were able to have a soft opening via Zoom in February and now the space is beautifully designed with fresh paint, books and bookshelves, conference tables and chairs and lovely artwork.

So that is the beginning of our research center. In addition to our soft opening, we hosted our first W. E. B. Du Bois Community Symposium on Race in conjunction

with University of Detroit Mercy. As our program booklet stated, “The social construction of the concept of race has impacted our global citizenry in innumerable ways. This symposium is an attempt to discuss the influences, outcomes, consequences, and experiences related to this concept. ... Our naming of this symposium honors esteemed ancestor William Edward Burghardt Du Bois for his work in expressing the critical concerns caused by the racialization of humanity.”



We had speakers from Rwanda, South Africa, Ghana, United Kingdom and the United States, which reflects the vision of Pan-Afrikan research and education we are seeking to promote. The global community symposium was held via Zoom and was very successful even though we are in the grips of a pandemic.

We invite you to come along with us as we endeavor to fulfill all our goals for the Akoma Educational Charity Foundation. For more information on the AECF, please visit our website at [akomaecf.org](http://akomaecf.org).

We are so grateful to the IHM Sisters for going on this journey of love with us.

*Jahzara D. E. Mayes and Chekesha Amisshah Aidoo*

**Note:** IHM Sisters ministered in Ghana from 1976 to 1996.

### **IHM South African ministries**

The pandemic is stable in South Africa at the moment, with fewer than 1,200 cases and 30 deaths per day (while the U.S. is still reporting more than 70,000 cases per day despite 200 million vaccinations).

Our IHM South African ministries have been affected by the pandemic in many ways. The lockdowns have created isolation and/or hunger for everyone.

The principal of Khazimula Home for (abused) Children died early into the pandemic. Rev. Mvuyo Ndenze had served from the beginning of the home in 2007 when Khazimula was started by a committee, including IHMS. He died from COVID one month after his retirement. Khazimula has been through many financial and other crises, but with the help of local communities and overseas donors, it is meeting a heart-breaking need to protect vulnerable children.

Our cook/cleaner at St. Joseph Preschool, Fikile Ngcobo, who was deaf and mute, succumbed to TB on April 17. Because the hospital was full, she was given space in the COVID ward. It is a sad day for all of our staff, who will miss her so much. Although Fikile could not hear or talk, she enjoyed being with the team and the children and she made sure that all was in order for our health and safety. After school she shopped, cleaned, washed clothes and cooked for her failing father, her

disabled sister (deaf/mute and in a wheelchair) and her two girls at their rondavel home.

The preschool is open with 45 children. Each now has her/his own table with sanitizer and personal crayons, pencils, blocks, etc. All are required to wear masks. The children receive one hot meal a day, but they must eat at their own table so that COVID is kept at bay from too much togetherness! It is impossible to keep them apart on the playground, but so far, no child has had symptoms.

Our HIV/AIDS Support Group continues to meet monthly. The nurse-son of the head teacher at our preschool checks all of the (60) women's vitals. Teachers from the preschool provide the women with a hot meal to take home (because it no longer is safe to have the group gather to talk during COVID). The 17 most vulnerable are given extra packs of food for days ahead. This week is the first time the staff came home discouraged. They said that many of the women are giving up. They arrived without masks; several are suffering from hives from not getting the correct ARV medication (which has not been available at Howick Clinic for months). We took the women's information to register them for the COVID vaccine which will "soon" be available here to all over 60 years old.

At this point I think the best support we can offer the children and adults in our projects is food. We will continue to provide sandwiches during the school holidays and on the days when the primary schools are not in session (children are going to school two and three alternate days per week during the pandemic to leave space between desks). Without school lunches, children from the squatter camp have very little to eat. The HIV group members are also hungry. I am using school funds to provide what food we can to both groups. So far, I am managing; but, as all over the world, it is impossible to meet the needs of everyone. We are doing what we can.

Sorry if this note sounds downbeat. I just want to keep you in the loop. Since we meet the preschool children every day and see how happy they are, we ourselves are in quite good space. The team at the preschool cannot be beaten! I could have retired several years ago, but they keep me going. All will be well.

*Peg O'Shea, IHM*

## **Challenges of online teaching**

South Africa implemented a very strict lockdown in March 2020 as soon as the pandemic was declared. We were ill-prepared to teach online at St. Augustine's College of South Africa. Email became our vehicle of instruction, sending out readings and assignments week by week and receiving written submissions to be marked in return. If your class material was pretty much in-hand, it was not too difficult and given that no one could go out except for food and medicine, it helped fill up the days.

In July when the second semester began, we were subscribed to Google Classroom and were able to have virtual classes. This, too, took some getting used to, although the students who were more "tech savvy" than those of us BBT (Born Before Technology) helped fill in the gaps. From then until now, all of our instruction is held

online. It has some real conveniences, but also some real losses, as engagement is often stilted and some students struggle with access.

The lockdown has eased considerably at present, but we will continue with virtual instruction until the end of the year. Perhaps in the next academic year (February to November) some combining of both modes will be possible.

*Judy Coyle, IHM*

### **Always new things to learn: teaching in the time of COVID**

COVID-19 came roaring into our lives in early 2020, ready to turn the world upside down with no warning—and no timeline. Is this a short-term crisis, a problem for a year or so—or a pandemic that will transform the world as we once knew it? The answer we know now is number three.

This is certainly true for me as an educator at the tertiary level. At St. Joseph's Theological Institute, I teach theology and spirituality courses (now called "modules") to undergraduates. In the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics of the University of KwaZulu-Natal my work is with honours (a one-year degree after a three-year bachelor's degree, which is the South African system), master's and PhD students.

"Contact" classes, which is all we knew until March last year, disappeared for who knows how long. Here came the challenges of online teaching and learning. St. Joseph's left us to our own creativity until June, when we had a short and very basic workshop on MS Teams. The university suspended classes for a few weeks in March-April so that everyone could learn how to use Zoom. In the second semester at St. Joseph's we began to use Teams, with all its challenges. This year I moved to Zoom in my St. Joseph's teaching because I have found it easier to work with. I am amazed at how much I have learned in a year that I can compare Teams and Zoom!

In my experience, teaching online takes two to three times more time than contact teaching. In the past, the students would receive a bibliography for a module. They would go to the library, read and perhaps make copies of articles and book chapters. Now I have to photocopy everything, turn the readings into pdfs and upload to two platforms. This takes a great deal of time.

In a contact class we see each other. In a Zoom class I may see a face or two, but most students keep their video off and so I hear disembodied voices. In my weekly trip to St Joseph's I see a few students (some modules are now contact classes) but I have realized that I would not recognize most of my students if I met them.

South Africa has an ongoing power problem because Eskom, the national supplier, is unreliable. We experience regular "load shedding" when the power is off at scheduled times. This is annoying but at least we can prepare with a wireless router. What is more challenging is when the power goes off without explanation. My worst teaching nightmare has only come true once when the power was off and my router failed. I cancelled that class through an email on my phone to the class representative.



Online life has advantages. It saves travel time; I have not been to UKZN's campus in Pietermaritzburg since early March 2020. Zoom staff meetings seem to have a greater attendance than in the "contact years." But I miss interaction with living, breathing students and colleagues.

My spiritual direction ministry now is done by Zoom and Skype and this has worked fairly well. But body language says a great deal, and that is gone now in an online spiritual direction session.

People speak of a "new normal" but the reality is that "the constant is change".

*Sue Rakoczy IHM*

### **Overseas Update Format**

The *Overseas Update* is available in a digital format on the IHM website ([www.ihmsisters.org](http://www.ihmsisters.org)) 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 Molly Hunt of the IHM Communications Office for the layout, and to Dorothy Diederichs, IHM, and Annette St Amour, IHM who coordinate the distribution of the *Overseas Update*.

### **The next issue ...**

... will be published in October 2021. Please send any news and articles to Sue Rakoczy, IHM ([srakoczymonroe@gmail.com](mailto:srakoczymonroe@gmail.com)) by Sept. 15, 2021. Thank you.