

IHM Overseas Update

The Overseas Update concludes its mission

This issue marks the end of the publication of *The Overseas Update*. It is issue #50, a milestone since the first issue in 1997. Over the years, several IHMs have returned to the United States from various African and Latin American countries while others continued their ministries in Mexico, Puerto Rico and South Africa.

All IHM Sisters who served outside the U.S.—no matter how long ago—were invited to share a significant memory or two of those years. So, this issue is rich with memories from a variety of countries and ministries—and of thanksgiving for the people we met and who touched our lives so profoundly.

Lisandra Pedraza Burgos's article "Love is inevitable" describes so well what overseas mission experience has been for us.

We hope that news of IHM overseas ministries will be included in the various IHM publications in the future.

I am grateful to all those who "all down the years" sent articles that filled the *Update* issues and to those who assisted with the distribution of paper and digital versions.

Sue Rakoczy, IHM
Editor, IHM Overseas Update



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- *Love is inevitable*
- Reflections on IHM missionary life
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- Gratitude for the *Overseas Update*

Love is inevitable

One night, as I stood on the porch saying goodbye to a friend, Samuel Isaí's parents came to pick him up after his visit with his grandparents. As we met in our front yards, I spoke.

Samuel Isaí, I want you to know that I loved you even before you were born. I remember when you were in your mommy's belly and when you started to walk and speak. With the pandemic, I cannot see you as often, but this will pass and we will be able to meet more often. Just know that you are loved.

He looked at me with an expression that seemed to shout, "Of course, no doubt!" Then, he took a deep breath and smiled, looking straight into my eyes. Suddenly, he started speaking with a very solemn tone, moving his arms up and down slowly, like speaking from the depths of his soul. He asserted, "Love is inevitable. I love people even when I do not know them, even if they live far away...."

This statement has revolutionized my consciousness. Samuel Isaí, a natural mystic and theologian, became a prophet for me in the context of many local and global complexities. How God's revelation was so clear and simple for this three-year-old boy, who started life with this profound foundation! His name honors his prophetic presence in this magnificent world. His heart and words fill the world with hope and infinite possibilities. I could just imagine what would happen if we all live as he said...

As I write this reflection, it is Holy Saturday, Easter's Eve. This *Overseas Update* issue coincides with our celebration of God's presence in the world. It comes to mind what it has meant for me to be part of a congregation that has shared a vision toward inevitable love toward life. I recall the diverse sisters that have shared their love, even when they did not know, at first instance, the people and culture. (I need to underscore that this is also true for each that has ministered only in the United States or her own country.) Their commitment to life has been inspirational. It has been expressed through the accompaniment of persons and communities in the struggle for justice and peace, which includes the

defense of women, children, elders, workers, natural resources such as the land, water, and air, and through the diverse efforts toward adults' and children's education, catechesis programs, base community work, sustainability/ecological education and gardens, theological education, parish ministry, health, education, counseling, healing and prayer ministry, among others.

The meaning of inevitable love has called us to be many times a voice for the voiceless, but far more, to listen carefully to the shout through the lives of the most marginalized, whom we know have a lot to say, but have not always been heard. This implies leaving room for others' perspectives and actions and welcoming the challenges and possibilities of these people. It has meant to assume a prophetic stance, doing what is needed and has not been done or understood by many. It has meant to *live out there*, yet from the depths of inner lives, from the depths of prayer. It has meant to tread alone sometimes, with an awareness of our deep connection with God, with everyone and all that is. It has meant to be active and proactive and to stay still, to reach out a lot more and to be fully present. It goes beyond collaborating and doing with and for others, imposing subtly and with good intentions our world views and cultures.

In this regard, we have become more sensitive to the fact that our understanding of mission is to live the dream of God in the quotidian, not to impose our religious or political values and ideas upon others, but to walk with others so that together, in the journey, we have a chance to see, taste, nurture and celebrate the richness of life with its diversity. We meant to question and challenge the individualistic parameters embedded in personal decisions that affect others in the world, beyond ourselves. To do this, we aimed to confront and sometimes reshape many of our understandings, to embark with transparency and integrity into multiple perspectives.



We recognized and claimed that other cultures and territories are sacred lands. In recognizing this sacredness, there is a moral mandate, an ethical consideration of reciprocity in our praxis of discernment and ministry. These have challenged the frontiers of personal and communal discernment and commitment, turning us away from individualistic religion or psychological approaches, sometimes through painful experiences. We aimed to hold strong enough to what we have known and believed, what we have experienced, to welcome the next chapter in the cultural adventure, lived and written together with the people of the particular cultures. We willingly let go and promised to live the call to embrace displacement as we embrace each marginalized person and culture. We transform ourselves as we move into deeper meanings of the experience of Ruth: Your people will be my people, and your God my God (1:16). Those that we have accompanied, known and unknown, have become our people.

“The meaning of inevitable love has called us to be a voice for the voiceless, but far more, to listen carefully to shout through the life of the most marginalized, whom we know have a lot to say, but have not always been heard.”

I emphasize the verb to accompany, as I recall the experience of God’s people, where God is present faithfully, even in the desert. Being present implies action. Nevertheless, this action is characterized by inclusivity and compassion. It subverts the established order, which excludes or colonizes individuals and groups. Inevitable love has meant for me a gigantic, unexpected and awe-inspiring blessing: the outpouring of love that characterizes my relationship with my sisters. This may seem like bragging, but to the contrary, it has made me very humble to think I have been given a gift generously and unconditionally and that there is no way I can “payback,” no matter what I do. I have asked myself, how in the world have these women loved me and my people? How have I come to love them so profoundly? How have we connected so deeply that most of the time we have been able to transcend cultural differences and other barriers? How have we known deep in our hearts that together the only thing we ought to do is love inevitably, even when we do not know the people, or we do not live in the same space?

This inevitable love has been at the core of the commitment of our sisters in ministry, wherever they

have been and are. Haiti, Ukraine and many other countries come to mind as I entertain the possibilities of inevitable love. Samuel Isaí has discovered early in his life this powerful connection with our brothers and sisters, beyond limits. Again, I can only imagine what would happen if we all live as he said. Thank you Samuel Isaí! Thank you dear sisters! Thank you to those in sacred territories who also accompanied us! May we continue expanding the boundaries of the powerful inevitable love in our world.



***Lisandra Pedraza
Burgos, IHM***

Brazil: making Vatican II real



Envision 1965: the end of the Second Vatican Council. Four IHM Sisters were sent to join the Detroit Recife Mission in Nova Descoberta, Recife Brazil. Dom Helder Camera was the Archbishop, afire with the Spirit.

As in other Latin American dioceses, small Basic Christian Communities were slowly being formed among the people of the poor and marginalized. People were guided to reflect on their lives in the light of Scripture and over time began to struggle for their human rights and dignity. Thus, the context for "Liberation Theology" was developed. What a PRIVILEGE and GIFT it was to be a vital part of this evolution both for me personally and for the whole Church.

"I have been gifted with so many more gifts than I have ever given in my 22 years in Brazil."

To share life together, to listen and reflect with the people, especially the women, was to influence and direct my way of living, my spirituality, and my envisioning of life and its meaning to this day.

To be involved over the years at diocesan and regional levels in the evolution of Vatican II in the Latin American Church was life-giving.

On a deeper level, becoming part of everyday living, cooking, washing clothes, shopping at the street market, listening to the stories of women and learning from the children left profound impressions on my soul. I have been gifted with so many more gifts than I have ever given in my 22 years in Brazil. Perhaps, this is what Jesus meant when He said, "The poor you always have with you."



Dorothy Diederichs, IHM

Brazil: accompany

I have been very much inspired by the book *In the Company of the Poor* based on the conversations between Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez. They have shared a deep commitment to pragmatic solidarity with the poor and marginalized.

When my niece Sharon died from COVID-19 last December, I accompanied Sharon's mother and my only sister. Accompanying my family members' suffering from loss of loved ones became paramount. I have been reflecting on how important it is to accompany people on their journeys.

- ♦ Accompany groups organizing to bring about change.
- ♦ Accompany groups organizing vegetable, fruit and herb gardens.
- ♦ Accompany communities organizing to bring about changes in their neighborhoods (Marygrove Community Association).

It is also important to continue to accompany communities in Michigan, Puerto Rico, Brazil and other places as well.



Brazil: two years that changed my life

I lived in northeast Brazil for two years in the early 1980s with Ann Nett. There I experienced God in the everyday lives of the people: in a grand celebration of feasts even in the midst of poverty; with children, each bringing one ingredient for a birthday cake and seeing the poor as those who had less than themselves; in the families gathered in the small chapel to reflect on the Word of God during what they called a "Mass without the priest" or the Lenten study and reflection on significant social issues; in walking the Way of the Cross on the hillside, stopping at homes of those experiencing pain; in the funeral procession passing on a busy afternoon through the marketplace; in the day-to-day beauty and struggles of life.

As I left Brazil and returned to life and ministry in the States, the experience of coming to know God as a God of the people had prepared me to grow in the values of inclusivity and the oneness of persons. Later it expanded into a more cosmic spirituality. Life is a journey, and there are moments along that journey that are pivotal. My few years in Brazil (Dec. 1983-Nov. 1985) were some of those moments.



Margaret Alandt, IHM

Memories of Honduras

After 22 years in Honduras, having been back in Michigan since 2005, it is always pleasant to look back and remember those years that were among my happiest ones in mission. The biggest impression that has stayed with me is that the poorest people are always the most generous. When we had been gone all day visiting a village, a young neighbor boy would appear at our door to invite us over for supper on our return. The family was poor and the kitchen looked bare of extra food, but there were always beans and tortillas sufficient to share with us.



Barbara Zimmer, IHM

Aida took in a very malnourished little girl and was able to get her up to a normal weight for a child her age with the help of goat's milk. Aida was able to get the milk from another person who had the goat and was willing to share it with the little girl. Aida developed a tumor on her neck which no one saw as her hair covered it. She prepared her youngest son for her eventual death by letting him feel the tumor and explaining that she would soon be with God. Her deep faith and witness through it all were an unforgettable example to me.



I have so many, many memories of the Honduran people who were survivors of many hardships beyond our imagination, but their stalwart faith always buoyed me up as we strove to accompany them.

Honduras: deep faith

When reflecting on the time I spent living with the people of Honduras, many wonderful memories arise. Perhaps one that most inspired me was the

deep faith manifested in their daily lives. In many villages, a priest did not come often to celebrate the liturgy. This did not keep the faithful community from praying in the church or their own homes. Sharing scripture, novenas, the rosary and processions were common practices. If no priest came during Holy Week, the journey of Jesus from Palm Sunday to Easter was simply "acted out" according to the scripture account. This was amazing to me. A prayer of gratitude to those who went before!



Donna Marie Schroeder, IHM

The generosity and hospitality I felt with the Honduran people were evident everywhere. This was true no matter whether people lived in a village or a larger city. Welcoming and sharing were just a part of who they were! How grateful I am for this enriching time in my life.

Honduras: rural ministry

In Honduras, we lived and ministered in rural areas where huge parishes generally had one priest. We searched for people in remote areas who were prepared as Delegates of the Word. Their commitment to share the Word in their communities and unite members for basic social change was a blessing. Their dedication was a gift that continues to inspire me!



Val Knoche, IHM

The blessings of Puerto Rico

I will always consider my ministry/community life in Puerto Rico as one of my greatest blessings. I entered the IHM Community in 1956. The first 10 years were lived with the familiar saying “You keep the Rule and the Rule will keep you.” This wasn’t life-giving for me as time went on!

With the dawn of 1966, my life changed dramatically. I was asked to go to Academia Santa Teresita in San Juan, Puerto Rico! It came as a complete surprise. I could even talk to my parents and a few IHM friends about this new adventure for their input.

So, from 1966 to 1972, I lived in abundant sunshine and the warmth of an IHM group of sisters, a meaningful ministry of teaching English to third and eighth graders in beautiful and lush surroundings by the Atlantic Ocean.

The Catholic Church was “opening its windows” to the breath of change as a result of Vatican II, as was our IHM community. Puerto Rico was a glorious place to celebrate these events and my own lust for life and love!



Carol Janowiak, IHM

42 years in Puerto Rico: years of personal growth and appreciation of a culture and of resilient people

I went to Puerto Rico when I was 25 years old. Looking back on my experience I can sincerely say I “grew up” there. I grew into adulthood with people who accepted me, but also challenged me to go beyond the known, to keep stretching into the new and unknown. I was a learner; they were the teachers. I found it to be a comfortable, collaborative way of growing and appreciating the innate wisdom of those who lived their lives, often struggling with economic poverty, but with a strong sense of family, relationships and connections, of generosity from the little they had.

I learned that celebrating life was basic to living! I learned that even in loss after hurricanes took so much away, it was life that counted most. I heard the words, “But we are alive!” standing in front of the rubble that was once the home of those who spoke the words. A gift of two eggs in an empty sugar bag from two elderly women was more precious to me than you can imagine. Again, a lesson of life and sharing not from abundance, but from what little they had.

I learned that there is more than one way of doing something, from peeling potatoes to planning a gathering “Puerto Rican time.” I learned that we don’t all think alike, that we process in different ways, that linear reasoning has drawbacks and divergent thinking opens unimagined possibilities. I learned that loud voices did not mean anger, but an excited exchange. I learned that accompanying someone on errands was not necessarily an efficient use of time, but it was relationship building and thus more important in the lessons of life. I learned that being vulnerable, showing it even when I did not like it, was held by caring hearts, and I grew from it.

I learned a lot about myself and others. I will always be grateful for those who helped me grow into adulthood. I hope to use those lessons of life for the evolving future in years to come.

Candy Rekart, IHM

A delightful highlight in Puerto Rico

IHM Formation in Puerto Rico was a major highlight for me. IHMs were part of the very beginnings of an Intercongregational Formation Program with women's and men's congregations and participants, not only from the island but from other cultures as well. Maureen Kelly was the first IHM novice in 1975. The Intercongregational Program launched that year with IHMs offering their skills in collaboration with others, programming, mentoring and participating in classes, workshops and shared time together. Lisandra Pedraza Burgos and Sandra Poupart Valentín participated with cohorts in these times which included not only theological background and learning but genuine fun, songs, and dancing in typical Hispanic fashion!

Carmen Armenta Lara, who made her novitiate in Puerto Rico, was joined by eight seminarians from Mexico for the time she was there. When María Antonia Aranda Díaz made her novitiate in Puerto Rico she was joined by two other women for the novitiate experience. By this time the Program no longer existed as before, but these three women, all from different cultures, speaking the same language, along with their formation directors became "Companions on the Journey."

I will always treasure the time I spent as part of the many women and men who journeyed together, in discernment toward a life commitment in service to others.



Candy Rekart, IHM

Reflections on IHM missionary life

As I was reflecting on my experience of missionary life today (May 1), the Gospel provided nice imagery for what I have experienced since 1975. The disciples are out in the boat trying to catch fish, the one thing they knew how to do after experiencing the loss of Jesus. These professional fisherfolk are catching nothing. Jesus, whom they do not recognize, signals to them to cast their nets to the other side of the boat and, low and behold, the net becomes so full it is close to breaking.

In some ways, this is a good image for my life as an overseas missionary. In 1975, I was called to cast my net not in Monroe or Detroit, but in Uganda, a country and a people I had never thought about before.

Thus began a fruitful ministry of teaching cultural anthropology in the major seminary and making life-long friends with students who are now pastors, bishops and professors, even one at Notre Dame. This was also a time of civil war and Idi Amin, a rather

ruthless dictator. I was asked to leave once and was threatened another time with expulsion. I learned the importance of building relationships and of trusting that our loving God would care for us all in ways we could not imagine, much as the disciples learned to trust in the Risen Christ once they recognized him.

One of my most loved ministries was serving as IHM Overseas Mission Provincial from 1988 to 1994. During this time, I was privileged to witness IHMs in ministry around the globe: South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Mexico, Brazil, Honduras, Nicaragua and Puerto Rico. The "catch of fish" is indeed abundant in all the places where IHMs have and are serving in mission. Lives are changed by interaction with IHMs and we are transformed in the process.

After serving the congregation as a member of the Leadership Council (1982-1988) and as Provincial, I was once again called to an overseas mission, this time in South Africa, a country where IHMs have

Ministered since 1985. While originally, I thought I would be working with teams training educators at the Catholic Institute of Education, the end of apartheid meant changes for the CIE as well. Given the end of support of NGOs by the European Union, which began bilateral funding to the government led by Nelson Mandela, the CIE needed to establish a development office. I was tasked with this challenge and opportunity, something I never thought of doing. Little did I realize how important this experience would become in later years.

In 2006, after 10 years of ministry in development in South Africa, I was once again called to serve the congregation as a member of the Leadership Council. These were challenging times, especially with the illness and passing of Mary Fran Gilleran. They were grace-filled times during which there was great support from the members of the congregation.

In 2012, I was again called to Africa, this time to be a part of a new paradigm for mission among the poor: women and men religious working with the laity under the banner of Solidarity with South Sudan. Initially, I thought I would be assisting with administrative tasks in South Sudan. However, during a brief sabbatical, I was approached by the Executive Director of Solidarity, Pat Murray, IBVM (now director of the UISG) and asked if, after spending a few months in South Sudan, I could return to the U.S. and develop a non-profit organization to raise awareness of the work of Solidarity and funding to support the work. I hesitated, recalling my decision not to commit to fundraising again after the stress-filled experience in South Africa. Once again, I was being called to cast my net to the "other side of the boat."

My discernment included reflection on my experience: African mission experience, leadership in a religious congregation and 10 years of development work. These were all gifts with transferable skills for organizing and directing a non-profit in support of Solidarity. Friends in Solidarity became an official not-for-profit organization in August 2016 with major superiors as Members of the Corporation and interested religious comprising the board of directors. Since 2016 the organization has transferred over two million USD to South Sudan to support Solidarity

training of teachers, nurses, midwives, farmers and diocesan pastoral teams.

God has strange ways of leading us into missions and various ministries. I am grateful for the experiences that have shaped my life and for the support of the IHM congregation, especially Margaret Brennan, Mary Kinney and Mary Jo Maher who called me forth to consider an overseas mission. I am also grateful for the faith and trust with which I have been gifted that have enabled me to cast my net to the



Annette St-Amour, IHM and Joan Mumaw, IHM at the Good Shepherd Pastoral Centre in South Sudan

other side of the boat when it might have been safer and "easier" to remain in what was familiar and seemingly safe.

Thank you to Sue Rakoczy, IHM, for her many years of editing and encouraging writers to share their experience in the IHM Overseas Mission Update. Now it is up to all of us to do our part to tell the IHM story in mission at home and abroad or wherever we may be called.

At the end of today's Gospel, Jesus says to Peter and all of us, "When you were younger you used to ... go where you wanted, but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will... lead you where you (may not) want to go...." Let us recall the abundance of allowing ourselves to be led by the Spirit whenever and wherever we may be led. We are always missionary disciples until our dying day, called to recognize the God of love in all whom we meet and in the Earth that we are privileged to inhabit.

Joan Mumaw, IHM

Four pilgrim mission journeys

Recently, we had a retreat entitled *Pilgrims on a Journey*. The journey was accomplished by means of honoring the Beatitudes. They were read in a different way. Blessed are those who appreciate everything and everyone along the way. Blessed are those who expect setbacks and problems along the way, they shall be full of trust and have no fears. Blessed are those who travel lightly, they shall be free to receive gifts in abundance. Blessed are those wise enough to travel with others from the past and present, they shall be protected and their joys and pains will be multiplied.

How much these words resonated in thinking about my/our mission journeys. Phrases came to mind with all the stories they held and layers of meanings.

- ♦ The sound of coquis (*small treefrogs in Puerto Rico*).
- ♦ The beauty of the Jacaranda tree (*South Africa*).
- ♦ The beauty of the colorful cloth and exquisite hair plaiting (*in Africa*).
- ♦ The many languages in the marketplace.
- ♦ The loss of freedom as borders closed and curfew began
- ♦ The many tribal customs appreciated by some and despised by others.
- ♦ The number of many different religious communities and all the countries they represented.

All the above were experienced in several countries, some of which I was gifted to serve for a few months, others for years. The pilgrim journey began with an invitation from those who invited, encouraged and supported me: Helen Smith in Puerto Rico, Anne Marie Hughes in Honduras and the Mission Center in New York, Mary Jo Maher and Joan Mumaw in Ghana and Zimbabwe, Mary Ann Markel in Zimbabwe and South Africa. It was indeed standing on the shoulders of ones who had gone before me, the IHM companions on the journey in each of these countries, who traveled with me.

Now in later years, the journey is with a walker and I meditate on what I've experienced. I'm now a piece of kindling in the powerhouse of prayer in the Motherhouse Senior Living Community.

Today, we all pray for an area most, if not all of us, have never experienced. We see daily, thousands leaving their homeland of Ukraine, people who see their art and culture in bombed ruins and people beginning again in schools with different languages.



The words to the hymn *This is My Song* are also my meditation prayer.

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean and sunlit beams on cloverleaf and pine.
But other lands have, sunlight too, and clover and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
So, hear my song, O God of all the nations, a song of peace for their land and for mine.*

So, whether at home or abroad, in war or peace, feast and famine, joys and sorrows are the same. We stand on shoulders of those gone before us and we continue to be pilgrims on this journey, unfinished.

Rose Graham, IHM

My journey to four African countries

My 32 years in Africa was spent in four unique countries.

In Kenya, I taught in a minor seminary, St Pius X. It widened my educational aspects. Also, it was the first mission where I truly lived among the people who were very gentle and generous. Zimbabwe continued my time among the people who also were very gentle and generous. Zimbabwe was a time among people who lived with the difficulty of fighting among tribes and also with white settlers in the farm areas. This was getting very close to our mission. Therefore, the Irish Brothers of Christian Education invited me to live with them at Mankwe Christian College of Education in South Africa.



After six years, I heard of Uganda Martyrs University; and, when I wrote for a position, the Vice Chancellor responded, "I received your letter last night. It was a letter sent by God. Come, we need you." Uganda was a fourteen-year venture. I was able to use all of my gifts, teaching and helping the students work with HIV/AIDS families and in the orphanages. I continue all these years later to think of my time in Africa and pray for my friends' well-being.

Marie-Esther Haflett, IHM



The gifts of Kenya

I was blessed to minister in Mombasa, Kenya from 1979 to 1983. I worked with a team of four Kenyan men and two American women doing development education for the diocese of Mombasa. We worked with parish groups, women's groups and workers – all religions represented. I learned so much in cross-cultural living and grew in accepting and embracing others' views and ways of being. Their gift to

me was experiencing a quality of life that wasn't based on material things, education and financial stability. Their lives expressed values of respect for one another, hospitality freely given in the poorest of circumstances and laughter shared with song and dance! These are gifts I carry into my life.



Marie Miller, IHM

Christmas drama in Ghana



From 1976 to 1983 I ministered in the Northeastern Region of Ghana, West Africa, teaching and training teachers for elementary grades.

As I began my second year at Our Lady of Lourdes Practice School, the headteacher requested that I organize a Christmas play. Plays were rather rustic in Navrongo, a poor mostly rural town. The stable was a table turned on its side, with the long savannah grass of the area forming the roof. Children wore whatever they could find for costumes. Since the oldest class were then second graders with minimal language proficiency, I taught them to sing the “Friendly Beasts” song, and they did very well singing and playing the parts of familiar animals.

The following year I told the then third graders that whoever was the first to bring a local shepherd’s flute to class could be the shepherd boy—a special role in this play. I thought that they would be rather excited, but for days, no flute appeared. I then reminded them that they did not need to know-how to play the flute, only to carry it as a prop, in order to have this lead role. Finally, in a few

days, as the shyest boy in the class came forward with flute in hand, I wondered whether I would regret my promise. However, he came through marvellously and subsequently became much more confident when speaking English. (This was how I learned that no one looked forward to becoming a family’s shepherd boy, outside in the hot sun and dry harmattan winds all day, unable to go to school.)

In year four, I was a bit late in introducing the next play. So, on All Saints Day, as I was conducting a class with younger students, I heard singing outside the open windows. The older ones had remembered all the words to carols from the previous years, and that was their way of reminding me that we had best get going on practicing new ones for the coming feast.

I again had a delightful surprise the year the oldest class passed to fifth grade. I had decided to let them make up the dialogue, suggesting that they base the play around the places that Mary and Joseph went trying to find shelter. One of the scenes they created took place at a local “chop bar,” a place where men gathered for a respite on their way home from working, mostly in the fields. Those children were such wonderful imitators, with their perfect Standard English, mixed in with the “pidgin English” of lorry (truck, bus) drivers and other business people throughout West Africa.

I have always thought that people, events and situations that become a part of our lives are teachers for us. In my experience as an overseas missionary, I realized more than ever how much I have yet to learn!



Agnes Anderson, IHM

Memories of my years in Ghana (1976-1996)

As an IHM Sister, we were very local. The majority were from two states in the U.S.—Michigan and Ohio. Ministering with International Congregations such as the Missionaries of Africa, Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, Holy Child Sisters, Presentations Brothers and of course the Ghanaian clergy and SMI Sisters were exciting. I can now say I have friends from several European and African countries and even a couple in Asian countries. Some would say that people in Sub-Saharan Africa and northern Ghana were very poor, but that depends on how poverty is defined.

There was no running water and people needed to go to rivers or distant wells to fetch water. There was no electricity. The people lived in mud huts/dwellings; medical help was miles away and reached only on foot or if lucky, by crowded lorries (trucks) that might come to the dirt and unpaved roads.

But even with their limitations of material and physical amenities, the people were happy. The women dressed up, walked miles to the weekly market, chatted with other women carrying their children on their backs and large loads on their heads. Singing and dancing were common. When we offered an occasional ride to a hospital, gratitude was expressed with a live chicken or a pot of soup, a smile and offering their baby for our admiration.

When I went to Africa, I thought I had some ideas of how to help. However, Mary Jo Maher, IHM sent us with this advice, “Go as a learner.” I think I followed that advice because I returned to the States so enriched. I also learned that people in Ghana had great respect for their ancestors. I had been sent to teach young men age 15-25 in the minor seminary and then in government institutions as a Christian presence. These experiences were in a teacher training college and a secondary school. These were residential and presented their own gifts and challenges. The students were many. It was not unusual to have 50-60 in a class with few books. It was a challenge to balance that with everyday needs of food and entertainment. I have good memories. The students were eager to learn and came from many tribes so there were many multi-cultural opportunities for learning of language, music and dancing, food preferences and dress.

There were many things to learn.

- ♦ The student body was made up of various religions including Christian, Muslim and traditional believers.
- ♦ Food scarcity in two institutions caused student uprisings. As a result, the lives of the heads of these institutions’ were in jeopardy.
- ♦ Women were subject to traditional superstitions. One was giving birth to twins and seeing to their deaths by abortion. When a fetus was found, the tribal leaders sought the woman to be killed.
- ♦ Tribal uprising in the area caused people to be killed and homes destroyed.
- ♦ Government coups and tensions with neighboring countries forced us to go through checkpoints every time we left our house in “no man’s land” between Ghana and Togo.
- ♦ An outbreak of cerebral spinal meningitis where thousands died because there was no penicillin available.

I wish I could have mastered one tribal language, but since we were teaching in English and there were few or no printed materials of the local language, this never happened. Even French would have helped since we were bordered by French-speaking countries. This made me realize the meaning of colonization and the mentality which we now identify as the “Doctrine of Discovery.” If you aren’t white and Christian, your land is free for the taking. The British took Ghana, which they named the Gold Coast and the French took the surrounding countries, often splitting tribes. Families ended up in different countries, but belonged to the same tribe.

I can say I am a different person because of my 20 years in Ghana, but I don’t “know” Africa. I only know a small fraction of a continent with a history I still long to pursue and learn more about.



Rebecca Vonderhaar, IHM

Peace and gratitude

A week before leaving South Sudan, as I was sorting and packing to leave, I was suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of peace and gratitude for the privilege of being in Africa for the past 34 years, walking with God's people, especially in their suffering. I felt it was a great gift I had been given. The call to intercultural mission began in working with Native Americans in Montana. I loved being with Indigenous people and experiencing their wisdom and customs. When new in Africa, I kept thinking how similar the customs were of peoples who had never encountered one another. In it all, we could experience our common humanity.

In 1985, I was among four IHMs who began a mission collaborating with Redemptorists, in South Africa during the final years of apartheid governance. It was four cultures, different worlds, black and white, mixed-race and Indian. It was uncomfortable. Within a few years, two of us moved to the black township, where there were many attacks and killings. I learned to just be present and grieve with the people and go to situations I would never have imagined possible. Despite my fear, I was driven by a power way beyond myself.

Little did I know the next call in Africa would be to South Sudan, a country that had recently emerged from 21 years of war with the north. They voted to become independent and achieved that goal in July 2011. It was three weeks before I was scheduled to arrive that they fell into a new civil war due to power struggles and tribal division. Trauma and disruption of lives were everywhere. How did the multi-national and intercultural communities of Solidarity with South Sudan minister in that context? I was impressed with

the normalcy of plans that continued while at the same time included planning for a response to the situation before us.

Our Pastoral Team worked with the National Pastoral Director assisting the Pastoral Teams of the seven dioceses of the country. This gave me the opportunity to travel all over the country, meet

victims of violence, leaders, train teams and offer *Capacitar* trauma-healing workshops to hundreds of people in the U.N. Protection of Civilian Camps and very remote rural areas. It was always humbling to be graciously welcomed and experience the people's pain, resilience, hope and wisdom.



Being part of a country's history was immensely rich, especially being an official monitor and voting in South Africa's first democratic election where Nelson Mandela was elected and being part of South Sudan's struggle for peace. All have been gifts and perspectives, teaching me that what is most valuable is, who we are in our being and depending on and surrendering to God's wisdom. I do not want to forget what I have learned.



Annette St-Amour IHM

Memories of South Africa

After 37 years it is difficult to single out one memory, apart from the obvious recollection of the election of Nelson Mandela and the institution of a new regime in the country. Politically it was a watershed and while some things changed dramatically, the failure to deal with the great disparities between the “haves” and the “have-nots” are always evident. But perhaps the fact that there remains a reservoir of goodwill amongst the general population – apart from any divisive ideological fault lines - should be remarked. The pandemic is one such illustration where the country united to deal with the restrictions that were required. So, I suppose it is the people and their ready acceptance of our common humanity (*ubuntu*) that is the memory and that of those especially, with whom I have been privileged to live and work.



Judy Coyle, IHM



Spirit-given words



Annette Boyle, IHM

I was visiting an Irish Dominican Sister in Cape Town, South Africa. She said to me, “Would you like to go see a friend of mine, the Provincial of the Coloured Sisters, for tea”? We went. When we arrived, the Provincial said to me: “The Province is assembled to hear you talk about prayer.” I asked if she would give me a few minutes in which I prayed and asked for the Spirit to guide me. Then, I went into the room where the sisters were assembled. It just came as if I had it all planned. We talked about prayer and they asked questions.

I was amazed how the Spirit took over. What came to me were the words of scripture, “The Spirit of God will give you words to speak.” After that, I did not hesitate. It was so amazing to sense the presence of the Spirit. I was never afraid to accept an invitation. That was the beginning of Prayer Ministry for me in South Africa.

South Africa: mentor and friend-- Andrew Burns, CSsR

As I look back on memories of South Africa, many already recorded in *Overseas Updates*, I want to pay tribute to Fr. Andrew Burns, CSsR who was the Redemptorist Provincial who welcomed me to South Africa in 1992 to teach Alphonsian Spirituality to the novices.

I came to South Africa with only a short course at Notre Dame for new missionaries in Africa. I was not aware of how much the same – and how very different – South Africa would be from the U.S. The IHMs who preceded me in 1985 had responded to many Apartheid realities that I doubt I could have handled.

In meeting Andy, I found someone who cared and who treasured spirituality. After a year with the novices and some months at Mpophomeni township, I moved to our first mission in Howick with the IHMs. When Andy became the parish priest at Howick, I served as the pastoral minister.



Andy helped me to adapt to my new situation. Every afternoon before Mass he would listen (Some would say “endlessly”) to my update on the parish, always encouraging me and sometimes gently correcting some of my assumptions. I always remember his question, “Now, what country are we living in?” When I told him that the children did not feel like “people”, he suggested we put all of them in Scouting to give them self-confidence and father figures. He contacted his Mum in England for funds to help pay the fees. When Nelson Mandela asked all churches to open creches, Andy supported me at the squatter camp school; and, when our teacher was threatened there because of her race, he told me to open the preschool in the parish hall.

The welcome, patience and friendship of Andy stabilized me in my desire to continue ministry in South Africa for 30 plus years. As with little children in our preschool who need a good beginning in life, Andrew Burns provided me with the strength to widen ministry from novices to so many other needs, especially for poor and abandoned people. Although Andy left South Africa for England due to health reasons several years ago, he motivates my spirit and ministry every day.



Peg O'Shea, IHM

African memories

I entered the IHM Community in 1967. When I was considering religious life, I never thought about Maryknoll for a single minute. Yet when I computed my time in Africa—Ghana for six years and South Africa for 32 years—it comprises 72% of my religious life. This was a surprise of the Spirit!

I was on staff at the Center for Spiritual Renewal in Kumsi, Ghana for five years. It was there that I learned to do cross-cultural spiritual direction by doing it. The theory and theology came after the praxis.

Of the many persons I accompanied on their directed retreats I will never forget this Ghanaian sister. She was young and this was her first directed retreat. Usually, I would meet each day with a retreatant for an hour. But after the second day, our sessions became longer and longer until they were two hours or more. I did not know what was happening, but I knew that I could not hurry her. Gradually over the eight days, the sessions were shorter. On the last day of the retreat, we reviewed the days and the action of the Spirit within her. She thanked me by saying "Thank you for listening to me. No one ever listens to me." Thank God I did not let my American sense of time impede her retreat.

During my years in South Africa so many important events happened. I choose two. In March 1990 Annette St. Amour and I were getting ready to move into our new prefab house in Mpophomeni Township outside of Howick. But then came the Seven Days War between the United Democratic Front and Inkatha, a Zulu nationalist movement. Many died and many homes were destroyed in the townships of Pietermaritzburg.

Some people tried to burn down the Catholic church in Mpophomeni, but there was only minor damage. When the war had abated, Nelson Mandela visited the Pietermaritzburg area and Mpophomeni where he later spoke. Annette and I met him near our house. He had only been released from 27 years of prison in February. He was tall and gracious and thanked the Church for what it had done to end apartheid. He shook our hands. I knew that South Africa would be in good hands.

The first democratic elections were held in April 1994. I volunteered as an election observer and went to a training session. There were to be three days of voting—April 26th for "special voters" such as the elderly and disabled and the 27th (now celebrated each year as Freedom Day) and the 28th.

I arrived at the community hall in Howick where I had been assigned at about 5.30 a.m. and with other volunteers set up the voting stations. The doors opened at seven and people entered. After about 10 minutes I saw black people voting. I saw history change!!



Nelson Mandela Votes!



Sue Rakoczy, IHM

South African election memories

One of the gifts of my experience in South Africa was the opportunity to be present and active in the first democratic election of April 1994 which brought Nelson Mandela to power. For 300+ years there was never a time when all races were allowed to vote. Intense preparations guided by social justice groups and church leadership preceded the election. Because the people trusted the churches, they were relied upon to provide training, encouragement and reassurance that each one's vote was free and secret. Multiple churches held ecumenical prayer services. Nearly all churches were open all day the Sunday before the elections for people to come and go as they prayed for free and fair elections and peace.

Especially now as we, here in the U.S., are fighting against restraints in the election process, I recall how so many safeguards were developed and implemented so everyone would be able to vote. Normally here in the U.S., we see a name on a ballot with an R or D after their name. The ballots in South Africa catered to those who may be illiterate by putting the name, the party, the party's logo and the picture of the person on the ballot. Much work was done in the townships and rural outstations to assure the people of their safety, freedom and secrecy in the voting process.



Election Observers Judy Coyle, IHM and
Eileen Karrer Perkins



Election Observers Judy Coyle, IHM and
Sue Rakoczy, IHM

All the sisters were trained and involved in the election proper for three days, five as observers and two as monitors. The first day was called "special voting" catering to the sick, the elderly and the handicapped. What a moving sight it was to see folks being carried in on the backs of friends or relatives, others with canes and crutches, some wheeled in wheelchairs and wheelbarrows. Those who were homebound or in nursing homes were visited by a mobile unit. These folks were mainly the elderly who waited all their lives for this opportunity. The oldest at our station was a 96-year-old man who walked in proud as could be, eager to cast his vote.

I served as a monitor in the Howick precinct. On the first day, there were miles of people in line, curving down the streets and weaving around buildings, waiting patiently for hours. Open back trucks transported many farmworkers from the outstations. Where normally you would expect to see one line for European (white) and another or "nonwhite" here all were together: white, Indian, so-called "colored" and African. All were in the same line, standing next to one another, sharing the same dignity. This picture was a revelation of what could and should be in this land. It was a sign of hope and it gave joy to my heart.

Eileen Karrer Perkins

Connecting with IHMs in South Africa

In March 2017, Pat McCluskey, IHM and I headed to South Africa to spend time with three IHM Sisters in Johannesburg and the Howick areas. Our first stop gave us time to spend with Judy Coyle, IHM. We were fortunate to stay with her local community and to learn of her connections, both at St. Augustine's College and the various organizations with whom Judy shared her time and talents. A bonus for us was a visit to the museum that told the incredible story of Apartheid. The leadership of Nelson Mandela was evident throughout our visit.

“All was a gift and we witnessed the IHM mission coming alive with the presence of our women in South Africa.”

Judy joined us as we headed to see Peg O'Shea, IHM and Sue Rakoczy, IHM. Our first stop was at a lovely villa in Little Switzerland in the Drakensberg Mountains. Spending time with Peg took us to the preschool that she started. We had a wonderful experience meeting those whom Peg has trained to continue the excellent work. She has put her heart and soul into this ministry and it is a gift to see it continue with the lay leadership.

Pat and I stayed at a lovely bed-and-breakfast that Sue arranged for us. Our time at St. Joseph's Theological Institute helped us see Sue's ministry through the eyes of her colleagues. We visited while having tea in the afternoon. We got to know them as well as the theology programs. We also became aware of all Sue has been involved in through her ministry.

During the 10 days of our visit, Pat and I saw quite a bit of the country and learned of the people with whom our sisters' minister. All was a gift and we witnessed the IHM mission coming alive with the presence of our women in South Africa.



Jane Herb, IHM



The gift of Africa: Zimbabwe

For approximately 25 years I was a successful classroom teacher. Then I was sent to Blessed Sacrament Cathedral parish in Detroit which had become an inner city parish and was experiencing violent, civil unrest. For many reasons, I felt I was a disaster as a teacher there. I will always be grateful to Sister Joan of Arc (Patricia Guthrie) whom I considered to be my rescuer. I expected a just scolding, but instead was treated as a sister who saw that because of my simple living experience as a farm child, I was not in the right place.

Sister Pat Guthrie suggested to Mother Anna Marie Grix that I be reassigned. She had recognized that I was an only daughter and my mother was only able to travel to see me once a year. In her kind understanding, she missioned me to Minnetonka, Minn. Later, I was missioned to Mary Mother of the Church parish, a parish dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. As a child in grade school, I had a desire to go to Africa. Sister Mary Jo Maher had asked me in 1976 whether I would be willing to go there to assist an archdiocesan congregation to set up a formation program. It was a request that I could have accepted; but after a seminar designed for cross-cultural living and a thirty-day retreat, I realized that I could not accept it at that time. My mother was in her mid-80s and not well. After the death of my mother, the Southwest Province Mission Councillor suggested I give Africa a second thought.

In 1988, I was missioned to Zimbabwe. Even though I preferred Pastoral Ministry, Zimbabwe had

requested teachers. Although I did not know a soul, I was surprised to feel so at home, probably because of the joys and sorrows I experienced as a child. When I arrived in Harare, at that time a beautiful metropolitan city, I was greeted by Notre Dame Sister Jennifer Smith, SND. With Jennifer and Sister Jo Buschell, SND I taught in Mutoko, northeastern Zimbabwe. Because the first school term didn't begin until January, I was able to visit many rural and poor schools that lacked staff and equipment and see the devastation of war. For the first four years, I taught boys and girls in rural mission schools. It was a difficult time for both students and staff. There was always a shortage of books, untrained teachers, students who were unprepared to write Cambridge examinations

and teachers who themselves did not know English. The list of disadvantages was endless. While teaching upper-grade students, I learned a great deal about the war as most of the students lived in areas of guerrilla warfare. It was important to meet with each student after correcting their essays.



It has been almost 30 years since I returned from Zimbabwe, when I was in my late sixties. After a time of Sabbath at the Redemptorist House of Prayer and attending FROM workshops for returning missionaries, I was first asked to be the Pastoral Director, later called the Administrator of Worship and Spirituality, then as liturgist at the Motherhouse.

As I enter the ninth decade of my life, I have experienced isolation, misunderstanding, bias and prejudice, loneliness and health problems. I have been very blessed with great companions in my

