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Sisters of Charity of Nazareth find sisterhood across the globe

Arthur Jones | Oct. 6, 2012

"At our first prayer service in Botswana," Sister of Charity of Nazareth Angela Hicks said, "we had soil from India, soil from Kentucky, soil from Belize, and mixed it all together with soil from Botswana. It was sisters from East and sisters from West joining together in Africa."

The soil proved fertile.

Twelve years later, on Dec. 1, the order's bicentennial day, 8,300 miles from Nelson County, Ky., the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Botswana will open a formation program to admit young Botswanan women into the order.

"We have been holding off in Botswana," said the order's president, Sr. Mary Elizabeth Miller. "We wanted to establish ourselves by our works, not give the impression we had come there to look for vocations and take their young women." The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth have a precedent -- it was a decade before they admitted applicants in India.

Continued appeals from the people and the priests finally convinced the order it was time. Sr. Teresa Kotturan, the congregation's liaison for Botswana, previously in leadership in India, said she and Miller have researched formation programs in South Africa and other African countries to see what would be appropriate.

"The Botswana women under consideration are already educated," Kotturan said. (In Botswana, public education is free, including doctorates abroad paid for by the government.) There are six Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Botswana, along with associate Tootsie Gish, previously a teacher, who sold her family home and many of her possessions to serve there.

Hicks, one of the pioneers, returned to Nazareth after five years. She said that for three years three of them worked to create an HIV/AIDS orphanage. (Botswana has one of the highest HIV/AIDS rates in Africa.) "We got the building renovated, planted gardens and trees," she said, but they were not able to open it -- the government took it over and is running it. "We were terribly, terribly disappointed."

The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth moved on to other work in Botswana -- jobs in education, health care and pastoral ministry while continuing with their own initiatives. They founded a hospice, two preschool programs (which the government does not provide), and empowerment programs. Multitasking Sr. Nalini Meachariyill, Hicks said, "works in the bishop's office and, beyond that, started an afterschool program for children." In Botswana, as in the United States, India and Belize, there is a flourishing associate program.

There are several Sisters of Charity of Nazareth associates and seven sisters in Belize, including Belize-born Srs. Barbara Flores, Higinia Bol and Carlette Gentle. In 37 years there, sisters have served in cities and rural villages, engaged in parish ministries and retreats, health clinics, physical therapy training, adult literacy, and social services.

Training lay ministers in the priest-short country was vital. In the south, said Sr. Rosemarie Kirwan, who served for two decades in Belize, "there may be only one or two priests for entire regions, with Mass once a month or less. If faith was to remain alive, it was up to laypeople in villages to maintain it." They adapted the Loyola Institute for Ministry program, she said. "Graduates who come through that program have a responsibility to do something." Offshoots have included programs to help teachers in the schools.

In the Spanish-speaking Las Flores, "we asked them to tell us their needs," Kirwan said. They answered: a library. With the sisters' organizational help and some funds, the men of Las Flores built the library after their day's work and on weekends. It took quite a while, but is now open. Next need: a health clinic. Sisters are in touch with U.S. doctors examining possibilities.

Collaborative outreach includes teaming up with others to renovate houses. But don't think in North American terms, Kirwan cautioned. "Just adding a concrete floor, or replacing a wall of linoleum with a proper wall" is significant. "Little steps," she said.

It was a giant step that took the order to India. U.S. Jesuits in Mokama, north central India, in 1946 asked the sisters if they would consider opening a hospital there. They arrived the following year. A decade later they opened their novitiate and there are now two Indian provinces with 258 sisters. Whether in cities or tribal areas, the work has a familiar ring: urban slum ministry, HIV/AIDS care, social outreach, skills training centers, hostels for working girls, schools and colleges to help girls and young women take their place in society, and shelters for women and children to help break the cycle of victimization.

In Nepal, the sisters kept going during the 1996-2006 violent insurgency. The women's centers training locals in marketable skills and cottage industries remained open. Civil unrest or not, sisters continued to care for those with physical and cognitive challenges, offering adult literacy classes, teaching and empowerment programs.

India's Sisters of Charity of Nazareth have a global reach. In 2003, Sr. Shalini D'Souza was elected president of the order. Similarly Mumbai-born, Sr. Margaret Rodericks, international student coordinator at Spalding University in Louisville, Ky., and previously congregation secretary general, has spent almost half her 50 years as a sister in the United States. Raised in a Catholic family, she had considered other religious orders, but "I got to know these Sisters of Charity," Rodericks said, "and I was very impressed. They went out to the people -- they didn't wait for the people to come to them."

Her father said she had to wait until she finished college before applying. He warned -- for he knew other congregations, Italian, English, Belgian and Dutch -- "Margaret, you are joining an American order. They will treat you as a second-class citizen because that's what the other [orders] do: The white skins have the positions of authority and the black skins do the work." She told him, "Daddy, if that happens I will come home."

She told *NCR*, "I proudly say that not once in these 50 years did I experience any form of discrimination or prejudice ... never. On the contrary, they quickly sent me off to Fordham University for two graduate degrees [in psychology and counseling], and Daddy lived to see me elected the first Indian provincial."

But missions and voluntary service by definition are not moneymakers. How is it all kept going? Sr. Susan Gatz, finance director, said that where possible, as in Belize, "most sisters work in positions that earn money, so they are not totally dependent on the congregation. We always ask ourselves, ëHow can the sisters earn money to support the mission?' " Work in India, Belize and Botswana is partly subsidized. The Indian sisters successfully approached the congregation with a proposal for an endowment fund whose interest would help with sister education, formation and retirement.

Currently there is a bicentennial drive to fund 200 scholarships. The campaign's title describes the work for two

centuries past and the one ahead: "Educating Young Women for a Better World: Honoring our Heritage, Giving Hope for the Future."

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