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Maryknoll Lay Missioners Kirstin and Merwyn De Mello receive the 2022 Bishop John E. McCar

Maryknoll Lay Missioners Kirstin and Merwyn De Mello receive the 2022 Bishop John E. McCarthy Spirit of Mission Award during Mass at Holy Redeemer Church in Washington Oct. 23, 2022. Presenting the award were Ted Miles, left, executive director of Maryknoll Lay Missioners, and Mary Novak, second from right, who is executive director of Network, a Catholic social justice lobby. (CNS photo/Leroy Partlow, courtesy Maryknoll Lay Missioners)



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Maryknoll Lay Missioners honored Merwyn and Kirstin De Mello with its 2022 Bishop John E. McCarthy Spirit of Mission Award on World Mission Sunday, Oct. 23.

The Maryknoll organization said the De Mellos "have dedicated themselves to international and intercultural peacebuilding and justice service throughout their lives" by serving with Maryknoll Lay Missioners as well as a wide range of faith-based U.S. and international organizations.

The award was presented during Mass at Holy Redeemer Church in Washington, where they are parishioners. It is conferred annually for continued justice and mission service after missioners have returned to the United States.

Ted Miles, Maryknoll Lay Missioners' executive director, and Mary Novak, executive director of Network, a lobby for Catholic social justice, presented the award.

In her introduction, Novak described Merwyn and Kirstin as "reflective peacebuilders in every sense of the word."

Miles told the couple the award was a small thank-you "for your untiring compassionate and transformative service, accompaniment and activism with marginalized people in Africa, Asia, the United States and throughout the world."

After returning from overseas mission service, Merwyn said, the two were in a sense "ruined for life," as the Jesuit Volunteer Corps slogan puts it.

"I realized that coming back to the U.S., after all those years of service, I really could not live, and this is very personal, a 'normal life,' where I would come back, look for a well-paying job and buy a house. Kirstin felt the same way," he said.

"Being affiliated with Maryknoll Lay Missioners when we were living in Zimbabwe and just being newly married to a Maryknoll lay missioner and learning more about the ethos and the charism of the lay missioners and of Maryknoll in general," Kirstin said, "(helped) my heart attune more to the human stories, to the complexity of people's lives, and especially how people may be suffering or experiencing different forms of violence in their lives."

"It's been a rich experience for me to have the privilege of walking alongside people in those kinds of situations," she added.

Born in Kenya of Indian descent, Merwyn De Mello's family moved back to India when he was 13. He is an Indian citizen with permanent residency in the United States. He began serving with Maryknoll Lay Missioners in 1994, first in Japan and then in Tanzania.

In Japan he was involved with Japanese lawyers and Burmese activists who supported primarily Burmese asylum-seekers. In Tanzania he worked in refugee camps for Burundians fleeing the violence in their country. He also developed community education programs on advocacy and peacebuilding.

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Merwyn returned to the States in 2003 to pursue a master's degree in conflict transformation and peacebuilding at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at

Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia. He met Kirstin at the center.

"Having grown up Quaker in a military town, Virginia Beach, I was raised with a strong commitment to peace," Kirstin said.

They quickly recognized each other as kindred spirits. They married in 2006 and served together with Maryknoll Lay Missioners in Zimbabwe until 2009.

Kirstin's work in Zimbabwe included facilitating workshops on dialogue for universities and helping to establish a national peacebuilding network. Merwyn designed and taught courses in transitional justice and trauma healing and peacebuilding, and provided coordination for peacebuilding strategy development in Harare and Mutare, Zimbabwe.

After they returned from Zimbabwe, Merwyn worked for Maryknoll Lay Missioners. The couple then moved to Chicago, where they served together with Community Peacemaker Teams, formerly Christian Peacemaker Teams. They also participated in community-based restorative justice processes.

After a few years, they wanted to serve overseas again, and "when Afghanistan came up as a possibility, we were drawn toward it," Merwyn said.

They arrived in Kabul in 2014 as volunteers with the Mennonite Central Committee and were assigned as peace advisers to a project, working in a team with their Afghan colleagues, focusing on organizational conflict resolution, trauma awareness and resilience and aspects of restorative justice such as peace circles.

In 2017, they went to Bangladesh also as peace advisers to the Mennonite Central Committee's projects.

In 2020, Merwyn and Kirstin returned to the United States and still serve migrants, refugees and low-income housing residents as well as advocating for peace and justice.

The couple lives in the Assisi Community in Washington, an intentional Catholic community of lay and religious men and women who are dedicated to Franciscan values, a simple lifestyle and social change.

The award, now in its fourth year, is named after the late Bishop John E. McCarthy of Austin, Texas, who was known for his social justice and advocacy work as well as his

efforts to promote the laity's role in the church.

Bishop McCarthy also was an advocate for the rights of migrants and refugees and a strong supporter of Maryknoll Lay Missioners.