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Dedicated to giving hope to young people

Marko Phiri | Feb. 3, 2010

Precious Blood Sr. Celestine Nyoni works with a youth working in the Insinga Center's garden. (Marko Phiri)

BULAWAYO, ZIMBABWE ? In a country where millions of people are without jobs, Sr. Celestine Nyoni instills a bit of hope and provides outlets for the energies of young people.

After a dozen years of its economy shrinking, last year Zimbabwe saw its economy post positive growth. One year ago, according to U.N. figures, Zimbabwe had an official unemployment rate of 94 percent. Fewer than a half a million Zimbabweans were working in the formal sector.

Zimbabwe's chronic economic instability has forced young people to seek their livelihoods as migrant workers in neighboring countries. An estimated 3 million Zimbabweans live abroad. Their remittances ? of food and cash ? keep the country alive.

The many millions more who don't leave home are left idle and wasting away on the streets.

Meanwhile, priests and religious complain that young people have fallen out of the habit of attending Mass, lured away by popular culture and decadent values. Religious vocations, they say, are dwindling.

Trying times, however, have not deterred Nyoni, a Precious Blood sister, from her indefatigable efforts to keep young people not only within church walls but also faithful to the age-old monastic spirit of *labora et ora* ? work and pray.

She traverses the length and breadth of Bulawayo archdiocese ? home to over 100 parishes ? preaching the gospel of self-reliance. Her official title is youth coordinator for the Bulawayo diocese, but her practical work entails many activities.

The most acute need is employment.

Nyoni took over a plot of land inside a church-owned compound in Bulawayo, and turned it into a thriving garden and market enterprise. The project at the Insinga Center employs young people to plant all kinds of vegetables. Some youths tend the garden, others keep chickens. Others sell the produce at market.

As Zimbabwe's economy crumbled, urban services declined. In the Bulawayo, which is the second largest city in Zimbabwe, water is nowadays always in short supply. But Nyoni had the foresight years ago to have a borehole sunk in the grounds of the Insinga Center. It has proven to be a lifeline for the market garden and the youth who work there.

Nyoni modeled the garden and poultry projects on a concept espoused by the Zimbabwean government at independence in 1980 whereby the then-new administration encouraged the establishment of self-help projects for young people.

While many of these government projects failed either because of lack of adequate funding or pillaging by members, Insinga has thrived, thanks to Nyoni's work ethic.

"I have to be strict or else this might just be another project that is wasted by young people," she said.

Besides providing employment for youth, the Insinga Center garden and market has also become an important source of food for neighboring communities.

Nyoni's current project is to establish at the Insinga site a youth hostel that will give the youth a place to live and a center for activities. Nyoni says the hostel and garden program keep young people safe from another danger: HIV/AIDS.

UNICEF estimates that the HIV prevalence rate for Zimbabweans aged 15 to 49 is 15.3 percent. About 1.3 million Zimbabweans are living with AIDS.

As the archdiocese's youth coordinator, Nyoni works with a local church-sponsored AIDS prevention program called Youth Alive. It teaches youths life skills and abstinence, but Nyoni has added her own component: economic empowerment.

"We have to inculcate a sense of self-respect in these young people who are growing up during very trying times" she said.

"It's a tough job but someone has got to do it," Nyoni said.

[Marko Phiri is a freelance writer from Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.]

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