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African order cultivates place of refuge for locals

by Christina S.N. Lewis



Sr. Divina Musimire

?Jesus came in.?

?Jesus came in.?

?And washed away my sins.?

?And washed away my sins.?

?I?m sitting, standing.?

?I?m jumping, clapping.?

?Happy all the time.?

The classroom of 4-year-olds at the Fatima nursery school of the Evangelizing Sisters of Mary sings along with their teacher, Jane Wangui. The roughly 18 children pantomime Wangui's movements, getting exercise while also learning to speak English. Wangui is one of several lay teachers hired by the Evangelizing Sisters to run the school. The school recently celebrated its 25th year anniversary. About 75 percent of its students received subsidized tuition, says Sr. Jane Wanjiru, the school's director.

Just a few dozen meters further along the dirt path that leads to the school, Sr. Divina Musimire, 50, is presiding over the birth of a little boy at the Fatima maternity hospital, a roughly 12-bed facility also sponsored by the Evangelizing Sisters. Next door to that, roughly 24 orphans ranging in age from infants to 3-year-olds are taking their daily nap.

The headquarters of the Evangelizing Sisters of Mary was the scene of a violent attack in the early morning hours of Jan. 14. It left one man dead, three sisters emotionally violated, and an order traumatized.

Yet prior to that attack, the sisters' complex had been perceived as an oasis within Ongata Rongai, a dusty, busy town just outside Nairobi. Like the abbeys of Europe, the compound was a sanctuary of greenery and calm.

The assault shattered that illusion.

However, the convent remains a place of refuge for the local populace who avail themselves of its many services. The 27-acre compound holds nursery, elementary and secondary schools, a community center that holds workshops for those suffering from HIV/AIDS, as well as vocational training. There is a home for elderly women and an orphanage.

On a recent morning, a group of roughly 25 HIV-positive women (and two men), most of whom live in the nearby slum, gathered inside a metal-roofed room that served as their weekly meeting space. On the walls, also made from metal siding, hung educational diagrams drawn during previous workshops.

One read: 'Myths/Misconceptions vs. Reality.' Farther down, it read, 'Columbus monkey,' 'ARV's,' 'pneumocystis,' and other things.

During the session, the women shared their challenges. All were hoping for more support to help them with school fees for their children. One woman hoped that the community center would expand into providing health care treatment, not just support services.

'Here the care is more personal,' she said.

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