

MMM

Rooted and founded in love



MEDICAL MISSIONARIES of MARY

SUPPLEMENT TO HEALING & DEVELOPMENT — VOLUME 80 — CHRISTMAS 2019

*'You bore for me the One
who came to bless
And bear for all and
make the broken whole.'*

*'You heard His call and
in your open "yes"
You spoke aloud for
every living soul.'*

*From: On Christmas Eve:
Theotokos: A Sonnet for Mary*



‘How beautiful on the mountains’ (Is 52:7).

In 2018 MMM celebrated 40 years in Clinchco, Virginia, USA. Sister Bernadette (Bernie) Kenny was one of the Sisters who responded to a request to begin a medical service in rural Dickenson County. While a place of great scenic beauty, this impoverished area had no hospital and only three day clinics for almost 19,000 people. Clean water and sanitation, a high infant mortality and poor nutrition were great problems. Bernie has since made her home among the people of Appalachia



At the groundbreaking: Bonnie Kenny, Sr Bernie, a neighbour, Sr Joanne

She wrote, ‘When we first came we visited homes. People knew we were to help in self-care, so they would understand their illnesses and how to promote health.’ Limited by what she could do as a registered nurse, in 1983 Bernie went to the Medical College of Virginia and became a family nurse practitioner.

In 1984 the Sisters got a health wagon. Plying dangerous mountain roads, they brought basic care to remote locations. In 1998 Bernie went to Mountain City, Tennessee, to see the work of Remote Area Medical (RAM) Volunteer Corps. Bernie and her co-workers mobilized to bring RAM to Virginia. From its first visit to Wise County in 2000, it became a yearly three-day event.

Over the years, other MMMs have also lived in and visited Clinchco. They visited families, advocated for benefits for the sick and disabled, and offered support. MMM Associates came to help with RAM. Bernie has welcomed them all, offering mentoring, friendship and creative vision.

More good news

The Health Wagon now assists the medically underserved in six counties. Over 3,000 people availed of free dental, vision, health screening and other services at the 2018 RAM. Reflecting the changes since 1978, the Health Wagon Facebook page announced ‘the groundbreaking ceremony of the new Sister Bernie Kenny, MMM, Clinic in Clintwood, VA. This clinic will be named after Sister Bernie Kenny to honor her legacy and many years of service as the founder of The Health Wagon.’

The article explained: ‘The new building will provide desperately needed space and services, including private examination rooms, optometry diagnostic spaces and dispensing, radiology, a medical laboratory, pharmacy, consultation offices, conference room and provider support spaces. It will house state-of-the-art telemedicine technologies so patients can access clinical specialists at tertiary medical centers.’

Bernie said that each patient will be assigned a navigator, a person to guide them through the complexities of the healthcare system, arrange for appointments with specialists, etc. The patient will be empowered to make necessary lifestyle changes!



The Health Wagon today: a state-of-the-art facility



Signs of empowerment: Teresa (L) with Sr. Bernie and Paula (R)

A gift of healing

Plans are to finish the clinic by June 2020. Sister Joanne Bierl, MMM Area Leader for the Americas, attended the groundbreaking on 24 October 2019 with Bernie's sister-in-law Bonnie. Joanne wrote: 'It was a joy to be with our Sister Bernie Kenny as she was honored at the ground-breaking of what will become the Sr. Bernie Kenny MMM Clinic in Clintwood. For me, it was a long but beautiful drive from the city of Chicago to the very rural roads of Appalachia that were in full October fall colors.

'Over breakfast, Bernie said we were there to represent her families - biological and MMM. She shared what she hoped to say and do when she was called up to speak - a blessing of hands. We travelled to Clintwood from Clinchco - about a thirty-minute drive - to find the white tent set up in the field. In the distance we saw the bulldozers already working to clear the site. Approximately one hundred people came: politicians, medical personnel, Health Wagon staff, and most importantly to Bernie, her friends and neighbors.'

After prayer there were remarks by Dr. Joseph Smiddy, medical director and board president of the Health Wagon, and Tamarah Holmes, Appalachian Regional Commission Program Manager. Health Wagon Executive Director Dr. Teresa Tyson and Clinical Director Dr. Paula Hill-Collins also spoke. Bernie is especially proud of Teresa and Paula, now nurse practitioners, whom she has mentored during her years in Appalachia.



Many hands break ground at Clintwood.

Sister Bernie addressed the gathering. 'You are the healers,' she said. 'We learn together how to take care of each other...It is the people of Dickenson County who have done that by "offering a hand up, not a hand out, empowering each other to take better care of ourselves and our neighbors.'

Joanne reflected, 'It was a celebration of faith, generosity, and hope, as well as fidelity to a vision with perseverance and struggle. For both Bonnie and me, it was so touching to see how Bernie is loved and cherished among the people of southwest Virginia. She led us all in an exploration of our hands, empowering us to celebrate all the healing we have done for ourselves and others. She encouraged us to continue to be healers as our hands were blessed. It was typical of the way Bernie engages and empowers others. We enjoyed the company, joy, good food, and the sense of accomplishment. Well done, Bernie!'

Photos 1, 3 & 4 by Tim Cox

The Power of Love

On 31 October 2019 Sr. Irene Balzan graduated from the Waterford Institute of Technology with an M.A. in Applied Spirituality. Irene described the study year as 'a space for meaning-making... a year unlike any other.' From Malta, Irene has spent almost 20 years on mission – in Nigeria, the Republic of Benin, and most recently in South Sudan. One of the pioneers of our mission in Wau in March 2013, she spent 5 years in this war-torn country, living at the epicentre of military patrols, heavy gunfire and bombings. There was an exodus of foreign personnel and the lingering question for her was, 'Should I also leave?'



Sr. Irene Balzan

After much inner searching she decided to stay: in her experience solidarity in her community was essential, as was connectedness with the wider community. Their decision to stay conveyed a deep sense of hope to the people, who were 'clenching to the last straw of life'. God became very real; prayers were mostly wordless but 'heart-laden'. Irene found that this time gifted her with a deep sense of the sacredness of life and a profound sense of gratitude for all of life. She witnessed how war-related trauma can affect people in physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual ways.

Irene's research dissertation for the master's programme was entitled 'Spirituality during a time of war: an exploratory study of meaning-making, resilience and witness in missionary religious women'. While part of processing her own life's journey, she also explored the role of spirituality in the lives of other MMMs who lived in similar situations.

'Catching a glimpse of the incarnate God'

Irene's core question was: 'Where is the God-encounter in traumatic situations such as war?' She interviewed five MMMs who lived and worked either in Nigeria during the Biafran War in 1968 or in Angola in 1975, asking what sustained them during these times.

The Sisters worked in hospitals, outreach clinics or refugee camps. They described harrowing land and air attacks, continuous noise, and having to shelter under tables or beds in

hospital wards. Treatments were disturbed by air raids and there were many close calls. Despite the risks, they crawled down to wards in the dark to feed the orphans, change drips or put up blood. Some were arrested or captured. One described crossing a bridge. 'There was dynamite on the bridge ready to be blown up to keep the enemy back, but we got over it.'

Several themes emerged from the interviews. All five Sisters worked in these situations from a choice they had made. They had been given the option to leave but each freely chose to stay. All were guided by a sense of purpose. Despite the fear they experienced 'as the war came nearer and nearer,



Gardening continued in South Sudan despite challenges.

we wanted to stay, we really wanted to stay with the people.' 'We loved the people...and we saw their suffering.'

A sense of connectedness lived in community was an anchor. 'We were more a group than individuals; we were together.' When they took risks 'we were so supportive of each other.' This led them to experience deep faith in God. They felt connections with people outside the community - the priests, Norwegian doctors and local young people. 'The dedication of the nurses and doctors was fantastic.' 'There is a bond that everyone is working together.'



Going to an outstation clinic in Nigeria

They improvised. 'A school table was used for everything, for surgery; we used it for maternity deliveries; we used it for Mass; we used it for eating on; we used it for everything.'

Full of contradictions

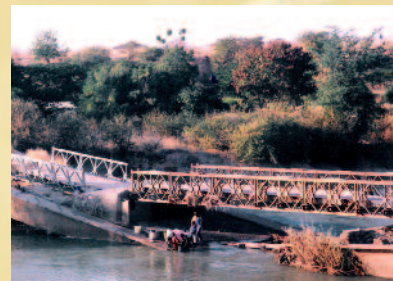
They dealt with the paradoxes of conflict. One remembered how people were innocently killed even when the end of war was declared. Despite the cruelty of war, they could see goodness in the soldiers. 'They wanted to share the tinned meat or something they had...yet there was the streak of toughness that they probably had to build up in the army.'

The Sisters' focus was outward: 'We weren't really thinking much about ourselves.' They still went to deliver women every day and looked after injured soldiers, treating soldiers on all sides equally. They worked long hours. 'We just kept on going. We saw people had needs and we tried to do something about it.' At the same time, it was important to have a sense of fun even in such dangerous situations - using 'any excuse for celebration' and playing cards at night.

War affected their spirituality in many ways. Most experienced a sense of gratitude – for peace, for blessings in life, for the support of others, attributing people's prayers to their safety. There was a deepening trust in God. After the war 'when things got rough it helped me to keep going.' Another experienced 'a deep sense of compassion and solidarity with all those who have been displaced through warfare or violence' and coming to 'an appreciation of what real suffering is for the people.'

The experiences these women shared left an indelible mark on Irene. She hopes that her dissertation will bring to light a largely forgotten worldview of courage and strength among humanitarians, missionaries and church personnel.

One MMM spoke of the gratitude she experienced at the end of the war. 'The people said, "Thank you. You stayed with us when we most needed you. You didn't run away."' She was deeply moved when she later bade farewell to the people she loved and had served for 52 years 'where every grandmother wanted to give me a hug.' Then she knew that there is no limit to love and loving.



A bombed-out bridge in Angola

'You Are Witnesses of These Things' (Lk 24:48).

The life of Sr. Aloysia Lagween is part of the early Christian story of Tanzania, or Tanganyika, as it was then called. Born Emeliana, in Tlawi-Mbulu, Tanzania on 13 April 1933, her mother died in childbirth. The newborn infant was immediately cared for by a heroic woman who was responsible, with three other Maasai women, for bringing the Christian faith to the Wairaqw people in the northern Great Rift Valley in East Africa.



With nursing class in Ireland – back, 2nd from R

The first convert to Christianity, Joseph, and his young wife, Juliana, adopted the baby. During their life together they adopted seven children and had three more of their own. So 'Ally', as we affectionately called her, lived a happy life with her many sisters and brothers. When Juliana died Joseph remarried, and Ally had seven more siblings.

Joseph and his large family are remembered with reverence and admiration for their efforts to bring Christianity to their area, for their holiness, and for their lives of kindness, hospitality and care of others. Several became religious Sisters and one became a priest. Ally was fourteen when the first MMMs arrived in Tlawi to set up a dispensary – our first mission in East Africa.

Not looking back

Ally's faith journey continued as she joined MMM in 1957, already a qualified midwife. One of our first two MMMs from Tanzania, she travelled to Ireland for her novitiate and then trained in nursing and midwifery in Drogheda. In 1963 she was assigned briefly to Uganda, helping for a few months in Masaka Hospital. In 1964 she returned to Tanzania, where she served as matron in Kabanga Hospital for twelve years. During that time she trained in management in Glasgow Royal Infirmary and in Dar es Salaam.



Nursing in Tanzania



Final profession in Tanzania with Sr Vincent Pallotti Sarwat

In 1981 she went to Dareda Hospital in Tanzania as nursing officer and then to Arusha, where she worked in a dispensary for four years. After another year of nursing in Kabanga she studied reflexology and counselling in Ireland, and also learned to play the piano! From 1994 to 2005 Sr. Aloysia worked in Arusha, offering reflexology services at the AICC Hospital. She then suffered a severe illness, which necessitated extended care at our house in Makiungu. Her condition imposed many limitations and she became physically frail.

In 2018 she moved to Ngaramtoni for ongoing care. She died there peacefully on 8 October 2019 and was laid to rest beside Sisters Opportuna Sanka and Theresia Samti, also MMMs from Tanzania.



Srs Theresia Lagween, Aloysia Lagween and Lutgarda Lagween

Ally was gifted and versatile. She was a good cook, a keen gardener, excellent at languages, and was caring and intuitive as a nurse-midwife. She was a sociable person who made friends and enjoyed a good story. She loved the liturgy and had favourite saints who never seemed to let her down in her long life of service and sanctity.

Sr. Aloysia loved to sing the hymn 'The Harvest Indeed Is Great but the Labourers Are Few'. As one of the labourers in that harvest she is surely now sharing in the hundredfold.



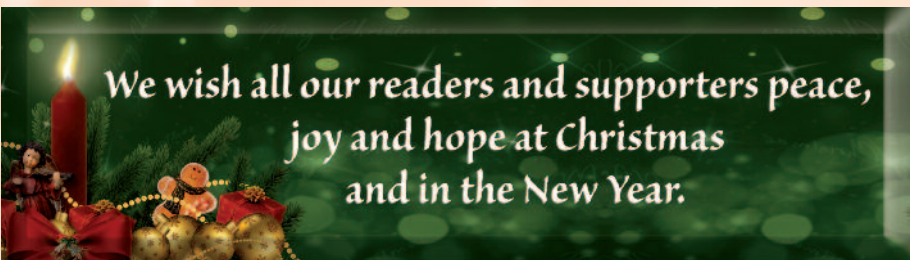
Sister Jacinta Roche was born Teresa in Oulart, Wexford in 1938 and joined MMM in 1957. After profession she trained as a nurse-midwife. In 1966 she was assigned to Nigeria. She spent 14 years there, nursing in several missions. After nursing in Waterford and Drogheda for 2 years, she returned to Nigeria, where she spent the next 25 years working in a busy clinic in Lagos. She also served in local MMM leadership.

Sister Jacinta returned to Ireland in 2008 and helped in the Motherhouse. She transferred to *Áras Mhuire* in 2015 and died there peacefully on 13 November 2019.



Sister Phyllis Heaney was born Mary Philomena in Dublin in 1937. After joining MMM in 1960 she trained as a nurse-midwife. In 1975 she was assigned to Brazil. She worked in community health and pastoral care in São Paulo for 9 years. In 1986 she began work with the physically challenged and people affected by HIV. From 1992 Phyllis also worked with the mentally challenged, helping families to access services and raising awareness about their rights.

In 2017 Sr. Phyllis returned to Ireland for health reasons. She was admitted to Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital for several weeks and died there peacefully on 10 September 2019.



Editor: Sister Carol Breslin, MMM Designer: Judi Lennon. Photo credits: MMM Sisters
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