



ENCOUNTER

Catholic laity on mission – everywhere

June 2020

Special Edition: The Call to Mission During a Pandemic

The global COVID-19 pandemic brought many parts of the world to a standstill this first half of 2020. As hospitals have struggled to keep up with the crush of patients and governments fumbled their responses to provide adequate supplies, including PPE (personal protective equipment) for healthcare workers, more than 7 million people have been infected and more than 400,000 have died; that number continues to grow as of this writing.

Unsurprisingly, the poor and communities of color have borne a disproportionate share of the burden for the rest of us, both in the numbers of sick and dead, and in the numbers of those considered “essential” workers who had to continue to work, and thus to expose themselves more often to the ravages of the virus.

Places often considered “traditional” missionary spots—Africa, India, Latin America—are seeing explosions in the numbers of COVID-19 cases. Yet in this time—perhaps especially in this time—the work of mission continues, albeit in modified form.

We touched base with a few of the missionaries who have been profiled previously in the *Encounter* newsletter, to ask how they have continued to be mission for others during this unprecedented situation. They shared thoughtful reflections with us about the experience. We hope to share more with you in the future.

Diane Huggins

Featured in the [September 2018](#) issue of *Encounter* for her work as a board member of the Parish Twinning Program of the Americas (PTPA). When we wrote that story, she had visited Haiti 23 times.

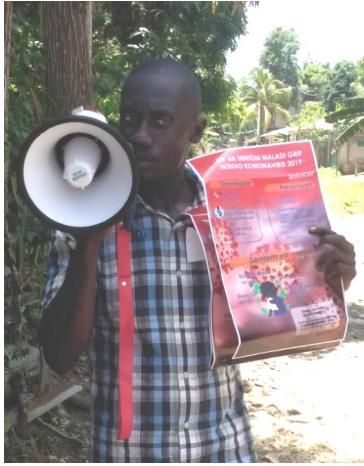
I am involved with Our Lady of the Lake (OLOL) Catholic Church in Hendersonville, Tennessee. I am the co-chair of OLOL’s mission for St. Bertin, our twin parish in Haiti. We continue to support St. Bertin financially, but we are sad that we have been unable to visit recently. We had a trip planned in January that had to be cancelled due to violence and political unrest. We had another trip planned this spring but were unable to go because of COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Now the coronavirus has made its way to Haiti. Not only do they face the crisis of the pandemic, but they also face severe food insecurity. We are praying for our brothers and sisters that God will protect them and keep them safe.



The initial training session conducted via conference call by a Caris physician in Haiti. Ten community volunteers received training so that they could then reach out and educate members of the St. Bertin community in Petit Bourg de Port Margot.

During this stay-at-home time, I have been working with the PTPA as part of a consortium focused on providing training and education on preventing the spread of COVID-19 to people in rural Haitian villages. It is called Haiti-CPR (COVID-19 Preventative Response). A group of people at St. Bertin just received the training and will now spread the word in the community about the importance of social distancing and other protective measures.



I am glad that I have been able to do at least a little something for the people of St. Bertin during this unprecedented, uncertain time. We are praying for one another and staying close in touch.

Man holding megaphone and poster used to conduct Covid preventative education.

Note: The Haiti CPR program was organized by a consortium of organizations, including Raising Haiti Foundation (RHF), Smallholder Farmers Alliance (SFA), Caris Foundation and Parish Twinning Program of the Americas (PTPA). RHF and SFA organized the project and PTPA connected U.S. and Haiti twin parishes to get them involved in the program.

Gabe Hurrish

Featured in the [August 2019](#) issue of *Encounter* for his work as a Maryknoll Lay Missioner for Solidarity with South Sudan. We reached him recently via email.

1 Peter 5:6–7 “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.”



It was surprising that South Sudan did not record its first confirmed case of COVID-19 until April 5. The government had wisely taken preemptive measures to stop all international flights in and out of Juba very early on and also increased vigilance at border crossings. This was good, since the health system of this country is so fragile, and the people are at high risk.

Through an unrelated occasion, I had been invited by

Emeritus Bishop Paride Taban to spend Holy Week in retreat at his Kuron Peace Village in the far eastern region of South Sudan. Shortly after I arrived, the central government locked down the entire country and now no internal travel was allowed, either. I was suddenly and unexpectedly confined in this very remote and isolated area of the mostly traditional Toposa people. Although there is internet, there is no cell phone coverage, power comes from solar panels, meals are simple beans and rice, and life takes on an even and calm pace.

It is quite a change from living and working in the capital, Juba, to now living in the Holy Trinity Peace Village in Kuron, 150 miles from the nearest town. In Juba, I was doing mostly administrative work and seldom had time for any leisure. Work was hectic, demanding, and ever-present.



Now, by a quirk of Divine intercession, I find myself in a very rural and traditional African culture. For the really the first time since I arrived in South Sudan some two and a half years ago, I have time to reflect and meditate on my life. With fewer distractions and demands, I am able to calm my inner being. I can listen to the voice of God deep in my soul. I can contemplate how My Lord is using me for His Kingdom.

My spirit has been revitalized as I walk for hours around the area greeting the Toposa with the few words that I have learned. This culture is interesting in that they have resisted the arrival of Western ideas and ways. They are pastoralists who prefer the way of life they have been blessed with. They are a proud and tough people who are very comfortable in their traditions.

Bishop Paride has built up his vision since 1991 for a village that works with the people in this forgotten corner of South Sudan. The Peace Village project is quite impressive and has schools, a health clinic, peace initiatives, agriculture, vocational training, and pastoral care for the Toposa people. The project is very involved in peace and justice issues, for instance arbitrating in local conflicts to resolve sensitive issues.

There are now six confirmed cases in South Sudan [as of

early June, there were nearly 1,700 cases]. At the moment, people in the Kuron area don't feel the excitement of the worldwide pandemic. They are focused on daily survival. However, the last confirmed case in South Sudan seems to be from a town located in the eastern regions. The government has declared special lockdown measures in the entire eastern states. It might not be too long before COVID-19 works its way to even this most isolated of villages. In the meantime, it seems I will be in Kuron Peace Village for some time to come.

I came here for what I thought would be one week of renewal of my spirit. God has decided that more time is needed to open my heart. I have always found the movements of the Spirit to be enigmatic and hidden. Why I find myself in this situation is a mystery.

Psalm 27:14. "Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord."

I thank God that I have this opportunity to spend time with the good people of the Toposa lands.

Jeffrey and Sharon Newell

Featured in the [October 2019](#) issue of Encounter for their missionary work in Haiti. Their parish, Immaculate Conception in Lafayette, Indiana, is a member of the Parish Twinning Program of the Americas (PTPA).



Typically, over the last 20 years, we have visited Haiti right after Christmas. With the unrest they had last year, it wasn't safe enough to go. We had decided to send a smaller group in the middle of March for the Feast of St. Joseph, since our church is St. Joseph. That trip was cancelled, which in a way was fortunate, because if we had left on March 16 as

planned, we would have gotten there but wouldn't have been able to get out because the airport was subsequently shut down.

We've sent money. Obviously, a huge need right now is food—Haiti didn't have good weather year last year for crops. The PTPA is putting together a COVID-19 educational program, getting materials in the hands of priests. There is a lot of misunderstanding about what it is and isn't dangerous and about what to do to protect yourself. Most people have scarves, not face masks.

They lack sanitizer, but they have soap. The nurse in the clinic there is doing a very good job. People were afraid they would get the virus if they took their babies for regular shots, but the nurse is allaying their fears and educating them.

The nurse has a 6-year-old child who is staying with her mother while she works for several weeks at a time. I told her if I had to do that, I wouldn't be able to do it very long. Her answer was this is where I'm needed, this is what I'm supposed to do. She has a great outlook.

The priest also does a fabulous job of monitoring money and staying on top of things. We still have other projects we're helping them do. About two years ago, there was an earthquake on the northern coast of Haiti that did a lot of damage. The rebuilding and repairing is ongoing. They've been having small Masses, with only 10 people, and the priest in Pondu visits six chapels. He does a lot of hiking!

We have often traveled outside of the country in the last number of years. I'm not sure when we'll feel comfortable doing that again. Not sure when we'll be comfortable traveling *inside* the country again.

Taylor and Katie Schmidt

Featured in the [November 2019](#) issue of Encounter for their work with Servants of the Good Help in Perú, where they live with their seven children.

It has been hard for the children to get adjusted to not going out to evangelize or teach. Thankfully, they are used to rolling with change and have adapted to working on the mission land during this time.

We had coffee harvest and now we are planting 350 trees as a reforestation effort. We have also planted potatoes, onions and yuca. We are getting ready to plant vegetables next week in anticipation of the upcoming rains. Our plan was to open a soup kitchen this year to feed children and families in need, but the virus put a stop to that. Now,



we are taking this opportunity to plant all of the vegetables we will need when we are finally able to open the soup kitchen.

We also purchased two dairy cows because we were no longer able to get milk, butter or cheese. We are currently milking one cow while waiting for the other to calve. Once we can milk both, we will be able to give milk to the families with young children who no longer have government assistance.

As of this writing, it is day 94 of our quarantine, which is scheduled to be complete at the end of June. In all honesty, though, the quarantine should be extended again because the hospital system has collapsed. I fear that if they lift the quarantine, we will end up like Brazil. We are not far off.

Our local healthcare system has completely collapsed. Both state-run clinics are closed and not seeing patients. The only exception is for deliveries. One clinic is an hour away and the other is an hour and a half away. Our desire was to ask for financial support in the U.S. and in Spain this year to fund a private clinic. After this experience, it reaffirms our call to do just that.



We have purchased infrared thermometers and are working to educate people on the disease. We are also looking for oxygen tanks for emergency transport but have been unable to find any. One oxygen tank supports one person for 24 hours. Unfortunately, there are no oxygen plants in our district, which makes it very difficult to fill the tanks when empty. It can take 50 days to refill an empty tank. This is one reason so many people are dying—because there is not enough oxygen for them. Another reason is families can't afford to buy oxygen when it is available. Tanks are selling for \$2,000 and cost from \$200 to \$1,000 to refill. We do not even have enough money set aside in our medical needs to pay for one. People are watching family members die because of the greed of others.

We are in a sad state right now. Please pray for us and for the people we love.

Article by Julie Bourbon,
ENCOUNTER Editor

USCMA Happenings

- Accompaniment and Solidarity** | Join USCMA every other Thursday at noon ET to accompany each other through this difficult time and be in solidarity with all the missions we support around the world. Visit the [USCMA website](#) for the registration link, upcoming agenda, and more!
- Occasional Papers** | Coronavirus, Missionaries and Fundamentalism. Fr. Harry Winter, OMI reflects on the unique opportunity that Christians throughout the Church have during the Coronavirus pandemic to connect with fundamentalists and challenges us to see one another as brothers and sisters. Read the article [here](#).
- Books for Review** | USCMA receives complimentary books about missiology, theology, and spirituality for review. Our feature book for the month of June is ***The Ethics of Encounter: Christian Neighbor Love as a Practice of Solidarity*** by Marcus Mescher. For this book or a current listing, [email](#) Nichole Petty, USCMA Office Manager.

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