Ministry in Africa

By: Alexandra Rodriguez, Mission Support and Communications Manager

Blessed John Martin Moye, the founder of the Sisters of Divine Providence, saw needs being neglected, especially in the exclusion of the poor girls from the educational system of his time and place. From the beginning, this story has inspired the Sisters of the Congregation of Divine Providence (CDPs) to be involved with many different ministries throughout the United States and Mexico. Wherever Providence took the Sisters is where they’d begin new ministerial projects remembering the advice and encouragement of Father Moye: “Great things have small beginnings; begin with little. If it is of God’s holy will, He who is all powerful has a thousand means, a thousand ways, to accomplish it.”

In April 1988, at the invitation of the bishop, the Sisters of Divine Providence in Kentucky went to Ghana, West Africa, to assess the needs of the people. The Sisters traveled to Kwasibuokrom, which is a small village in the Brong Ahafo West Region of Ghana. They decided to establish a young girls boarding school under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of the Diocese of Sunyani, Bishop James Kwadwo Owusu. Our Lady of Providence Senior Secondary School for Girls (OLP) would be dedicated to raising the dignity of women to their full potential and improving the quality of life for women and for their families. Several years later the Sisters of Divine Providence from Kentucky invited the Congregation of Divine Providence in San Antonio, Texas to join them in Kwasibuokrom to support the school’s mission.

Shortly after accepting this invitation in 1996, Sisters Frances Lorene Lange and Mary Catherine Griffin from San Antonio joined Sister Bernadette Claire Kramer, Sister Janet Schneider and Sister Mary Joyce Moeller in Kwasibuokrom. For the first time the Texas Sisters heard Twi, the native dialect of the South and Central Ghanaians; and during their first week of teaching, the Sisters realized that they had an unanticipated challenge. Their students knew little to no English even though English is the official language of Ghana. As Sister Frances Lorene Lange added, many of the primary level teachers were pupil teachers - they only had primary or junior secondary education and had no formal teacher training. Consequently, the students had serious difficulties in learning their studies in English. But because of the presence of Our Lady of Providence School and the influence of the Sisters, it became clear to the Ghana Education Services that in order to ensure the students’ success, they needed to begin the teaching of English as a secondary language beginning in the primary grades.

Over the six years that the San Antonio CDPs were in Kwasibuokrom, they wrote numerous letters to the Sisters back in the United States. These letters captured the story of their experiences in Ghana and related what they were doing to make a difference for women whose educational needs had been neglected, but with the help of the Sisters, were now being addressed.

Sister Frances Lorene left OLP in 2002 and returned to San Antonio. Even this many years later, the Sisters have not been forgotten by the people of Kwasibuokrom.

Continued on next page
Ministry in Africa continued

In May 2018, Mr. Stephen Abougye wrote, “Very much thanks to you and your Congregation for bringing us such a school we are most proud of.” In April 2019, Joseph Febiri wrote, “Thank you for the wonderful work you did during those six wonderful years you spent in Ghana and at the school. This shows that you planted a good seed which by the grace of God has made it possible. Thank you and our God.” Also, in March 2019, Mrs. Bonua Mary wrote, “The good work that you did in Ghana is going on and on. The school has now grown into a big tree where all kinds of people come.”

The influence of the Sisters has a lasting and profound impact. OLP in Kwasibuokrom had grown to 65 girls when the Sisters first arrived in 1996. Today, with the help of the Sisters and faculty, there are around 800 girls enrolled. In 2018, OLP was voted 4th best secondary boarding school in the region due to the number of students that passed their exit examinations for college acceptance. Despite the challenges that the Sisters experienced, their initiative is continuing to help empower generations of students through education and the Power of Providence.

Through her experience in Ghana, Sister Frances Lorene is grateful to have been a part of a project that impacted so many people. As she reflects back on her time there, she recalls, “This experience has become an integral part of who I am, what I think, what I do, how I do it, and the decisions I make. Living with a people in a culture so different from our American culture was an invitation to open myself to a world I had not known before – to become more aware of and to learn to love others that are different. That experience of missionary work among the people of West Africa remains a source of energy for me.”

Once again we see that when a project newly begun and tended to is of God’s will, it grows and thrives. The Sisters are the instruments by which Providence accomplishes these kinds of great things. After years of mentoring a project, it is time to hand it over to others for future tending and continued growth. That is the way of Providence.

21st Annual Heritage Day Drew Crowds

by Alexandra Rodriguez, Mission Support and Communications Manager

The Congregation of Divine Providence 21st Annual Heritage Day was a success! Taking place at Moye Retreat Center in Castroville, Texas, on Sunday, October 13th, Heritage Day was filled with entertainment, family and friends.

Over 900 plates of BBQ chicken and sausage were sold.

Dancers entertained the crowds by performing traditional Alsatian dances.

Sisters Joyce Jilek, CDP, left, and Jackie Kingsbury, CDP, right, volunteering at the raffle ticket station.

Theresa Jones, right, and friend Ed drove 450 miles round trip to bake 15 dozen kolaches. Sister Roberta Haby and Sister Anna Marie Vrazel, left, view their finished work.
Dear Partners in Ministry,

Each year, as we near the season of Thanksgiving, it is traditional to reflect on the journey of our founding fathers and mothers, whose faith and courage brought them to new shores in search of religious freedom and a new way of life. Like those pilgrims and immigrants of today, we too are on a journey – not a physical journey, but rather a spiritual one. Whether lay, religious or ordained, as God's faithful here on earth, we are called to constantly seek new ways to serve God and to prepare ourselves to join God in Heaven. The Thanksgiving season provides an opportunity to reflect on our progress and to express our gratitude to those who have helped us along the way.

The Congregation’s founder, Father John Martin Moye, observed those who lacked education in impoverished villages in Alsace Lorraine, France. He acted by gathering young women who would be willing to live simply and teach children. These were the first Sisters of Divine Providence. With great courage, many followed Father Moye, heeding God's call. Leaving their families behind, often knowing that they would never see them again, the Sisters of Divine Providence traveled to the New World. In 1866, these pioneer Sisters arrived in San Antonio where they acted on their mission to educate children in the United States as they had done in France. Their journey, both the physical and spiritual, required great faith, courage, and a conviction which still thrives in our community today.

As we celebrate the season of Thanksgiving, let us remember with gratitude the examples set by those who have helped us in our own spiritual journeys. This edition of our newsletter offers several stories on this theme which have been important ones for our Congregation. On October 13th, 2019, we celebrated the 21st annual Heritage Day, a reminder of our pioneer Sisters and their determination to educate the poor, even when that mission took them far from home and family. Likewise, Sister Frances Lorene Lange’s modern-day mission to provide education to children in Africa has empowered generations of students. We remember Sister Christine Stephens’ dedicated leadership, which taught others to speak for themselves and their communities, creating lasting change. Finally, we cherish St. Joseph Chapel as a symbol of our Sisters’ journey in their faith and an enduring reminder to follow in their footsteps.

With grateful hearts we thank God for you, our partners in ministry. May this season bring you a time of reflection and gratitude.

Sincerely in Divine Providence,

Sister Pearl Ceasar, CDP
Superior General
Remembering Sister Christine Stephens, the Organizer’s Organizer

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On the evening of July 25, about 400 people packed a large chapel at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio for the wake for Sister Christine Stephens. A Sister of the Congregation of Divine Providence, Stephens spent her life teaching the poor and disenfranchised how to organize and lead within their communities.

Stephens, who died on July 18 at age 78, was co-director of the West/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a community organizing nonprofit that has chapters in 14 states. In Texas, the network has been responsible for a litany of successes: bringing drainage projects to the drowning Westside of San Antonio, creating workforce development initiatives, fighting for education equalization funding, securing more than $250 million in state bond money to fund water and wastewater utilities for border colonias, and, in recent months, organizing undocumented immigrants to fight for their rights. Stephens’ organizing was integral to all those victories.

But the victories were not the focus of Stephens’ wake. Instead, speaker after speaker marveled at her compassion, her anger at injustice, and her drive to help people develop tools to build their own power.

After entering the Congregation of Divine Providence, she became a social worker with the Campaign for Human Development, a Catholic charity, and ended up as chair of the local sponsoring committee for the emerging Metropolitan Organization of Houston (TMO). Southwest IAF founding organizer Ernie Cortes recognized her leadership potential and recruited her to be an IAF organizer, much as Stephens did many times over with community leaders over the four succeeding decades.

Stephens and Cortes revived the IAF organizing model through one-on-one meetings with community members and house meetings of small groups of neighbors to talk about shared challenges. This led to larger collaborations at parishes and other congregations. Through these meetings the organizers were able to identify community leaders. In the ’70s, the first leaders of San Antonio COPS (Communities Organized for Public Service) were concerned about how big rains flooded the predominantly Hispanic Westside of San Antonio. Streets were unpaved, and people drowned in open drainage ditches. COPS leaders learned that money for Westside draining projects had been appropriated in 1945 but used elsewhere. They confronted the city council, which released the funds, and then they agitated for a $100 million bond referendum for Westside infrastructure and worked for its passage. Sister Christine Stephens became a champion for this organizing model.

Women organizers in particular told me how much Christine’s mentorship meant to them. “Christine’s clarity and anger as a woman were important to me,” said Anna Eng, lead organizer for Bay Area IAF. “She taught me how to agitate and about how her anger and her generosity went hand in hand. Here was a woman who could demonstrate clear anger and was taken very seriously. ... I was told at every previous job that my anger was a problem. Christine told me it was valuable.”

Stephens faced barriers in the male-dominated organizing world. Arnie Graf, a former colleague, told me Christine “had to elbow her way into IAF leadership.” Graf continued, “She was one of the first women lead organizers. She had to push. We were fortunate she did. She paved the way for other women.”

One of Stephens’ last actions was to work with organizers and leaders across 19 Southwest dioceses to address the status of immigrants. They called the action “Recognizing the Stranger,” and it was created to teach recent immigrants to become leaders in their parishes and to create relationships beyond their smaller communities.

Sister Christine Stephens “felt great joy in public life,” Jason Lowry told me. “Her greatest joy was when a leader found that joy.”
St. Joseph Hall Chapel Windows to Be Restored

Readers of the last edition of our newsletter will recall that the Congregation of Divine Providence has launched a campaign to restore the Chapel's windows, which has now been expanded to include repairs to the chapel's plaster walls and ceiling, as well as the roof over the chapel's dome. Built in 1933 by prominent Texas architect Leo Dielmann, St. Joseph Chapel has always had a special place in the hearts of the Sisters of Divine Providence. It is a sacred place, both historically and architecturally significant. On those merits alone, it should be restored. However, beyond its beauty it holds a special memory. We asked several Sisters, for whom the chapel is especially meaningful, to explain.

Sister Denise Billeaud pointed to the meaning behind the imagery chosen for the chapel's windows. “The Congregation’s administration chose holy women as a theme for the Chapel's stained glass windows,” she explains. This decision was significant then and still resonates with the Sisters today, reflecting the Congregation's identity as a community of religious women who are strong, courageous, learned, fiercely determined and, above all, dedicated to the service of God and others. The chapel's windows honor holy women who exhibit these same characteristics, such as St. Teresa of Avila, a 16th century Doctor of the Church, and St. Barbara, a martyr.

“St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, was newly canonized in 1920, not long before the chapel was built. She has an honored place in our Sacred Heart Chapel and is also pictured in one of our St. Joseph Chapel windows,” adds Sr. Lourdes Leal.

Of special importance to the Sisters is the Chapel's dedication to perpetual adoration. When Sister Denise Billeaud and Sister Ramona Bezner entered the convent in the 1940s, the Sisters observed perpetual adoration, a time of silent reflection and prayer, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Both Sisters recall how, as young novices, they were paired to pray in the middle of the night. The older Sisters would go during the day. In order to go to the Chapel, the Sisters would use flashlights since the halls did not have any lighting. Sometimes they prayed sitting, but most often they prayed kneeling, spending an hour in quiet devotion. When the hour had passed, one Sister would return from the Chapel to wake the next pair of Sisters, saying, “Jesus is calling.”

The next pair of Sisters would immediately put their habits over their gowns and proceed through the darkened convent halls to the Chapel to pray. Smiling, both Sisters recalled how the young novices always hoped they didn’t get assigned the final hour of the night, because they’d get only an hour of sleep before it would be time to wake up again.

The Sisters who took part in perpetual adoration describe their time in the Chapel as precious. Sister Denise Billeaud said, “This was our first introduction to contemplation. Our vision of the world was not very wide. It was beautiful to spend that time in solitude, complete silence, while we prayed for our family and friends.”

In the 1960s, the practice of perpetual adoration came to an end. However, the Sisters still love to go to the Chapel for prayer and reflection, cherishing the peace and solitude it offers.

Sr. Ramona Bezner describes the Chapel as a hidden treasure, adding, “It is time for it to be discovered again.” Her hope for the Chapel after the windows’ restoration is that attention will be drawn to it and that there will be a renewed interest in it because of its innate beauty and contemplative nature.

For us, St. Joseph Chapel is precious, both in the memories of our Sisters, and as a continuing legacy of an ideal in the women we strive to emulate. We hope you will join us in our goal to restore the Chapel's window and preserve it for future generations.
We Have a New Look!

We're excited to announce that the Sisters of Divine Providence have adopted a new look to better align with our Congregation's core values: Confidence in Divine Providence, Simplicity, Charity and Community. While the appearance of our newsletters and our website will be changing, our mission, values and our message to the world are just the same. Rooted in profound confidence in God's providential love and care for all, we commit our lives, our ministries, and our resources to furthering the mission of Jesus. We hope this simpler, streamlined design will allow our message and ministry to shine and that you will love our new look as much as we do!