

Mercy in Nigeria

YOLA

The old tea chests in our garage here in Yola from the Sisters of Mercy in Dungarvan, Co. Waterford are a reminder of the first coming of the pioneer Sisters to the young diocese of Yola in Gongola State, North East Nigeria, in October 1969.



Pioneer Sisters of Mercy to Yola, 1969 with Augustinians who also came to Nigeria in 1969 and Bishop M. Russell, Bishop of Waterford and Lismore, Sr. Gerard Flynn, Sr. Philomena Kelly, Sr. Emmanuel Ahearne and Sr. Joseph Sheehy

From the contents of these tea chests Sisters Philomena Kelly, Emmanuel Ahearne, Joseph (Mary Jo) Sheehy and Gerard (Mary) Flynn set up the first Mercy Convent in Nigeria. They were warmly welcomed by the people of St. Teresa's parish. Very quickly they immersed themselves in helping to build up the expansive diocese with the Augustinian Fathers led by Bishop Patrick Dalton OSA, and, on his death in November 1969, by Bishop Patrick Sheehan OSA.

Nigeria was recovering from the effects of the Biafran war when the Sisters arrived. For the next decades the country moved from democratic structures to military coups and military dictatorships until democracy was finally restored in 1999.

Education

Shortly after their arrival Sr. Mary Jo Sheehy started to teach in St. Michael's Secondary School which was under the care of the Augustinian Fathers. Fr. Dan Kelleher OSA was the Principal at that time. Sr. Mary Jo served as Vice-Principal there and as Inspector of English in Gongola State, now Adamawa State. When the state took over all denominational schools in 1976, Sr. Mary Jo was assigned to RAMAT Government Boys'

School. Another part of her ministry was in Bible Study in St. Teresa's parish and she is hailed as the founding mother of the Charismatic Movement in Yola Diocese.

Over the years several Sisters of Mercy taught in St. Peter's Minor Seminary in Yola. Two Sisters with a dedicated staff spearheaded the setting up of a Diocesan Pastoral Centre to co-ordinate pastoral planning and leadership training, incorporating the Catechetical Centre and Religious Education Office. This was a hub for all diocesan activities with its vision for the development of Yola Diocese until the year 2000.

In 1994, at the request of the women of the parish and the Parish Priest, Fr. Ignatius Kaigama, the Sisters set up a primary school for those who were economically disadvantaged. This was possible as the State had rescinded its ban on denominational schools and from then onwards St. Teresa's school has prospered under the careful eyes of eight Sisters and their dedicated staffs. Sisters also accompany the Young Christian Students Movement in the local secondary schools and are often asked to give retreats and Workshops to them, to the youth groups and other Church groups.

Healthcare

At various stages Srs. Philomena Kelly, Mary Flynn and Emmanuel Ahearne went to the village of Bare to assist women with health care and poverty alleviation. They had been learning Hausa from Fr. John Gough OSA from the time they came and it was a great help to them in their work with the women. Srs. Emmanuel and Mary concentrated on getting a Health Care Centre started. Over the years twelve Sisters from Dungarvan, Waterford City and Cahir with their staffs ministered most compassionately to the people in Bare and in many outreach clinics until the Sisters withdrew in 1990, due to lack of personnel.

Catechetics

When Sr. Philomena returned to the town of Yola her new task was to visit the primary and secondary schools in the area and also the Teacher Training College to prepare the students for the reception of the Sacraments. Her work with women continued with the ZUMUNTA MATA (Women Together) and with the wives of the trainee catechists at the Catechetical Training Centre who came from all parts of this vast Diocese. One of her Church activities was to set up the Legion of Mary in the Parish of St. Teresa from whence it spread throughout the Diocese. In true Catherine McAuley style, Sr. Philomena broke new ground when she began the ministry to the Catholic prisoners in the two prisons of Jimets and Yola town.

Versatility and adaptability in each decade were the hallmarks of the work of the Sisters of Mercy in Yola since 1969.

Care of Women

A request from Bishop Sheehan to care for unemployed and drop-out women in the Yola area was answered when one of the Sisters set up the Rahama Centre for Women, assisted by three other Sisters over the years and by a group of young tutors.

Community Development

Local villages are assisted by Sr. Kathleen Hannon to assume responsibility for their own advancement and the transformation of their lives. Working in tandem with village leaders, Sr. Kathleen works with the communities, training animators and literacy teachers using Training for Transformation Programmes.

Ecology

As the new millennium dawned there was a growing concern among the Sisters about the widespread erosion and depletion of the soil in the State of Adamawa. Bishop Abba of Yola was happy to give some Diocesan land for the setting up of an Ecological Training Centre by the Mercy Sisters led by Sr. Máire McGann and a well-trained staff.

The programme at the Centre ranges from organic farming to seminars on ecological justice as a way of life. The formative dimension of this endeavour visions a future where the principles of the Universe – interiority, diversity and communion – will shape a new order from the present chaos.

HIV/Aids

During the past decade the care of people who have HIV and AIDS has become an integral part of every ministry we are involved in here in Nigeria.

MINNA

In 1975 Mercy was spreading its wings to another part of this vast country when the Strabane Mercy Community agreed to send three Sisters to assist Bishop Christopher Abba, Bishop of Minna Diocese, in his work of building up the Church in this young diocese in Niger State (in the west of northern Nigeria).



*Pioneer Sisters of Mercy to Minna 1976
Sr. Margaret Burke R.I.P, Sr. Sheila McDermott and
Sr. Susan Lynch being welcomed by the women of Minna*

Background

In 1971 Sr. M. Dominic (Sheila) McDermott, Mercy Community, Strabane, responded to the call for help from the St. Louis Sisters in Niger State and volunteered to join them in their mission in Bida. Later in the 1970s, the Nigerian Government was taking over mission schools, and because of lack of personnel, the St. Louis Sisters were planning to move from Minna where they had a Girls' Secondary School. Minna was then a small town, a former railway junction, about 100 kilometers north-east of Bida.

In view of this move, the St. Louis Sisters suggested to Sr. M. Dominic that she might invite other Sisters to join her in northern Nigeria to take over their house and mission in Minna. Thus in 1975 Sr. Margaret Burke and Sr. Susan Lynch joined Sr. M. Dominic in the former St. Louis Convent. At this time the parishes and mission stations in Minna Diocese were conducted by the Kiltegan Fathers SPS. The Sisters renamed the house 'Gidan Rahama' (House of Mercy). The new Sisters were given a warm welcome and soon became-involved in teaching, including the Teachers' College and later in the Advanced Teachers' College in Minna, in parish work, especially catechesis, and in ministry in the hospitals and prisons.

Expansion

Over the ensuing years, other Sisters from the Dioceses of Down and Connor, Dromore and Derry joined the early pioneers and the apostolate expanded. The Sisters initiated programmes for women's advancement, assisted in the Catechetical Centre in Nanati, a school in the Leprosarium, ministry to widows, and advocacy for prisoners awaiting trial. They were also involved in the opening of St .Peter's Primary School in Maikunkele in 1995, in answer to the earnest request of the priest and people of that village. Seven Sisters of Mercy and dedicated staff have served, and continue to serve, generously and successfully in this school since its beginning.

LAGOS



Pioneer Sisters to Lagos in 1986

Back Row: Sr. Helena Doherty, Sr. Vina Leonard, Sr. Carmel Loye, Sr. Josephine Byrne, Sr. Maureen Walsh with their Leaders and Cardinal T. O'Fee, Archbishop of Armagh

By 1986 a third group of Mercy Sisters had come to Nigeria. They came from the Armagh Archdiocese in Ireland and their intention was to assist in the education and health care ministries of the Lagos Diocese under Bishop Okogie.

The pioneers of this mission were Sisters Carmel Loye, Vina Leonard, Josephine Byrne along with Sisters Maureen Walsh (Raphoe Diocese) and Helena Doherty (Derry Diocese). They settled in St. Leo's Parish in Ikega Lagos. Two weeks after their arrival, they opened a private school in the parish with Sr. Vina as Principal and Carmel, Maureen, and Helena on the staff. Sr. Josephine set up a clinic which eventually branched out to three out-stations. Later, the Sisters set up basic Christian

Communities which were instrumental in enhancing the lives of the people in many villages in the Lagos area.

The school and clinic prospered under the guidance of various Mercy Sisters from Irish Dioceses – Tuam, Ardagh and Clonmacnoise, Kerry – who ministered in Lagos over the years, with their dedicated staffs. In 1998 these ministries were returned to the Archdiocese when the Sisters withdrew from Lagos due to lack of personnel.

Since 1969 sixty Sisters of Mercy from Ireland, USA province and the Kenyan province, and Sister Juliana Yarkwan, Nigerian Mercy Sister have ministered and are ministering in Nigeria. In that time the Sisters have been on a discerning pilgrimage in each place and in each ministry seeking out the path of Mercy with the Nigerian people. It was with great joy that we in the Nigerian Mission Area, celebrated our 40th Anniversary on Mercy Day, 24th September 2009. A Thanksgiving Eucharistic Celebration was held in Yola Community house with all the Sisters, along with the Religious, Priests and Bishop Christopher Abba. In May 2010 we celebrated with our Nigerian colleagues and friends in Yola Cathedral. The celebration in Ireland took place in Emmaus Conference Centre, Swords, Co. Dublin in August 2010 with the final celebration held in Minna in the autumn of 2010.

We rejoice in the faithfulness of all the Sisters who sowed the seeds of Mercy and compassion in Nigeria since 1969. The warmth of the welcome of the people of Nigeria made this possible.

“Let us rejoice and give thanks”